

“Walking in the Light”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
Advent I – November 27, 2016

**Isaiah 2: 1-5**

**Romans 13: 11-14**

I have a question for you: raise your hand if you love to hear the sound of the alarm clock in the morning? Really? There are some people? I guess there's one in every crowd!

I would assume that the large majority of us are not fans of the alarm clock going off. I am one of them. This year is the first year that both Erin and Heather are on the same school schedule since three years ago. And while that's great on many levels, it is not so great in that the alarm clock goes off at 5:30 every morning. Well, that's our alarm clock. Erin's goes off fifteen minutes before that. Getting on the school bus at 6:25 every morning requires such an early morning wake-up call.

In some ways, my body has shifted to being up early now. I go ahead and get up most mornings and come on in to the office, in order to get a head start on my day. And I've found that we all get into a sort of rhythm throughout the week when school's in session.

But I can also say that my body relishes the days when I don't have to set an alarm clock. The week we were gone for Fall Break, we all slept late – I mean, late – and it was almost like my body needed that full week to renew from weeks of those early morning wake-up calls. I was not a happy camper when that alarm clock went off on the Monday morning after break!

Today is the First Sunday of Advent, and in many ways it is like an alarm clock waking us from a deep sleep. As we begin a new year in the church's calendar, it is our opportunity to stir ourselves from the slumber of complacency, and prepare for the coming of Emmanuel – God with Us.

What we hear in Isaiah and Paul's letter to the Romans is more than just a wake-up call. It is a call to “walk in the light,” to prepare for the coming of God Incarnate with active and deliberate works which signal Christ's presence. It is also more than just light: it is the light and it is the Word, the instruction that accompanies the light. The two go hand-in-hand to help us to better prepare for what God is sending us.

The prophet Isaiah saw a vision of God, but it is not described as only a vision: “The word that Isaiah . . . saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.” The word of God was both instruction and a vision, for with the future promise comes the instruction of God's Word. The vision that Isaiah sees depicts a Jerusalem that unites peoples of all types and

nationalities. The purpose of this coming-together is “that God may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” God plans a revelation to the world in Jerusalem, an act that people will both see and hear. For the Israelites who heard the prophet’s words, they likely believed he spoke of the coming reign of the Messiah, the one who would restore Israel to its glory of David and Solomon. That was the hope that the people waited expectantly for, amid the darkness of foreign armies and rulers conquering the northern and southern kingdoms.

Yet these texts for the First Sunday of Advent more specifically depict what life will be like not in the Messiah’s first coming, but in his Second Coming. Paul’s words speak of the advent of the Messiah’s second-coming. He urges the Christians in Rome to “wake from their sleep” for it is the time that they have been waiting for. Paul emphasizes how they are to prepare themselves for the Lord’s coming: “Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” To walk in darkness means to cause reveling and debauchery, drunkenness and licentiousness, quarreling and jealousy. To walk in the light means to “live honorably in the day,” while putting on the Lord Jesus Christ as your “armor of light.”

And Isaiah paints a picture of what this day of the Lord will be like. Ruth Meyers describes it in this way: “People are streaming to a holy mountain from every corner of the earth. They carry with them the weapons of war, and as they climb the mountain, they cast swords and spears into the furnace. A blacksmith stands by with a hammer, patiently pounding weapons into tools for cultivation. The din of the forge grows louder, hammer clangs on anvil as more and more people arrive weary of war, drawn by the light, ready for a new day of peace”

(Ruth Meyers, “Live Into Hope”, Christian Century, Nov. 14, 2001, 15).

That all sounds great, but just turn on the evening news or open up the news app on your phone and it can be hard believe that “nation shall not lift up sword against nation.” We see people killing one another not just in far off lands, but right here in our city streets. We have witnessed violent discourse over the last several months that has threatened to tear apart any sense of civility in our culture. I mean – it’s great and all to envision this new future which Isaiah foretells of war being a distant memory. But how do you grab hold of that prophesy when all you see around you is violence and destruction?

Perhaps one key is found at the end of Isaiah’s message. Throughout the first four verses, the prophet is speaking of a future vision in a future tense: “In the days to come; He shall judge, etc.” But in verse five, the verb tense is no longer future – it is the present tense: “O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!” (2:5). It is not left to us to just dream about a future peace. We are invited to live into that peace in the here and now.

Paul Duke writes: “We are in the presence of a mystery. God’s own justice and peace will occur among the nations ‘in days to come.’ What days? How? Perhaps all we can say is that the vision describes what God is, in fact, at work in the world to do. It is what Jesus apparently meant by ‘the reign of God,’ which is already present and at work among us, though not yet in fullness. We saw it in Jesus, who converted fear to love, lunacy to sanity, enemies to friends. He died surrounded by swords; a spear stabbed him; nails tore him . . .

“(Isaiah) lifts a gleaming promise of what God will do in days to come. (He) expresses the deeps of human longing, and points to the dreams and promises of God for the world. God’s future casts its gleam into the present. We move toward God’s future by making our choices – personal, relational, political, communal – in its light.

“At St. Louis University is a small Jesuit chapel that is creatively lit. The light fixtures are made of twentieth-century cannon shells, converted. Emptied of their lethal contents, they now hold light for all people to pray by. In such light we pray and live. And having laid our weapons down, we bear witness to the promise of greater transformation in days to come” (Paul Simpson Duke, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 7).

The alarm clock is going off. Can you hear it? It’s waking us from our slumber of complacency, and stirring us to walk in the light of God. “You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.” As we begin our time of waiting for the light of the world to come into our lives once again, may our waiting not be passive, but active as we awake to seek Christ coming to rule this world with power and might.

Thanks be to God. Amen.