

“Nearer to Us Now”

Romans 13:11-14

Home Moravian Church, November 30, 2025

How does the sun rise? Emily Dickinson said: “A ribbon at a time.”

You’ve seen that: in the graveyard on Easter morning, or in your own backyard. A ribbon of light, then another, and another, and suddenly it’s full day. How did that happen? You could hardly say when it began, certainly not when it ended; yet you know that the sunrise is complete. Sunrise could be called a *Kairos* moment: an indeterminate period of time in which a significant event transpires. What matters in a Kairos moment is not the duration, but the significance of the event, and its coming to completion.

When Paul hints at a Kairos moment, we know by the word he uses for “time.” Biblical Greek offers two choices: *chronos*, as in “chronology,” which is clock time or calendar time; and *Kairos*, the moment of significance. When Paul says, “You know what time it is,” he’s not checking his watch; he’s talking about a Kairos moment—a sort of sunrise, somewhere between dark and light. But not right in the middle: “the night is far gone, the day is near.” Something is coming. It has been coming for a while, and it is nearer than it used to be.

That “something” is the reign of God—which covers a lot of territory. Because God is lord over *all*, no part of created reality is too big or too small to be involved. Just in today’s short passage, Paul manages to connect the largest possible subject—God’s plan for the salvation of the whole created universe—to the intimate details of individual behavior. Could Paul be suggesting that the completion of God’s plan for the *whole universe* might affect each of his readers personally? That seems as difficult to comprehend as the beginning and end of sunrise;

but, like sunrise, the reign of God is coming, and Paul lets his readers know they'd better get ready. They know what time it is! Now is the moment for them to wake from sleep.

I say “them” instead of “us” because I want us to think about Paul’s original audience. He’s writing to Christians in Rome, around the year 55. And whether those first Christians were Jews or Gentiles—the church in Rome had some of both— they were seeing their old traditions overlapped by something entirely new, not only to them, but to the whole world. These early Christ-followers understood that they were living in a Kairos moment. The old world was still present around them, yet everything had changed. Something significant was happening—a ribbon at a time. The change had not come to completion; yet, at the same time, the change had already arrived. The new life Christ promised was already present in the world. The future had broken into the present. Paul *had* to speak of *Kairos* and not *chronos*, because God moves in a way that defies chronology.

Living in a world where the new already overlapped the old, Paul and the churches around him were in expectant mode. The first generation of Christians believed Christ’s return was imminent. Perhaps with every sunrise, they thought they might see Jesus again in the flesh before sunset. What was it like, to awake with that kind of excitement? How did their expectation affect the choices they made every day?

That first generation of Christians learned what all Christians learn: We don’t know as much as we think we do. There is a lot about Christ that we don’t understand. They were sure he would return in their lifetime; we’re still looking, more than two thousand years later. Yet the passing of time does not change the question: If we believe Christ will return, if we believe that the created order will be redeemed by love, what choices do we make in the meantime? It’s not about how long it takes for love to win; it’s about how we choose to behave while we wait. Paul

writes about how to live in the in-between, when night is far gone but day has not quite come. Sort of where we find ourselves on the first Sunday of Advent.

As we begin a new church year, we're at the end of the calendar year. And so we enter Advent with a year's worth of burdens. A year's worth of hard work and disappointments and hurt and weariness. A year's worth of grief. Meanwhile, the days get shorter, and in every way we seem to be entering the darkest part of what has already been a very hard year.

But Paul says: Not so. Paul says darkness is already well behind us. Not because we have made any progress on our own toward making things brighter, but because a light is coming toward us, *has been* coming toward us, a ribbon at a time. And it's nearer to us now than when we first perceived it. The closer the light, the closer the salvation.

And the salvation Paul sees coming is not individual, but entire: the redemption of the whole creation. Salvation is not an individual goal toward which we move. Salvation is God's plan for the whole world, and it moves toward *us*. When it has fully arrived, that's when love will have won. The central tenet of the Christian faith is that love will win. And what Paul urges in this passage is to live as though it already has.

Here's a memory I cherish from the second Sunday of Advent in 2013—twelve years ago, my first Advent on the pastoral staff at Home Church. At the end of that service, we were singing with gusto our final hymn, "Fling Wide the Door," when suddenly there was a loud POP and the power went out. Lights, organ: Gone! But the choir? God bless you, choir: You just kept singing. After a few befuddled seconds, we all caught your enthusiasm and plunged back into the hymn, singing just as if the sanctuary were still full of light.

To live in the dark and yet behave as though the world were full of light—this is the challenge the apostle Paul lays before his readers in Rome. It was a big challenge for them, and

it remains one for us; that's one thing we have in common with the church of 2,000 years ago. That, and the fact that just like them, we find ourselves in the dark much of the time.

And some of our habits belong to the darkness. Behaviors that abuse our bodies and the bodies of others; behaviors that poison our relationships. As examples, Paul names reveling, drunkenness, debauchery, licentiousness, quarreling, and jealousy. There's something for everyone in that list. Even if we've managed to avoid drunkenness and licentiousness, there's not a one of us who hasn't quarreled or been jealous, and Paul puts those sins on exactly the same level as the rest. As he says elsewhere in Romans: All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

If we are all so fallible and sin so universal, then how can we hope to lay aside these behaviors of darkness and "live honorably as in the day"? How will we create these daytime behaviors? Paul says: We don't create them. We receive them, like a garment handed to us by God. We *put them on*. We "put on the Lord Jesus Christ."

If we don't know what those clothes look like, we need only look back to Paul's previous chapter:

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

As Christ moves toward us, he extends the possibility of this kind of life. We can stretch out our arms and slip it on. Imagine how that garment shines—how each time someone puts on the Lord Jesus Christ, the light in the world increases.

Advent is a season of waiting. We've all heard that. After a lifetime of Advents you've probably heard preachers talk about waiting from every angle. Every type of waiting: reflective waiting, active waiting, hopeful waiting, expectant waiting. But Paul proposes what we might call *as-if* waiting. Wait as if Jesus were already here. Wait as if God's plan for the salvation of the world has already been completed by the return of Jesus Christ. Live as if love has already won. Because it will.

How long will it take? That matters in *chronos*, but Paul reminds us that we're living in *Kairos*. The salvation event has begun, it is ongoing, and we can wake each day with the same excitement as the first generation of Christians, because we know what our choices are. We can scan the horizons as we do on Easter morning, looking for the ribbon of light that appears suddenly... then another, and another. The sun rises, a ribbon at a time.

That Advent Sunday in 2013, when the power went out? I neglected to say, not all light was extinguished. As we kept singing, the two candles on the Advent wreath kept burning.

The light grows, one Advent candle at a time. The light grows, one shining garment at a time. The new overlaps the old; the future breaks into the present. We live as though love has already won, and we discover that it has. Amen.