

Advent 1

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[0 : 00] The hour has come. Wake up from your slumber. Put aside the deeds of darkness. Put on the armour of light. Behave decently. Don't gratify the desires of the flesh.

! These are some strong words, but they're not a threat. This is an invitation. It's exciting. But perhaps you're wondering, what this passage has to do with the first Sunday of Advent. Let's get straight to the point. In preparing for this service, I really sense the fact that this is an invitation for us, for the church today.

The time is now to realign our focus. To turn our hearts and our minds from the things of the world and the busyness that we so often get caught up in, especially at this time of the year. And to invite the Lord in to do the preparing of our hearts. Because as we come to celebrate Emmanuel, God with us, God incarnate, God who made his dwelling among us, Paul, the author of Romans, where we find our passage this morning, reminds us that the time for our salvation is nearer now than it ever has been.

So we need to be asking ourselves, are we preparing? Are we ready? Are we dressed for the occasion?

[1 : 37] I remember when I was little and Christmas was the most exciting time of the year. On the first day of December, the Advent calendar would be hung up in the hallway.

The Christmas fairy would come and put some sweets in the pockets. And coming home from school would be more exciting than ever. Going into town would be a nightmare because the Bath Christmas market would be on and it would inevitably clash with a Bath rugby game. And no one in their right mind would go near the town centre on a Saturday. Then two weekends before Christmas, the Christmas decorations would come out of the cupboard. Chairs would be moved to make way for the tree. Dad would hang up two bits of tinsel and then run away. And escape the madness.

One of two Christmas CDs we seemed to own would be playing as we prepared the house for Christmas. Then came the lists, or at least the lists that mum had been preparing for a while, suddenly came into my awareness.

[2 : 44] Minced pies to be made, a Christmas cake to be baked and decorated. Last minute Christmas presents would be bought, wrapped and delivered. School shows, concerts, carol services.

Family to be visited and the Strictly Come Dancing final to be enjoyed. Grandparents would arrive around Christmas Eve. Mum's mega Christmas dinner timings list would surface and presents under the tree would begin to appear.

At last, Christmas Eve would draw to a close. I'd go to bed waiting for Santa to come and fill up my stocking with goodies. And would I sleep that night?

No. My dad's shaking his head. Too excited for that because in all of the preparation, all the decorating, the waiting, the expecting, and the longing for that day to finally be here, it would finally be Christmas Day.

In all of the excitement of traditions and celebrations and games and merrymaking that would accumulate over Christmas Day, I'll be honest, my overwhelming feeling would sometimes often be that I could finally open that oddly shaped Christmas present that I'd spotted under the tree.

[4 : 00] I do now sleep the night before Christmas. And it's not all about presents anymore. It never really was. But I still enjoy the decorating, the baking, the shopping, the visiting family and friends, all the traditions.

But there's something more to Advent than that. And I think we often miss it in all of the busyness of Christmas. When I was preparing for this talk this morning, I looked up the different readings that I

could choose from from the lectionary.

And I noticed that they all were about the end being near. And I turned to Russ and I said, these readings, they're not very Christmassy, are they?

Aren't they meant to be more Christmassy than this for the first Sunday of Advent? And his reply was something along the lines of, that's a common mistake that people often make. We conflate Advent and Christmas.

And too quickly, we jump to Christmas and totally miss out on Advent altogether. Of course, Russ being Russ definitely gave me a longer, more intelligent answer than that.

[5 : 17] But this is the point. See, Advent isn't just about the festive fun of chocolates behind little doors as we count down the days towards the big day.

Advent is a really important season of preparation, of expectation, of looking forward to the hope that was promised to Israel in the shape of a coming Messiah.

Advent is a time of reflection in a season of darkness, a renewal of hope and a movement towards the beginning marked by Christmas Day.

To steal a line from the great Christmas carol, Advent is about where we let every heart prepare him room. I think about the excitement I felt as a child as we prepared our home for Christmas.

As we made preparations and did all of our pre-Christmas things. Maybe there was something right in my childish excitement about the Christmas presents.

[6 : 25] But I was thinking about the wrong gift. And so, on this first Sunday of Advent, as we prepare our hearts to celebrate the coming of Christ the King, the Messiah, the Saviour of the world, let us look at these words from Paul to the Church of Rome.

And by extension, to us too. I'm going to read the passage again, this time from the Message Version. And it says, Make sure you don't get so absorbed and exhausted in taking care of all your day-to-day obligations, so that you lose track of time and doze off, oblivious to God.

The night is over. Dawn is about to break. Be up and awake to what God is doing. God is putting the finishing touches on the salvation work he began when we first believed.

We can't afford to waste a minute. Must not squander these precious daylight hours in frivolity and indulgence, in sleeping around and dissipation, in bickering and grabbing everything in sight.

Get out of bed. Get dressed. Do not loiter and linger, waiting until the very last minute. Dress yourselves in Christ. Be up and about.

[7 : 43] It's time to wake up. To rise up. As I was preparing, I read a commentary on this passage that went something along the lines of, it's possible for us to do many Christian things and still essentially be asleep to God.

We can talk in our sleep, walk in our sleep, hear things in our sleep. We can even think things in our sleep. We just call it dreaming. But unless we wake up from our slumber, we can't be committed to right walk with God.

We'll just sleep walk with God. And I'm sure you'll agree with me that I don't want to sleep walk my walk with God. When there is so much more to be found when we wake up and walk, right walk in the fullness with him.

See, Paul is right. The day of Jesus' return is closer than it was when we first believed. It's closer than it ever has been.

And whilst God has already won the victory through Jesus' death and resurrection, God's salvation plan has not yet been fully executed and he will be coming back.

[8 : 57] As Jesus himself said, the day and the hour is not for us to know. But I'm sure when he comes back, there are things that we would rather him find us doing or not doing.

Paul calls us to put aside the deeds of darkness, which he rounds up as drunkenness, sexual immorality, debauchery, overindulgence in sex, drugs and alcohol, arguing in a way that leads to discord and jealousy.

And you know, we might think that we're okay because we don't sleep around. We don't get off our faces on a Saturday night. We aren't the ones to engage in arguments or fights.

Or maybe you're feeling a bit hot under the collar because you can identify with these things. But the list isn't exhaustive and it involves all of us. What about the grudge that we've been holding against someone?

What about the gossip that we just couldn't keep to ourselves? What about when we speed down the motorway, breaking the speed limit? Because we would rather risk someone else's safety and

our own and get home five minutes sooner.

[10:10] Eek. But Paul, inspired by the spirit of God, tells us not to even think about gratifying the desires of our flesh.

Those things of our body, mind and or soul that aren't in line with the desires of God's own heart. Instead, he calls us to clothe ourselves in Jesus.

To dress ourselves appropriately for the time at hand. Now, I love pajamas.

And what I'm about to say might cause some outrage in the congregation. But my mom and I have a rule about pajamas.

And that is that they cannot go on until 8.30pm. At the earliest. See, there has to be a boundary line. And I do believe that boundary lines have fallen in the pleasant and good places.

[11:14] Because, left to my own devices, I would be in my pajamas way too early in the day. And I'd never get anything done. The same goes for the morning. It's not until I'm dressed and ready that I actually start to do anything productive.

How I dress affects my actions, my state of mind, the way I posture myself and relate towards the people around me. And if I'm cozied up in my PJs, I switch off.

Mentally, I am off duty from peopling and productivity. But when I'm dressed, I'm ready for action. And why am I telling you this? Not because I want you to keep me accountable to not being in my pajamas before 8.30pm.

My mom does that for me. But because I think there's something in this that relates to what Paul's telling us. When he tells us to put aside the deeds of darkness and clothe ourselves in the armor of light.

To clothe ourselves in Jesus. When he talks about not giving in to the desires of the flesh, he's not talking about our literal skin and bones in our body.

[12:23] But those ungodly, unrighteous desires that draw us away from our relationship with God. Rather than leading us closer to him. Those things he summed up in drunkenness, sex and earthly things.

Greed for those earthly things. Jesus calls us to walk and flourish with him. Isn't that exciting? He calls us to a life where we flourish with him.

In another letter that Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus. He says, and this is from Ephesians 6 verse 10. Be strong in the Lord and his mighty power.

Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's scheme. For the struggle isn't against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against authorities, against powers and principalities.

Against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore, put on the full armor of God. So that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground.

[13:29] He then tells us to stand firm with the belt of truth. The breastplate of righteousness. The boots of peace that are ready with the gospel. The shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the spirit.

All of that is to say that in this world there are spiritual forces and powers at work in opposition to the Lord. But God has given us his armor that equips us to defend and to attack.

We need to put off our pajamas and clothe ourselves ready for the day at hand. I wonder if you notice anything about the armor of God.

The armor of truth and righteousness and peace that is ready with the gospel, faith, salvation and the Holy Spirit. Because to me, that sounds a lot like Jesus. It looks to me like what Paul is saying when he says, clothe yourselves with Jesus.

We're called to live a life according to the spirit by the power of the Holy Spirit who lives in us. Who came to dwell in us when we first believed.

[14:43] It's the same Holy Spirit that lived and worked in Jesus. The same Holy Spirit that raised Jesus from the grave. That's the Holy Spirit that lives in each and every one of us.

Further instructions on how we dress as disciples comes in Colossians chapter 3 where it says, Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone.

Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all of these virtues, put on love which binds them together in perfect unity.

The way that we dress needs to be a lot less about ourselves. Less about elevating and comforting ourselves.

And a lot more about loving God and loving his people. We need to be dressing ourselves with Jesus so that we are ready. Because the day of our salvation is nearer than it has ever been.

[15:56] If we want to be ready for his return, we need one, to wake up. Two, to clothe ourselves in Jesus. And so that three, we can walk in step with him and be transformed into his likeness.

So that when he returns, he'll find us living in accordance with his heart. And so as we enter into Advent this year, what do we do with this?

It would be impossible for me to prescribe what this looks like for each and every one of us in our own walks with God. And it will look different in different seasons of our lives.

But I want to suggest just a couple of things that we could try this Advent. Number one is practicing stillness. In our Wednesday night focused Bible study group, we've been going through Tyler Statton's book, *Praying Like Monks and Living Like Fools*.

And it's a book I would really recommend you get your hands on. Put on your Christmas list this year. It's really, really great. And we've been learning about how to go deeper with God in our prayer lives.

[17:09] Recently, we've been trying to still ourselves for two minutes at a time, which actually feels like quite a lot to begin with. Stilling our minds, our bodies, just to be present before God.

Not to get any revelation, not to get anything for ourselves, but just as an act of worship before God. To honour him just by coming before him, quiet and still.

Allowing him to do with that space what he wants to do. Being present before God is an act of worship, however it looks. Perhaps it's creating an atmosphere, still music, an Advent candle, dim lighting.

But practising the presence is a great way to start. Number two is asking Jesus, what does he want to wake us up from this season?

He's kind, he's good, and he doesn't expect us to fix ourselves. He's the one who does the fixing. Where does he want us to focus right now?

[18:17] And there's a great prayer at the end of Psalm 139 that we can use to guide us in this. It says, search me and know my heart, God. Test me and know my anxious thoughts.

See if there is an offensive way within me. And lead me to the way everlasting. Where does God want in this season to work with us?

To lead us more deeply into his fullness of life? And thirdly is finding an Advent resource. There are loads on the Bible app.

There are loads of books if that's your style or podcast. Personally, I'm going to be using the *Lectio 365* app, journeying through Advent each day.

But finding those things that help us to pause from the busyness of the commercial lead up to Christmas and fully engage in Advent this year is really important.

[19:17] It might not be any of those things for you. It might be all of them. It might just be one or two. And the purpose of them isn't to add another thing to our to-do list.

It's to be present with God. To allow the Lord to fill us with hope and anticipation. To re-center our busy lives on his coming as a baby.

God incarnate so that we can have a living, transforming relationship with the King of Kings. The Saviour of the world. It's time to wake up.

To put aside the deeds, the desires of our flesh. To clothe ourselves in Jesus. And to remember that he is the reason for this season.

Let's pray. Lord God, would you wake us up from this Advent season. Would you wake us up from the slumber that we've been in.

[20:23] Strip us of the desires of our flesh that aren't in line with your will. And clothe ourselves in yourself. We're sorry for where we've been so focused on what we want.

Not on what you want. What is good and pleasing and holy and true. Clothe us in your love.

Your mercy. Your sacrifice. Your goodness. Your goodness. Your kindness. As we Advent this year, God, would you help us to be still in the busyness.

To lift our eyes from our lists and our calendars. And fix our eyes and our hearts on you. Help us to breathe deep and know that you are God.

To remember that you are the reason for this season. That you are God with us. And you are all we need. Amen.