

Waking Up to Hope

by Linda Rex

November 27, 2022, 1st Sunday in ADVENT/Hope—This morning I was blissfully sleeping away when the phone rang. It was my husband calling from Florida where he had been delivering cold cases to grocery stores. It took a few minutes for my eyes to fully open and my brain fog to clear, but eventually I was alert enough to enjoy a conversation I don't always have an opportunity to have.

As we enter the time of Advent where we prepare for the coming of Christ as God in human flesh, we are once again being awoken from sleep and given afresh our new “armor of light” which Jesus forged for us in his incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. We are reminded to wake up and live in the truth of what God has done for us in Christ, is doing right now by his Holy Spirit, and will do one day when Jesus returns in glory.

In our gospel reading for this Sunday, Matthew 24:36–44, we are reminded to always stay alert, for we do not know on what day our Lord will return. It is easy to get so focused on a future day when Christ will return, on reading our circumstances to determine whether he might be coming right away, that we miss a critical understanding of what it means for Jesus to come to judge the world. In fact, we may be so focused on the future that we miss what the Lord is doing in us and in our world right now.

The Greek word which describes Jesus' coming and presence is *Parousia*. Karl Barth and other theologians remind us that the *Parousia* of Christ is not just one event at the end of time, but is a singular event which includes the three “comings” of Jesus—the incarnation, the arrival of the Spirit, and Jesus' return in glory. We need to think of the return of Christ in a broader way than simply his return at the end of time. And one of the reasons for doing this is that we will live life more spiritually awake and alert, rather than asleep or dead to the spiritual realities.

Even though Christ has come and has sent his Spirit, he has not yet returned in glory to establish his kingdom in its fulness here on earth. In our Old Testament reading for this Sunday, Isaiah speaks of the day when Jesus will establish his throne here on earth and all the nations will flow to his “mountain”. In that day, Isaiah says, “they will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, and never again will they learn war” (Isaiah 2:4b NASB). Recently I became aware of some classmates of one of my children who have been shipped overseas as part of the United States military presence in Europe due to the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine. That we still need armies to protect our borders and still need soldiers to fight other nations' soldiers is a clear indication that we are not living in the new heavens and new earth.

Seeing this war and all the evil, suffering and natural disasters around us each day may cause us to forget that Jesus is present and active by his Spirit right now in this world. We may lose sight of the magnitude of the judgment which Jesus underwent on our behalf on the cross. In Jesus' sacrificial self-offering, our human flesh, which he bore, underwent crucifixion and death, entering the realm of the dead, to rise from the grave in exaltation into glory.

What Jesus did in his self-offering was to, as it were, divide by the sharp sword of the Spirit our sinful flesh from the Christ-resurrected redeemed flesh, bringing us all up into new life. As I was recently rereading Jeff McSwain's upcoming book on placemat anthropology, I was struck by his use of verses 40 and 41 of our gospel passage for today. As Jesus hung on the cross, there came, in a sense, a severing of the old from the new flesh—two women at the mill, one is taken and one is left; two men in the field, one is taken and one is left. How marvelous that Jesus made it so that this inner battle we all fight between our sinful self and our true self has been victoriously won on behalf of our true self. The true spiritual reality for every human being is that our redeemed resurrected life is right now hidden with Christ in God. The old is gone—the new is come. We can begin even now by faith to participate in our real life which is hidden within Jesus' own face to face relationship with the

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Father in the Spirit. We can participate right now in God's kingdom life as the beloved adopted children of the Father in Christ by the Spirit.

In this manner, we are participating in the *Parousia* of Christ by the Spirit right now, amid this broken and sinful generation. Because our true life is hidden with Christ in God, the apostle Paul says to us:

"... it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts" (Rom. 13:11–14 NASB).

In other words, we are reminded to wake up and remain alert at all times, living in the truth of who we really are in Christ. The Spirit is present and active in us and in our world. Christ is alive in us and with us, moving in our midst to bring about his kingdom purposes here on earth. We are participants in his mission and ministry here on earth by the Spirit, so we want to be busy following Jesus' lead and allowing him to guide and teach us to live in the truth of who we are as God's children. We don't want to live in the darkness of sin and unbelief, but in the truth of who we are in Christ.

What is interesting about this passage in Matthew is that much of it is written in the present tense, even though it doesn't always show in the translations. I find this interesting, because the present tense shows the present reality of what Jesus was saying. We go about our daily lives as people did in the time of Noah, and even so, Jesus is coming and present in each moment by the Spirit, separating out what is passing away from that which is everlasting and eternal. We need to be on the alert at all times, attentive to what Jesus is doing to bring about his kingdom life in this world right now. If we allow ourselves to doze off, we will miss out on the hope, peace, joy, and love he means for us to experience in our daily lives as the beloved children of his Father.

And as we are living attentive to the *Parousia* of Christ by the Spirit right now, we learn to live in the truth of how we will be living forever as God's children. We share with others the good news of what God has done by including us in his life and love, and it becomes our way of being that will carry on beyond this life into the life to come. Living in expectancy of Christ's constant coming and presence or *Parousia*, reframes our hope of his coming in glory, enabling us to let go of trying to figure out how soon he will be here, knowing that he is already present and at work, and we are even now a part of what will continue on beyond the end of this age into the world to come.

Thank you, Father, for sending your Son and sending your Spirit. Thank you, Jesus, for giving us new life and a great hope for the future. Enable us to always be attentive and alert to you and your presence in us and in this world right now by your Holy Spirit. Even so, come, Lord Jesus—Maranatha! Amen.

"But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone. For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so will the coming of the Son of Man be. Then there will be two men in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one will be left. Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will." Matthew 24:36–44 NASB