

Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122;  
Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

There is a display at Walt Disney World that I have yet to see myself, but I always see it being taken down because we go in January, and it's up for the Christmas holidays. This display is called the "Osborne Family Extravaganza" (and for those of you who watch MTV, it's not those Osbornes). Jennings Osborne began his one thousand light display as a celebration of the holidays and as a present for his then six year old daughter, back in 1986. By 1993, the display had grown to more than three million lights, and was visible by plane eighty miles away.

As you might imagine, this garnered a little bit of attention – people from far away would come to see this. They would drive past the house. They would clog up the streets. They would annoy the neighbors. The neighbors asked him to stop, to the point of taking him to court. Mr. Osborne fought it all the way to the Arkansas Supreme Court (he did appeal to the United States Supreme Court, but that was turned down by Justice Clarence Thomas). He paid several fines, one of which was \$10,000. And finally, he decided, both figuratively and literally, to pack it in.

In 1995, Walt Disney World stepped in and purchased the entire display. It has now grown from three million lights, to over five million lights. It takes 21,000 hours and ten weeks to get this display set up; it's set up on the "Back Lot Tour" of the MGM park of Walt Disney World. The current display includes holographic glasses and nightly "snowfalls".

I wonder if this is what Paul meant when he wrote, "Let us lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light"?

Perhaps this is the time of year that we can more readily identify with light and darkness. I get up in the dark. Dawn may be trying to peek over the horizon, but still I need to flick on the light in the bathroom in order to get ready. With my schedule, I am back home to meet the school bus, but then I come back to Trinity late afternoon and I'm here with various meetings and other things, often times until late at night. So, by the time I get home, it's dark once again. I arrive in darkness; I leave in darkness.

Some of us may suffer with "seasonal affliction disorder", or SAD. This is an honest diagnosis; it causes folks to get depressed because there's not enough sunlight. Fortunately, it is relatively easily combated with a lot of sun lamps in which you spend most of your time. But still, it is an affliction, and it affects thousands of people each year.

Is that what Paul meant by "Let us lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light"?

Paul was writing to a congregation that he had not yet met, but hopes to visit there. At this point in his life, Paul has both persecuted believers and been persecuted because of his belief. He writes to the folks in Rome for many reasons, some of which is to lay down some basis understandings, some theological framework, for the emerging church. Not just there in Rome, but the church of Christ throughout the world. He knows, too, that he is facing death. He's not afraid. He's not afraid to die, for as he wrote to the church in Philippi, "To live in Christ and to die, is gain." So, he writes to Rome, to build them up, to get the church as a whole ready, because whether Christ returns before Paul dies or immediately after he dies; whether Christ returns right now, or this afternoon, or by the end of the month, or not for ten thousand years, still Paul encourages us with the words we heard in the Gospel, "be ready". Be prepared. Be prepared to go at the drop of a hat, in an instant.

Many of us prepared this past week, didn't we? For Thursday we had various kinds of preparations going on. I'm sure it depended on whether we had the folks at our house or went to theirs. If they were all coming to our house, we had to clean up things and vacuum away the dust bunnies from under the bed; we had to get the children to shove everything into the closet, we had . . . you know, all those little jobs that we started and never finished, we had to hurry up and fix those or hide them or covered them up.

If we were going to someone else's house, we had to make sure we had the plane tickets, or that there was gas in the car. If we were spending the night, how long were we staying? What clothes do we need to take? Do we need our sleeping bags? Do I have all of my medicine?

And someone had to get the food. We had to prepare for Thursday.

Paul reminds us; Jesus encourages us: Be ready now. Paul goes on to say, "Don't live in a manner that might embarrass you, should Christ return right now." That's what Paul is talking about when he goes through this long list of the things he calls us to "lay aside" – reveling, drunkenness, debauchery, licentiousness (what **is** licentiousness, anyway?), quarreling, jealousy. Put these aside, Paul says. In other words, Paul says, "Don't drink to get drunk. Don't be rowdy and tear up the place, just because you can. Don't go around having sex with whomever and not really caring about the consequences, just because you can. Those are the ways of darkness. Those are the works of those who live in the shadows, who don't really want to be found out."

Those of us who struggle with addiction know what that's like:

"I really need those pain pills. If I go up to the bathroom and lock the door, no one will know."

"I'm, out of town on business, no one knows I'm here. What does it matter if I go to an adult store?"

"The kids are asleep and my spouse is out of town. I think I'll log onto the chat room and see if my buddy is there. We've been having such really good conversations, I'm thinking of asking that person to meet."

"They don't treat me all that well at work. They're not fair. It's a big company; they can afford to replace these things. Besides I need these things at home."

"Let us live honorably as in the day", Paul writes, "put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh." In other words, live like we are the Osborne Family Extravaganza. I don't mean to put up five million decorative lights. Rather, let Christ shine through us.

Imagine if others – the folks with whom you work, your neighbors, total strangers – see your witness, see your love of Christ, see your willingness to serve God and say to themselves, "There's something different about him." or "I want to know why she is so caring." What if those around us could see Christ in us, from miles away? What kind of faith a witness would that be? What kind of a message would that bring to our family, our community, or school, our work place, the world?

The way to get there, the way to have Christ shining in us, is to prepare – daily. To get ready – daily. Not to put things off until we have time; we have to do it everyday. We talk with God every day. We prepare ourselves every day.

In these twenty-eight days of Advent, let us prepare. Prepare for the coming celebration of Christ's birth. Prepare for the return of Christ – Christ as King, Christ as Ruler, Christ as Savior. Let us go and prepare, and let God's light shine through you.

Amen.

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