

## Waiting for the Potatoes

The First Sunday of Advent  
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

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

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“When are we going to eat?” That was always the question directed to my mother and my grandmother on Thanksgiving when I was growing up. Everyone was hungry. No matter where you went in the house, you couldn’t escape the smell of turkey and stuffing and pumpkin spices. “When are we going to eat?” we would ask. The answer was always the same: “When the potatoes are done.”

It became somewhat of a family joke. No matter what fancy meal we were having, those of us waiting in the wings would ask, “When are we going to eat?” We knew the answer that would be given: “When the potatoes are done.”

Which was a **non**-answer, when you think about it. For unless you were near the stove, pricking the potatoes in the pot with a fork, you really didn’t know what “when the potatoes are done” meant. It could be ten minutes. It could be half an hour. And with the smell of roasted turkey wafting through the air, a half an hour could seem a lifetime. We were hungry!

The 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians to whom Paul wrote in our 2<sup>nd</sup> lesson were hungry, too. Oh, they were hungry, all right. Hungry for God to intervene in their world, and usher in a kingdom where his power and rule would prevail, victorious over all present corrupt earthly powers and rules. Paul writes to people hungry for God to make his righteousness known, to establish a justice and peace they certainly weren’t experiencing in their time, a justice and peace they could only dream about. When will that kingdom come?

Of course, in Judaism there had **always** been this hunger—albeit tempered with reverence and fear. Read just about any of the prophetic writings in the Old Testament (whether it’s Isaiah or Amos, Micah or Malachi), and you will find prophecy upon prophecy that the Day of the Lord is going to come—someday—and on that day the Lord God will intervene, render his final judgment upon our world, strip bare all human pretensions, reveal all human sin, destroy that which is enemy to his will, but save and deliver his faithful. Then, and only then, the Lord God will establish *shalom*. *Shalom*—a kingdom of peace and harmony and justice such as the world has never seen, but has only been promised. This will be a kingdom where creation itself will at last be whole and complete, as the Lord God intended—so whole, in fact, that weapons of war will be transformed into farming implements. Isn’t that what Isaiah prophesies in our 1st lesson today? And doesn’t he, as he describes that future day, sound hungry for it? First he envisions a time when all people will say to each other, “*Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord . . . that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths . . .*” Then Isaiah describes how the Lord God “*shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.*” But of course, it’s sometime in the future for Isaiah and his people. An unknown time. It doesn’t take place in Isaiah’s lifetime.

Read through the Old Testament to the last words of Malachi, the final prophet in the Old Testament canon, and you read again about that hunger. When will the Day of the Lord come? When will all be made right by God?

As I noted earlier, if you turn to New Testament scripture, you discover that Christians—those following the crucified and risen Christ—also had a hunger, a similar hunger. Only this concept of the Old Testament Day of the Lord and a kingdom of *shalom* now had the story of Jesus Christ superimposed upon it. Paul, and the people to whom he wrote letters, believed Jesus Christ himself would intervene in our world, come to judge the earth and its inhabitants, subdue the worldly powers, and reign victoriously over God’s people as a righteous, wise king in a glorious kingdom that was his . . .

The people to whom Paul wrote were hungry for this to happen. So, they were asking, when will our Lord Jesus Christ come again? Paul’s response to their question? “. . . *salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near.*” Which is a **non-**answer, when you think about it. It’s a lot like saying, “When the potatoes are done . . .” Paul, when is the kingdom of God going to come? When will a creation gone awry be made right by its creator? Well, Paul says, it’s nearer than the last time you asked me, and boy, doesn’t that turkey smell wonderful?

Paul and those 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians thought for sure Christ would return soon. In their lifetime. Or at least not long after. But centuries have passed, the waiting drags on, and here are you and I, journeying through a world where the power of sin maintains a sure grip even on us, where one generation teaches war to yet another, where justice and peace cannot be purchased at any price. It is difficult to hold onto hopes and promises when faced with such things of despair. In fact, my fear is that we gradually lose our appetite, forget what it is we once hungered for. We begin to accept the status quo. Scale back our expectations. This is just the way the world works, and we might as well fit into the system, right? Go with the flow, right? Do what everyone else is doing, right? In the waiting, how easy it is to become lethargic and drowsy, no longer anticipating the intervention of this mighty God into our lives, no longer hungry for a world of *shalom*.

But Jesus warns against that drowsiness in Matthew’s Gospel today. Jesus exhorts his disciples to stay alert, or they’ll miss the advent of God. He says, “*Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming . . . you must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.*” And Paul takes up the same mantra: “. . . *it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep . . . the night is far gone, the day is near.*”

Our family of five toured Williamsburg, Jamestown and Yorktown over Thanksgiving, and we stayed in a motel in Williamsburg for three nights. We didn’t have to get up real early since the various visitor centers didn’t open till 9 a.m., but I noticed how hard it was for us to wake up, even at a later hour. And that wasn’t just because we were tired out from all our walking the previous day. It was because of the drapes. The Hampton Inn where we stayed had these drapes underneath the sheer curtains that blocked all light from outside. Oh, it was great not to have the floodlights of the parking lot shining in our faces when we went to bed. But the drapes blocked light so well that, consequently, you couldn’t tell if it was 3 a.m. or 8 a.m. We might very well have slept all day! I found, though, that if you didn’t quite close those drapes, leaving just a little space between them, a bit of dawn’s light would peek through, and you would know it was nearly morning. That chink of light piercing through the dark is what Paul’s talking about here.

He tells the Romans that you know daytime is near because we're living in the first light of dawn. Jesus Christ and his birth, his earthly ministry, his mighty works, and his servant status on the cross are that bit of light that breaks through the darkness of this world to reach us with good news: God is intervening in our world. He intends to redeem his creation. So, Paul says, wake up and live in that light! It is no time to sleep. It is no time to accept the status quo. It is time, rather, to put aside the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light. Paul is saying that God's **future** plans for us give clarity to our present direction and purpose. God's **future** plans for us have a direct bearing on our present ethics and attitudes, thus shaping our daily words and deeds.

There was a pastor several years ago who served a church in Harlem, just above 125<sup>th</sup> Street in New York City. The neighborhood surrounding this Gothic church was pitiful—burned-out shells of buildings, pawn shops, roach-infested grocery stores. Prostitution and drug-dealing were the income producers. Many churches had simply up and left, but this pastor and that church remained. They organized a locally-owned bank, they set up a latch-key program for children, they formed a neighborhood redevelopment agency, they conducted Bible studies in the tenements, they volunteered time on crime watch. A newspaper reporter interviewed the pastor, asking at one point, "Sure, you're doing great stuff. But what difference will it make?" The pastor responded, "We've read the Bible and we know how it ends. We aren't at the end yet, but we know how it ends, and that's what makes the difference."

He and his congregation elected to stay awake, to stay hungry. They didn't know when the potatoes would be done, but they kept smelling that wonderful smell of roasted turkey. They didn't know when full day would appear, but they kept looking for the chink of light piercing the darkness of those slums. Then they put on the armor of that light as they cared for the people in their neighborhood.

"Salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers . . ." Hmmm. What might have been considered a **non**-answer on Paul's part is really Paul urging us to live like we're expecting Christ's return tomorrow. It is Paul's call for Christians of every generation waiting for Christ to return to be **hungry** for that return, a hunger that makes us eager and hope-filled and ready. A hunger that gets us up on our feet and moving out into his world to live under his rule and serve in his name. For Paul says Christ's return will be good news—it's salvation, it's God's restoring us, and it's nearer than the last time we asked about it, it's nearer than when we first believed, it's nearer than yesterday, and it's nearly here. **Come, Lord Jesus. AMEN.**