

First Sunday in Advent – Epistle

Wake UP!

Romans 13:11-14

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Analysis by Ron Starenko

Romans 13: 11 Besides this you know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; 12 the night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; 13 let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. 14 But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

DIAGNOSIS: Asleep

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Clueless*

Whatever sleep means, including its benefits, there is a negative side to consider. At least St. Paul in his letters uses sleep as a metaphor for escape, being unprepared, even for being dead, as in this lesson from the letter to the Romans, where sleep can mean that we are “out of it,” clueless. When my father thought I was dense about something, like I was walking in a fog, he would shout, “wake up!” As I remember, sometimes it had to do with not knowing what time it was. St. Paul began today’s lesson with: “Besides this you know what hour it is, how it is

full time now for you to wake from sleep” (v. 11). What sleep is he writing about? Could it be the slumber of living life in a fog, the meaningless, monotonous existence of one day after another, as though we were sleepwalking; not knowing who we are or whose we are anymore; not knowing the time of opportunity or even experiencing something new and revitalizing? Could he mean that we fall asleep, metaphorically speaking, because we do not know God, whether God’s judgment or God’s promise? Could he mean that we are clueless to God?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – Faithless

Being out of it is bad enough. Not wanting to be clued in is worse still. Even though St. Paul alludes to Christians who knew a time when they “first believed” (v. 11), there was a time when they did not believe, when they had no answer to the darkness, no hope of finding the light, when they were burdened with nothing but bad news. The problem of being faithless plagues us still. Sleeping to escape, or not being able to sleep in order to escape, might both be forms of faithlessness; both might reflect an inability to trust God, an unwillingness to trust God. Without faith we miss God’s actions in our lives; we miss the news that a Savior has come for us and will come for us again. Asleep, we are moving close to death.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – Lifeless

Having lost track of time, having lost track of God, we are already dead and do not even know it. Now we have the worst problem of all. We could run out of wake-up calls, and the next thing we know we could be waking to the darkness, to the God who says that time has run out on us. We are condemned to a sleep from which we will not awake—or perhaps that’s an awakening from which we cannot escape into sleep. This is, by far, the worst news of all.

PROGNOSIS: Awake

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – Alive

However, St. Paul tells his audience that “the night is far gone” (v. 12). He means the darkness is over! Its reign has given way to the dawn of a new day when our Lord Jesus Christ in his first advent defeated the powers of evil. Christ, who suffered shame on the cross, lifted the judgment of God that would otherwise have crushed us. The night now is behind us, and the whole creation has been redeemed; God “has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of God’s beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13-14). That is news capable of waking us from the dead. “For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we wake or sleep we might live with him” (2 Thess. 5:9-10). That wake-up call is not only for this life, for today’s struggles, but also for whatever may come. When St. Paul adds, “the day is at hand” (v. 12), he is referring to the second advent of Jesus. This salvation is near (v. 11). It means resurrection from the dead—peace with God.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – Alert

We who hear the call to wake up from sleep to life and light receive good news that makes our day. We have God’s promise that on that final day those who are in Christ will awaken to everlasting day. Our advent wake-up call now is to trust that word and promise by “putting on the Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 14). The Holy Spirit makes our day by joining us to Christ, who not only bears our death but also destroys it in Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. Through these sacraments he makes us awake, alert, prepared for the end that God has promised. “Salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed” (v. 11). When faith is awakened, we no longer walk in darkness, as we have the light of life.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – Active

Therefore, writes the apostle: “let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy” (v. 13). In other words, gratifying the desires of the flesh is now behind us, too, because we are justified by faith (Rom. 3:28). We know what our life is for, what our bodies are for, what our relationships are for: They are for the Lord and for the neighbor. St. Paul probably considered self-indulgence—whether sexual misuse and abuse, getting stoned, or harboring ill feelings in our relationships—as ways to lull ourselves into sleep. But now that we are awake in the Spirit, and children of the day, we can be proactive rather than reactive. Our faith becomes active in love as we awaken to life for others.