

ADVENT I

November 28, 1971

Redeemer Lutheran Church - Milwaukee

Text: Jeremiah 31:31-34

"PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE IN CHRIST"

31:33 "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people."

The prophet Jeremiah is usually called the weeping prophet. He is pictured as overwhelmed by the pathetic conditions of human existence and the tragedy of times in which he lived; as a man of sorrow and acquainted with much grief. And as far as it goes, this picture is certainly a true one. For he was overburdened by the foolishness and sin of the people of his day; he saw clearly that disaster alone awaited them.

And so his central theme--REPENT - TURN BACK TO GOD - FORGET YOUR FOOLISH WAYS--runs throughout his prophecies. Here was a man whom God had "set over nations and kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to replant (Jer. 1:10)" Yet here, this same man, was so deeply sensitive--so keenly aware of his human limitations--so committed to both his people and his God that every pronouncement he made in God's name crushed him into agonizing lament for God's scattered and disloyal people.

It is only with this kind of backdrop that we can begin to comprehend the depth of his tension - the tension between the pessimism that he communicated and the hope that he longed to see. And in the text before us we see most clearly his vision of hope. And so Jeremiah the prophet of doom now confronts us as Jeremiah the apostle of hope.

For in the midst of the war that was crushing his country and reducing Jerusalem to rubble, Jeremiah describes a future in terms of a new covenant--a new covenant asserting God's sovereignty--a new covenant proclaiming a real hope for the house of Israel--a real hope for all the people of God--a hope which is real because this new covenant seeks to meet

needs of God's people.

A new Covenant which meets men's needs in three vital ways--as a pardon for the past, power for the present, and a promise for the future. These are the three ingredients of the NEW AGREEMENT God has made with the Israelites--and with us.

I. Jeremiah proclaims from God: "I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." So the first ray of hope is that God will and does offer pardon for the past. But we say, what does it matter whether the past is forgiven or not? The past is gone forever, never to return; what has been, has been. Let bygones be bygones.

But do we close the door on "what had been" so easily? The fact is that the past is never MERELY past; it is always alive in the present and powerfully active. There is no such thing as a dead past - and each of us knows it too well.

We all know how the life of someone dear to us--someone who has inspired and comforted us--we all know how that past is still very much present. We know how these fond memories do entrench, us, yet we also live with foul memories which imprison us to the conflicts and bitterness and guilt of yesterdays.

So, can we still claim that pardon for the past doesn't matter? That we're too modern for that kind of forgiveness stuff? Only fools reject this vital dynamic of life.

And yet each of us can recall a time in our own lives when we have rejected an offering of pardon--an offering of forgiveness.

For many of us have lived or are still living with a heavy burden of guilt for something done in the past. Maybe we're feeling that we let a loved one down before his death? Maybe we're feeling that we exploited another person's love for us? Maybe we're still sick over a lustful desire--or yet chanied by an act which still causes us pain, or guilt, or resentment, or despondency. If so, we haven't accepted God's pardon, have we--and maybe even worse, we maybe

haven't shared God's forgiveness with that person whom we know is crushed with guilt . . . who is still chained to his or her past sin.

And so like the Israelites, we too know our need for the New Covenant. We know our cynicism, the slashing tongue, the self-righteous stare, the seductive greed that separates men from other men--wives from husbands --children from parents--nations from other nations--all people from God. Jeremiah also knew these. And he knew--and we know that they must be dealt with, confessed and forgiven. The pardon of the past--the forgiveness of sin is not a luxury concocted by theologians--it is a necessity of existence--it is part of the hope that Jeremiah proclaims as God's New Covenant--it is a basic human need because human beings basically imprison themselves in sin. We need to be pardoned for self-righteous slaughter of ourselves, others, and our God and his creation.

II. But our hope is not complete with only a pardon for the past. We have to live our lives now; every situation has to be faced anew as it confronts us. We need power for the present. A second provision of God's New Covenant.

Prior to this New Covenant, Israel experienced power to live through a strict adherence to Mosaic Law and Deuteronomic Code. In essence this law of God was and still is good and humane--it sought to bring justice and righteousness to all. But as this law became an end in itself, God's people were blinded to its purpose of love--they only sought to fulfill regulations without understanding their ultimate purpose of love of God and for one another. And in so doing, they discovered their impotence--their lack of power to fulfill the law. And so the law became a source of pride and evil power--and Pharisaism became that power personified.

The law had thus become a tool for destroying rather than guiding men--it had become a power for negating the worth of life, rather than for preparing the way for human relationships. And so God thru Jeremiah proclaimed a New Covenant--a new agreement in which the

law would remain the law--but an agreement in which men would know they were accepted even when they had not fulfilled the code.

In other words, God became not only an external force, but because of His forgiveness, he became an inner presence of power and principle--his love was no longer only out there as tablets--his presence was now internalized--written on the heart. His presence was now felt--because forgiveness is a feeling, it is more than knowledge of the law--it is deeply personal, very real, and tremendously empowering, because it proclaims that we are worth something even though we have been sinful in the past.

It drives deeply into us to tell us that we are suitable. And when we know we are still suitable even when we have done wrong, then we have experienced God's power to live anew. That is a power which further stimulates us to fulfill the law, because that power of acceptance enables us to pick up our lives even as we are stuck in the muck of our own mistakes.

And so God proclaims: "I will put my law of love in their inward parts, and I will write it upon their hearts."

Many situations in life could illustrate this new relationship of love. Let's just consider one. Just try to imagine that you have a son. He has just taken off for an evening with the family car. Shortly thereafter, you receive a call that he has had an accident--it may even be his fault. As you are enroute to the scene, you are bit angry with him. You know from your conversation that he is shaken. You both know that the rules of safe driving have been violated, i.e., the law has been broken.

You look at him and he looks at you. He sees a compassionate grin beneath your exterior of frustration which tells him you love and forgive him. And you see from his lost and confused look that he desperately needs your love and forgiveness. There are no harsh words of condemnation--only a father and son embracing each other.

My Christian friends, that is God's New Covenant; that is God's law of love in the inward parts, and written on the heart. That is God saying, you have done wrong--you know it and so do I. But I pardon you of that past action, and I still accept you as my child. Now LIVE ANEW, and TRY NOT TO DO IT AGAIN.

And as long as that boy, and EACH OF US knows that we are accepted by God and each other, even in the midst of yesterday's sin, then we do know power for the present--the power God has given each of us--the power to daily seek to fulfill His law of love.

III. And so with our past pardoned and being empowered for the present, what can we say about the promise for our future?

Here we turn to Jeremiah's 38th verse, where he proclaims "that the days are coming says the Lord when the city shall be rebuilt . . ." Obviously, he refers to the rebuilding of Jerusalem . . . a city which at the time was a heap of ruins.

So what is Jeremiah saying by this for all of us? He is proclaiming that God will not forsake His people. He is proclaiming that no matter how much we turn away from God, God will never turn His back on His people. This is the third vital hope of the New Covenant.

And this element of hope for us on November 28th, 1971 is not just a pietistic platitude--for we know better than Jeremiah's own people that God has offered us that hope in a very real way.

For that hope--that security for God's people--was taken with utmost seriousness by one man in history. With God's direction, this man came to the conclusion that the only thing with which this New Covenant could be written, was his own blood.

And on the same night he was betrayed, Jesus took the cup when he had supped saying: "This is the New Covenant in my blood."

The hope of Jeremiah is fulfilled in that man. He is also our ultimate hope--because His life fulfills our ultimate need of love, of acceptance, and of a pardon for the past.

To know, to love, to obey Christ is to be introduced into the life of the New Covenant.

We enter this Advent as we have entered many others--with the hope and expectation of again being reintroduced to the Jesus of Nazareth, who became the Christ, the living New Covenant.

We are governed by a memory of Him, who loved us and gave himself for us in the past--and who now and in the future sustains us through our anticipation of being always in his presence and becoming like him.

May God continually grant us this pardon for the past, power for the present, and promise for the future - in Jesus Christ.

Amen.

ADVENT I

Church of the Master - Troy

December 1, 1974 "WHAT TIME IS IT?"

"You must do this, because you know what hour it is: the time has come for you to wake up from your sleep." Romans 13:11

Have any of you ever felt haunted by the shortness of time? You know - that feeling of so much to do, and no time to do it.

I'm sure you all know the feeling. I'm especially certain that many of your experience that feeling on Sunday morning.

And obviously, this is the seasonal time that so many of us feel increasing neuroses due to the shortness of time.

Paul found himself in the same dilemma. But it was more than shortness of time -- he was expecting the crisis of the world's history at any moment -- the Second Coming of Christ (the Parousia). The Early Church expected this happening at any moment, and so it had great urgency.

(At this point I could digress into an intellectual game of speculation regarding the Parousia - we'll save that exercise for our Bible study group -- suffice it to say that Lutherans affirm Christ's coming again - the details of which vary from theologian to theologian)

What is important is the context in which Paul was writing. Christ's second coming was even more urgent for him because he was convinced people weren't ready. He says "the time has come to wake up" meaning: to wake up to the lifestyle of Christ.

Paul deeply feared that Christ would return so soon -- and the Roman church would not be ready. As we readily see in this lesson, the Roman church had drifted away from Christ's lifestyle -- Paul uses the image of darkness - he claims these people were doing the things that belong to the dark.

He names them -- our translation says - orgies. The Greek term is "komos" - meaning revelries. This came to mean a noisy band of revellers who swept through the city streets late at night. It means that people were into a lifestyle of wild parties and drunken blasts. Obviously, if Christ returned - Paul felt the people would have no chance for salvation -- they would be too drunk to care.

He names immorality - the Greek term here is "koite." This word brings to mind the man who puts no value on fidelity -- it is the mindset which takes his pleasure when and where he will. Like indecency, these Greek terms portray the quality of a man who is so deeply in the grip of sheer lust that he dares publicly to do the things which are unbecoming for any man to do.

Again - Paul uses "eris" - here translated fighting. This is the ~~fight~~ for place, power, and prestige motivated by a hatred of being surpassed. It is a total unwillingness to take second place -- it is the entire negation of agape love (the love of God for man).

Is it any wonder that Paul was saying: It's time to wake up. He felt the whole society was doomed to hell - he felt Christ would never receive a mankind that was unwilling to recognize its depravity.

And so - those who select the lessons for the lectionary place this in the first Sunday of the church year - Advent I. The emphasis here is not ~~merely~~ ^{only} on Christ's Second Coming - ~~although~~ ^{though} that's a daily consideration. The emphasis is upon our own watchfulness -- our own preparations -- our own sleepiness or alertness to God's love in Christ.

And so to the question: What time is it? we must apply our present lifestyles. We say Advent is a time of preparation for Christmas -- that sounds nice, but what do we mean by it? Yes, what time is it?

I think, first, it's time to wake up and re-examine the meaning of Christmas. ^{as related to our lives} What difference has the birth of God in the flesh made?

Comparison Are we facing any conditions similar to Paul's day? Like "kemos" - that is partying for partying sake. Or Koite-being caught in the grip of infidelity. Or "eris" - a total unwillingness to take second place.

Maybe our conditions are these and yet others: ~~is~~ the economic scare in Michigan driving us to re-examine a lifestyle which has been thriving on a greed mentality. A mentality which preaches more - more - more for me.

How elaborate - how gaudy - how expensive will we have to make this Christmas in order for the Christ child to be born?

Yes, what difference will the celebration of God's birth in the flesh make? Friends of the Master, I hope it will make enough difference to us so that we might help

deflate our desire for revelling - and infidelity - and being the top dog -- and the greediness and gaudiness that reflect such superficial peace & joy.

I hope secondly - this will be a time to re-assess our relationships -- to God, to one another - to those less fortunate than we are.

Tonight we will offer each family an Advent devotional booklet. Although this is a token gesture - if each family uses it each day during Advent -- this might say that God is getting a bit more quantity and quality of time.

And to one another. How much we need to re-assess the quantity and quality of our family time. Advent is a beginning -- the coming of a new order of things because of God's coming in the flesh -- it is a time for new priorities in our relationships to each other. The least we can do as families is to talk about it.

And our relationships to those less fortunate. Our food ingathering was a first token gesture. Our clothing ingathering will be a second token gesture. They are important. But the real test will be our READINESS and WILLINGNESS to get involved personally -- to get involved like God get involved -- IN THE FLESH!

Which leads to the third and final point: Maybe our Advent re-examination and reassessment will be a TIME that we'll realize the greatest gift WE CAN OFFER EACH OTHER AT CHRISTMAS - OR ANY OTHER TIME, is a GIFT OF TIME. Yes, the Greatest gift is to offer each other OURSELVES.

Isn't it amazing -- this is exactly what God realized. He realized the greatest gift he could offer us was HIMSELF -- in the flesh. He offered us - and still does - time to get to know him in the flesh.

He NOW uses earthy elements for the flesh - bread and wine. He still takes the time to offer himself - to offer his presence of forgiving love. How can anybody turn down such a fantastically free gift?!?

What time is it? It's time to wake up and share the free gift of God's love -- and then offer this timely gift throughout Advent, Christmas, and the New Year.

Amen.

ADVENT I
Luth Church of the Master
Nov. 30, 1975

"BE PREPARED"

"Watch therefore-- for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning-- lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Watch."

MATTHEW 13:35-37

Most of us are aware that the Boy Scout motto is "Be Prepared." I never realized when I was a Boy Scout how theological that motto really is. The motto is very much in keeping with many things that Jesus said. "Watch - be ready -- watch."

As I remember my Scout training that's just exactly the nature of the motto. "Be Prepared" to act on the behalf of anyone at anytime. Needless to say, it's a great rule to live by.

Yet from the Christian viewpoint, it has an even more profound motivation than simply a good rule. Preparation or anticipation for the Christian has a 3-Dimensional focus. It is more than a rule -- readiness for Christ is based on three dimensions.

First - the Christian is keenly prepared for this moment because of his awareness of the past. Second - the Christian is confidently prepared for the future because he believes God's promise. Third - the Christian is urgently prepared to act RIGHT NOW because he knows that's when God needs him.

So - let's take them in that order. First - the Christian prepares to live EVERY MOMENT with keen knowledge of the past. And what do we remember from the history of our past -- quite simply, alienation from God.

Listen to Isaiah in today's lesson.

Behold, you are angry, and we are sinful;
all of us have become like unclean men,
all our good deeds are like polluted rags;
We have all withered like leaves,
and our guilt carries us away like the wind.
There is none who calls upon your name,
who rouses himself to cling to you;
For you have hidden your face from us
and have delivered us up to our guilt.
Yet, O Lord, you are our father,
we are the clay and you the potter:
we are all the work of your hands.

Obviously, Isaiah is referring to Israel and her pagan sacrifices and idol worship. But which one of us can't remember times when we too have made life little more than a polluted rag -- when we have separated ourselves from God and his way of living.

Which one of us is blind to the moral and spiritual crises of the present day? Is alienation from God only something that Israel experienced? Hardly! It aboundeth all around us today.

yet - what was the result of Israel's moral and spiritual decay? The destruction of her entire civilization.

So - the first dimension of our Advent preparations see us looking back -- becoming aware again of the cost of alienation from God. And in so remembering, we again submit ourselves to the Father -- confessing our guilt -- and letting him take us like clay and remold us back into his own image.

To be prepared in Advent FIRST sees us cleansing ourselves from our idols SO THAT God can reshape us - to make us useful vessels for his purposes.

Then THE SECOND DIMENSION for the Christian -- always preparing to be confident about the future. We are prepared AT EVERY MOMENT to take God's

promise seriously - namely, that we have eternal life through Christ. We live confident of the future, NOT FEARFUL. The future is not hocus-pocus chance for us -- it is belief in God's promise THAT WE WILL BE SAVED. There is absolutely NO DOUBT for the Christian who has continued to prepare BY BELIEVING.

There's a whole school of evangelism strategy today which seeks to get converts by SCARING THEM INTO BELIEF. The approach goes like this: "if you died tonight, would you go to heaven." Obviously, to the ill-prepared Christian, this tactic can come as a threat.

But not so for us. Our answer is the same as Paul's expressed to the Corinthians in today's second lesson:

(as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.) (CR)

To be prepared in Advent sees us taking that promise seriously -- we are confident even should we die today that God will not renig on his promises.

So - that leads us to the **LAST DIMENSION** of being prepared as Christians. We have seen the first Advent of Christ some 2,000 years ago. We have been promised the second Advent of Christ for our future. And so God leaves the last dimension in our hands -- NAMELY, we are to make the Advent of Christ a reality right now.

We are to do this
~~And how are we to do this? Yes~~ -- by watching, not just at worship, not just on Sunday mornings, not just when church people or the pastor is around -- BUT BY WATCHING EVERY MINUTE for that opportunity when we can share the love of Christ. THAT'S BEING PREPARED FOR ADVENT. AND THAT'S BEING PREPARED FOR CHRISTMAS.

We receive six new families today. They have been and will continue to be prepared to receive

the Advent of Christ through this congregation. Yes - there is an urgency in this last dimension. These new members don't expect to wait 'til the new year before they experience the love of Christ in this congregation. THEY ARE PREPARED right now -- they are expecting us TO SHARE AND DELIVER the love of Christ.

I am confident we are prepared to do so -- so let's not renig on our preparations.

But we're not alone. New members in Christ, your fellow members at the Master expect to receive the Advent of Christ from you RIGHT NOW AS WELL. Today is a new day -- the alienation of the past is behind us -- today we have prepared for a new advent of Christ -- a new coming of his presence into thás body of believers.

We look forward to receiving his love from you. Just as we have prepared for Christ's coming, he has prepared us for your coming. We fully anticipate that you will help us BUILD UP his body -- that you will continue to help us prepare his body for the future.

Yes - we fully anticipate that together we will BE PREPARED to WATCH every moment for opportunities to let Christ COME ALIVE wherever his love is needed.

O, Come, o Come Emmanuel -- Come, God be with us -- let us not fall asleep on the job that never stops for one moment of life -- the job of urgently preparing to make Christ's presence alive, RIGHT NOW!

We live with 3-D preparation -- cleansing ourselves of idols and alienation -- confid3ntly living with the promise of eternal life -- and always preparing RIGHT NOW to offer the love God first gave thru the Advent of his son, Jesus Christ.

AMEN

ADVENT I

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo

November 28, 1982

Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"TIME TO WAKE UP!"

Jesus said to his disciples, 'And there will be signs in the sun and moon and stars, and upon the earth distress of nations in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves, men fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world; ... Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.'

Luke 21:25,26,28

There's a famous barnyard story of a bird that made a deal with a farmer. The bird just couldn't satisfy his appetite for worms -- so he asked for the farmer's assistance. He would make the farmer a good deal -- for every worm that the farmer would get for him, he would give the farmer one of his pretty feathers. So they consummated the deal. And it wasn't too long after that the bird had eaten too many worms and lost so many feathers THAT HE TOTALLY LOST HIS ABILITY TO FLY.

It was only at that point that he recognized his true destiny -- his true purpose was to fly. But the worms had proved too tempting. He was now grounded for life! If only someone had warned him sooner -- if only someone had awakened him to the mess that he was getting into.

Well - so goes the story of a foolish bird. But too often, human nature follows the same foolish course. Too often humanity looks only at the immediate gratifications around them -- not at our purpose of living in the image of God. In short - too often we allow the worms to get the best of us -- we center our lives on the temporary, the short-lived treasures of the earth. We exchange the feathers of heaven for the worms of the earth -- we become hopelessly weighed down with the cares and worries -- the powers and pleasures of the principalities of this world.

Like the bird, humanity often gets himself into a wormy mess because he's fallen asleep to his real purpose. It's so easy to become addicted to the passions and pleasures and powers of our own appetites. And when we become so addicted, just like the alcoholic, we lose touch with reality-- with the real purpose for existence.

What the bird needed was a prophetic voice -- someone to wake him up to what was really happening; someone to wake him up to what his greed was doing to his future. But as is often the case when the worms of life are plentiful -- there was no one around to be a vigilant voice -- TO WAKE HIM UP!

We who celebrate in the church today are much more fortunate -- for such is the voice of Advent I! As we begin a new church year -- the first voice is that of prophecy -- the voice of vigilance -- the voice which says: "Now is the time to wake up -- to look at reality for what it is!! The voice is one which is looking out for our own good -- it's God's voice, asking us to take a good hard look at the signs of the times. What are we preparing for -- other than Christmas goodies and shopping?!? Have we allowed ourselves to become weighed down with too many worms -- too much stuff, too many cares, too many pleasures SO THAT WE NO LONGER SEE THE LOFTY PURPOSE OF GOD FOR OUR LIVES!! Have the worms of the earth gotten the best of us??

Well - it doesn't take a genius to tell us that the signs of the times are pretty wormy. Even in these times of high unemployment -- basic greed runs high and thankfulness runs pretty low. We hear a lot more about destruction and war than about renewed building and peace. Immorality, drunkenness, hedonism and narcissism continue to reign as the gods of our culture. If ever there was a time for the doomsday prophets to have a field day -- we are living in that time. For as our text reflects -- there is much distress among nations ... and there are many men fainting with fear and foreboding what is coming on the world.

But we dare not over-react to these signs of the times. Face them, we must! But over-react- never! The whole purpose of these texts and of Advent I is to AWAKEN US to the realities around us. Contrary to what has often been done with these texts -- the aim is not to produce hopelessness -- or to get us to run off to the hills to wait for the end of the world.

Much to the contrary -- the voice of prophecy always has the single aim to awaken us TO FACE UP TO THE REALITY OF THE WORLD. Those very words are used in today's text: we are

urged to "look up and raise our heads." In short, we are not beckoned to WITHDRAW -- but to confront the realities of whatever wormy mess we find ourselves in. That's the difference between the false hope of the world -- and the real hope of God's Word. God's Word always urges us to face up to the mess -- not to avoid it. The first step of hope -- whether in national, international, community, or even family affairs -- is to face up to a problem when a problem exists -- NOT TO RUN AWAY FROM IT.

The reason there is so little hope in this world is that far too many people have been following the world's recipe for hope: NAMELY, when you've got a problem, just make believe that it doesn't exist; Avoid it; Cover it up; Overlook it; Run away from it; BUT ABOVE ALL -- DON'T CONFRONT IT. Is it any wonder there is so much brokenness in the world -- there is no longer a voice of vigilance in the world -- a voice which seeks to call a spade a spade; a voice which seeks to call a wormy mess, a wormy mess!!

That was graphically illustrated for me this past week as I was reading the December issue of Reader's Digest. Admiral Hyman Rickover, now 82, served 60 years under 12 different presidents. He has written an article entitled: "What It Takes to Be President." His first and most important point is that he says "a president must not discourage the interruption of a smooth running White House." He goes on: "What is needed is someone to disturb the self-assurance of a staff, someone who will say: "We are getting into a mess!"

Admiral Rickover is saying exactly what our texts reflect today: Leadership, to be good leadership, always needs a voice of vigilance. A voice which is willing to tell it like it really is -- rather than the official version, which is far too often a cover up of the truth.

The Voice of Vigilance is the Voice of Jeremiah, Thessalonians and Luke: It is the voice which says: IT'S TIME TO WAKE UP. It's time to look at our appetites for what they really are. It's time to determine where we have given up God's feathers for the worms of the earth. It's time to look anew at God's calling -- it's time to fulfill what we have been chosen for -- NOT TO RUN TO THE HILLS, but to be the presence of Christ in the world.

St Luke says we fulfill that calling - that chosenness in three ways: by taking heed of the ways we have allowed ourselves to become weighed down; by being watchful at all times; by praying for strength to withstand whatever trials we may have to face.

Yes - St. Luke says - "Take heed ...do not become weighed down with drunkenness and cares of this world." We are moving into the drunkenness season; more alcohol is consumed in the month of December than the rest of the year combined-- we're told it's the season to be jolly. This is the season where commercials tell us that if we have a nerve-wracking problem, take something -- take a pill, take a drink, take something to make reality go away!"

The voice of our Lord says, take heed -- be vigilant against those worms which only satisfy our momentary appetites. Instead, look up and raise your heads to the Christ who has given you more than the worms of the earth -- he has offered you and me ~~the~~ kingdom which will not pass away.

Likewise - St Luke says -- you have been chosen to be the watchful ones. So often Christians have interpreted these words to mean that we are to just sit around and wait for God to do his thing. But as one author says: as we wait for the Lord, he also waits for us. He waits for us to finally do something lasting ... to give something permanent ... to pray with works as well as superficial words.

To be watchful means to use our time profitably -- to watch like the boy and girl ball retrievers do at a tennis match. They take their places near the net, on hands and knees, always ready and waiting to get the ball that has hit the net. They do not watch aimlessly like many spectators; they watch with purpose -- to keep the game going without long interruptions.

Such is the watchfulness of Christians. Wherever we see conditions or needs in the world which reflect an interruption of God's love -- we will be quick to respond to manifest his love and support and aid in those places.

Finally - St Luke says as God's chosen ones, we are to pray so that we will be able to withstand whatever trials come our

way/ The implication is obvious: the Christian life is not lived without suffering and earthly worminess. Followers of Christ get their hands dirty and their hearts wounded in the problems and perplexities of living. But God gives his followers an extra: through the power of prayer, God offers the gifts of his Spirit -- namely, the gifts of love, patience, self-control, kindness, and gentleness." Those gifts make it possible for Christians to "look up and raise their heads" even in the midst of gloomy days.

The Word of Advent I is not to fear the end of the world; Only God knows when the end will come; human speculation about the time and place, about the winners and the losers, is doomed to failure. But the Word of Advent I is that Christ is coming again -- even today he comes as a voice of vigilance. He comes to awaken us to his presence in us and around us. He says: Today is the time -- the time to wake up ... to take heed of our earthly greed ... our wormy appetites; and to transform those cares of life by watching for those signs and those times that we might fulfill his love in the world.

AMEN

ADVENT II
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
December 6, 1987
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"THE WAY . . . BACK!"

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God ... In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places smooth. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed ... for the Word of God will stand forever ... He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young."

Isaiah 40:1,3-5,10-11

It was the summer of '62. I had just celebrated my 20th birthday. For two years my home parish pastor had been preparing the way for Peter in the parish ministry. During that time, I regularly read the lessons and assisted with Holy Communion. But at the same time, I had been seriously dating a Methodist nurse for more than a year. And it was soon to be the first Sunday in August -- a Communion Sunday ... another Sunday for reading the lessons and assisting with Communion.

But I had other plans for that Sunday. I had planned a get-away with my girlfriend up to her neck-of-the-woods in beautiful northern Wisconsin. For weeks - she and I and our friends had been planning this get-away. It was now Thursday evening before Sunday -- choir rehearsal night. In the middle of choir rehearsal, I went to my pastor's office. Upon seeing him I said, "I just want to remind you that I will not be here this weekend; I'm going to Virginia's place for a get-away."

Without hesitation, he looked at me and said: "Well, Peter, you have to establish your own priorities in life. It's either a commitment to Christ ... or having fun with your friends. It appears that "your friends" are more important!"

I was aghast! I couldn't believe he would lay that guilt trip on me. I looked at him and said, "Well, Pastor, if those are the choices, then I guess I'll take friendship with others rather than fellowship here! And while I'm talking let me say, I've never had anyone 'Lord it over me' the way you just have ... not even my parents would be that rigid. So, don't expect my return to this fold again."

I stormed out of the church -- trembling with anger and humiliation. When I arrived home, I announced to my parents that "I was finished with the church ... and they could also forget about their son becoming a pastor." I went on, "If he's an example of the way pastors are to treat people, then I don't want anything to do with the pastoral ministry." I went to my room and secluded myself for the rest of the evening.

I was still trembling and deeply hurt. But on the outside I felt victorious -- I thought, "I really stood up to that bully." But on the inside, I was ripped to shreds. I had hurt my parents ... I had disrespectfully attacked my pastor ... and my choir friends had observed the worst of my arrogant foolishness (of course, they had also seen my pastor's worst as well). Needless to say - if there was ever a time that I felt all alone ... that I felt I was hanging out on a limb all by myself - this was the time. And worst yet, I figured the limb was bending and cracking ... soon it would break off, and I'd be lost. I would be severed from God, cut off from his people, and maybe even rejected by my parents.

Well, that weekend I went on my get-away ... thinking I was pretty tough stuff. And for the next two weeks, I didn't sing, I didn't worship, I didn't talk to any of those church folk, and I avoided my pastor like the plague. Boy, was I showing them! Then about three weeks later, the phone rang. It was my pastor. He wanted to see me -- just for a spare half-hour. We met. We confessed. We cried. We hurt. We hugged. We laughed. And then we rejoiced -- because God had given us THE WAY BACK! God had prepared the highway of reconciliation. God had lifted up the valleys of anger ... and made the mountains of human pride low ... he had made the uneven ground of arrogance into a smooth plain ... and now we were both back home, where God wanted us to be all the time.

God had given us THE WAY BACK. For if either of us had been left to our own devices, we would have held out. We would have remained stubborn and stupid -- living out on the limb of alienation ... sulking in our own selfish stupidity. But God never leaves faithful people out on a limb -- he always prepares THE WAY BACK HOME!

How many of you have even been out on that limb? How many of you have ever allowed human arrogance and pride to drive a wedge between family or friends? How many of you have never allowed some stupid fantasy or fool-hardy game to jeopardize your faithfulness to God, to family, and to friends. We've all been out there "on a limb," haven't we? In our stubbornness, we've hung out there on that limb literally dying on the vine. And in our hearts, we know that God always gives us THE WAY BACK ... but will we choose it? No Way! I'll go my way and you go your way -- but don't expect me to let go of my anger and arrogance ... my greed and grief, my desire to stay separated. Yes, we can choose God's comfort, God's reconciliation, God's forgiving grace; but instead, we often choose concrete conceit, absolute arrogance, and stupid stubbornness.

But this is hardly a new story. We have learned our lesson plan well from our forefathers. For decades, Israel rejected the covenant relationship with God "out of willful disobedience to the Law." Against the Word of God thru the prophets, Israel made her alliance with the Babylonians. And

then in exasperation, Babylon came upon Jerusalem, razed it to the ground, and carried away her able-bodied men and women into exile. In Babylon, the Israelites again became strangers in a strange land. Is it any wonder that they cried out: "All is grass ... here today and gone tomorrow." Is it any wonder that they felt helpless and hopeless. With no temple of their own ... with no land of their own -- they had willfully crawled out on a limb ... and now they were being pushed further and further to the cracking point. It looked again like Israel would break off again into the abyss of nothingness. But God gave her THE WAY BACK. Just as he had done in Egypt, now he was doing it again in Babylon. He had prepared the highway of renewal and reconciliation. ALL ISRAEL HAD TO DO WAS TURN AROUND AND WALK ON IT!

Tell me now if that isn't Good News! Tell me now that the Gospel was not alive and well in the Old Testament. Tell me now that God has not always sought to offer his faithful people THE WAY BACK HOME. Tell me now that God is not faithful and cannot be trusted. Is it any wonder that the prophet proclaims: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God, "your warfare has ended, your iniquity is pardoned. Your God has prepared the way ... he has given you a desert highway ... he has lifted up the valleys and made low the mountains ... he has made the rough places smooth. For God's Word has spoken ... and it will stand forever."

For fifty years the people of Israel had been living out on a limb. Certainly, after all that time, God had given up on them. But not so! God never gives up on us -- he remains our faithful and sovereign father. He always offers THE WAY BACK ... HIS UNCONDITIONAL LOVE.

That's the real significance of Holy Baptism for each of us - and especially for Benjamin Griffith today. In Holy Baptism, God offers us the assurance of THE WAY BACK. It's the Good News way -- because it is the only assurance in life of absolute forgiving acceptance. It's the only highway of absolute hope ... it's the only bridge to permanent belonging ... it's the only passageway to everlasting paradise.

In Holy Baptism, God cries out to us: "I'll always be here waiting for you with open arms; I will always welcome you back home. No matter how far away you wander, I will always prepare the way for you to come back home. It will always be there with you - THE WAY BACK. All you have to do is turn around (repent) - and then start walking back on the highway of grace I've given you. And you won't even have to walk alone. Because I will give you the good shepherd - namely, my son, Jesus Christ. He will take you by the hand and walk with you ... he will feed you, he will gather you in his arms, he will lead you back home."

And isn't that exactly the whole story of the New Testament?!? The Good News is the unconditional love of God in Jesus Christ. Jesus was always helping people find THE WAY BACK. He didn't force anyone ... he respected everyone's freedom. So he asked the sickly, "do you want to be healed?" And once assured, he offered them THE WAY BACK. To Zacchaeus, who was literally out on a limb, he offered THE WAY BACK. To the woman caught in adultery, he challenged the self-righteous and then asked, "Woman, where are they? Is no one left here to condemn you? Well, neither do I. Now that I've shown you THE WAY BACK to real love, then go and sin no more." Even all his disciples - except Judas who sawed off his own limb - even after they had deserted him, he showed them THE WAY BACK to his unconditional love in the Upper Room.

But we don't have to travel to the Upper Room to see the highway that God has prepared for us. Just look around. Stories abound in this room of faithful people who have offered others THE WAY BACK. That's what this font and altar symbolize -- THE WAY BACK to peace, paradise, and the promises of God. That's what this fellowship ... this communion of saints and sinners ... this body of Christ is all about -- people committed to helping other people find THE WAY BACK to the unconditional love of God. There's a graphic story of THIS WAY BACK told about a business executive; with so many executives and professionals here - it seems a fitting conclusion.

A business executive was on the verge of implementing a shrewd, profitable plan. The scheme involved temporarily dropping his prices way below the level of profitability thereby starving a smaller competitor out of the market. Then with the market to himself - prices and profits could rise again. Of course his competitor was a small, struggling family-owned business -- not really a major factor in his market -- but the sole livelihood of that family. Obviously, his plan was technically legal -- it was a competitors fair game, since after all, business is business.

Just as the arrangements were nearly in place, the executive was called to his hometown for a funeral of a cousin. At the graveside service - as the man sat under the funeral tent - his eye traveled to the gravestone of his grandmother, who had died when he was a boy. Inscribed on her stone was this saying from Proverbs: "She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue."

When the executive returned to his office, that proverbial message was burned into his heart. He had read the message before - but now these words haunted him. It was as if his grandmother were standing there with him ... her memory now judging the consequences of his business behavior. Again, God had given THE WAY BACK, for from then on, he made a conscious decision to live by "the teachings of kindness" rather than by the business of greed!

God has prepared that same highway for us today. That's what Advent is all about -- FINDING THE WAY BACK TO THE TRUE LOVE OF GOD - JESUS CHRIST. The font, the altar, the advent wreath, the manger, the star, the poinsettias, the glorious Christmas carols -- all these symbols point to THE WAY BACK to the peace and joy and hope of Christmas - Jesus Christ!

There is no reason for anyone here to feel like he or she is hanging out on a limb. For God has given us THE WAY BACK to harmony and wholeness with him and each other. All we need to do is take the good shepherd's hand ... turn around and follow THE WAY BACK to forgiving grace. What a WAY to go!!

AMEN.

ADVENT I
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
December 3, 1989
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"SIGNS OF THE TIMES"

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; 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 ... " Romans 13:11-12

Well, the SIGNS OF THE TIMES have been with us for a little over a month now. Right around Halloween, I saw the first elves and reindeer and tinsel displays. Did anyone else see the SIGNS OF THE TIMES before Halloween this year?? How many of you have been getting Christmas shopping catalogs for the last four to six weeks? Last week - when the Martyns were going by Amtrack to St. Paul, MI for Thanksgiving - the ticket manager was telling another customer that Amtrack was already sold out for Dec. 20th thru the 24th. Those are the SIGNS OF THE TIMES, aren't they? They seem to get earlier and earlier each year, don't they?? I even caught myself a few weeks ago complaining to my catechism class that it's all just TOO EARLY!! But you know something -- I might be totally wrong about this! Maybe the earlier, the better.

Maybe it's good to have SIGNS OF CHRISTMAS more than two months before Dec. 25th!?! Maybe it's appropriate to sing "Joy to the World" several weeks before Christmas!?! Maybe it's necessary to be shocked by these premature SIGNS OF THE TIMES!?! BECAUSE LET'S FACE IT - there is no time like Advent or Christmas!! This brief period is the MOST UNIFYING, MOST UPLIFTING, MOST GRACIOUS, AND MOST GIVING TIME OF THE WHOLE YEAR! This time is one of the few times that good will and peace are experienced by all humanity on earth.

On Christmas Eve, 1914 - WWI was only 5 months old and 800,000 men had already been wounded or killed. Yet on France's Western Front - British soldiers raised "Merry Christmas" signs above their trenches. The hated Germans responded the same. Soon carols were heard from the German and English trenches. On Christmas Day - both sides met in the middle -- in no-man's land -- for song and conversation. They exchanged small gifts, and passed Christmas Day peacefully. Swords had been turned into plowshares for miles along the battlefield. At one point - the British played the Germans in soccer -- winning 3 to 2. In some places, the truce continued another day without a shot being fired. But the next day - the high command of both armies ordered that any further "informal understandings" would be punishable by treason. And the light of peace again became the darkness of war.

Yes, maybe it's good that the SIGNS OF THE TIMES begin a lot earlier than Advent I. How desperately we all need to be urged to celebrate the SIGNS OF THESE TIMES all year long -- not only on December 25th!!

One of my favorite PEANUTS cartoons has Lucy coming to Charlie Brown saying: "Hey, Charlie, Merry Christmas! Since it's again that time - I think we outta bury our past differences and try to be kind and considerate." Charlie Brown responds: "Well, why does it have to be just for now ... why can't we do it all year long?" And Lucy looks at him in disgust and says: "What are you, some kind of fanatic?!?" How tragic that only fanatics celebrate the SIGNS OF THE TIMES all year long!!

As I said several years ago, unlike Santa Claus, Jesus Christ does not take 11 months off to hibernate in the north pole and then make a grand re-entry in the Thanksgiving Day Parade. The SIGNS OF HIS COMING have been here all year long! They have been uplifted daily and weekly in this community -- in word, in deed, in fellowship, in sacrament, in prayer, in generosity, in rejoicing and weeping, in new life and in death! Let's face it - maybe we don't even need Advent. Who needs all this prophecy and preparing, all these added rehearsals and dull Advent hymns? Why can't we just go from ghost and goblins to the babe in the manger??

Well, that all sounds scientific and rational, but most people are not inspired by purely rational religion. Each of us needs time to "wake up!" Religious life regrettably is not too much different from secular life; it plods along 11 months each year almost forgetting the significance of Christ's coming into the world. Just like secular life - it needs a TIME when someone yells: "HEY, WAKE UP!" It needs to be reawakened to let the LIGHT OF CHRIST SHINE IN THE WORLD. It needs a time to be reminded TO CAST OFF THE WORKS OF DARKNESS AND PUT ON THE ARMOR OF LIGHT!

As I said once before - Advent is like the "two minute" warning in football games. Good teams do not live in "fear" of those last two minutes; but good teams do live with much greater awareness of what's going on during that time. They are much more intentional about THE SIGNS OF THAT TIME. They play with greater determination, greater gutsiness, greater vigilance ... with a greater sense of purpose and meaning. So is Advent for us -- it's the two-minute warning of vigilance. It's message is simple: GET WITH THE LIGHT OF CHRIST NOW! LIVE FOR HIS HOPE! GIVE WITH HIS PURPOSE! OFFER OTHERS HIS LIFE AND MEANING! DO IT NOW, BEFORE THE DAY IS GONE AND DARKNESS IS AGAIN UPON YOU!

Many of you know the name Victor Frankl. He was a Jewish prisoner in a WWII concentration camp. In his book, Man's Search For Meaning, he describes the nightmare of his imprisonment: the endless brutality, the inhuman lengths of physical labor, the gruel and bread crusts for food, the senseless and arbitrary death.

But Frankl came to the realization that there was a great difference between those who survived and those who perished. The ones who endured lived with a sense of the LIGHT, with a

HOPE for better days ahead, with a PURPOSE and MEANING beyond the present. For some, it was the hope for freedom, for others a desire to see family again, for others a determination to outlast their tormentors. But for all the survivors - they had THEIR EYES FIXED ON A LIGHT THAT WAS COMING INTO THEIR WORLD. They had cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light!

That is the spirit of Advent! A time to wake up to the great hope, the great joy, the great opportunities, the great transformation that has come with the life and death of Jesus Christ in this world. Advent anticipates more than Dec. 25th -- it anticipates that soon the whole world will be transformed by the way, the truth, and the life of Jesus Christ! Advent has never said that it will happen all at once. But for those who are patient ... for those who continue to hope ... for those who continue to work for the light ... for those who don't give up on God -- THE DAY OF THE LORD WILL COME!! LIGHT, HOPE AND HARMONY WILL TRANSFORM THE DARKNESS.

And yet -- there are still SKEPTICS to such SIGNS OF THE TIMES. There are still some who say that Christ's coming hasn't transformed anything! There are still some who believe that armor of God's light is still overshadowed by the works of darkness! There are still some who say that the SIGNS OF THE TIMES are not in God's hands but merely manipulated by the principalities and powers of this world! Well, if you or anyone you know has been saying these things ... then you have not been hearing or listening to the SIGNS OF THE TIMES.

Even the BLADE, which is notoriously known for uplifting too much bad news, cannot resist the incarnation of the God's light that has come into the world. The headlines speak to us that the world is finally seeing the LIGHT ... finally casting off the works of darkness and putting on the armor of light. Just look at the headlines for the last seven days:

Czech leaders resign, bow to mass protests!
Half million Czechs seek more reform. The darkness of Communism is giving way to the light of freedom and self-determination. The flicker of light seen in Tienamen Square last summer has burst forth again more brilliantly in the communist bloc.

Kohl calls for 1st steps in reunification. THE WALL has come tumbling down!! And there have been those who have often said - why don't we see any miracles today like those we have read about in the Old Testament. Just as He did for Israel, God still intervenes thru the will of his people. With time, his light shines - his love is victorious over the powers of darkness.

Multa Summit may be start of new era.
Gorbachev promises Pope religious freedom is coming.
Leaders will seek future free of fear! How can anyone not have HOPE as he or she reads these headlines??
How can anyone not see THAT THE DAY OF THE LORD IS COMING ... THAT SWORDS ARE BEING MADE INTO PLOWSHARES, AND SPEARS INTO PRUNING HOOKS??

Oh there's no doubt about it -- we must be vigilant ... original sin still has the upper hand on humanity. We must always be cautious of false prophets in sheep's clothing ... we must be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. But if there was ever a TIME TO WAKE UP TO THE COMING OF THE LORD ... the SIGNS OF THE TIMES are all around us. And the signs today are not merely jolly old saint nick amidst crowded malls and tinsel trimmings and holiday cheer. At last -- God is turning darkness into his marvelous light! We have become first hand witnesses to a divine phenomenon as miraculous as the exodus!

So what are we waiting for -- LET'S CELEBRATE THE COMING OF THE DAY OF THE LORD! Let's live everyday casting off the works of darkness and putting on the armor of light. Let's make this Advent more than a prelude to December 25th; let's live everyday in the light of Christ ... working to transform this world into his kingdom -- a kingdom of truth and peace and goodwill for all peoples. Let's not let Mikhail Gorbachev upstage the people of God!!

We begin with ourselves -- eating and drinking the forgiving presence of his light. Then we look for opportunities to make that light a SIGN OF THE TIMES ... a sign of peace, a sign of love, a sign of generosity to the poor and and hungry and homeless, a sign of good will for all people on this earth. And when we have seen the SIGNS OF THAT TIME -- then we will know THAT THE DAY OF THE LORD is not only coming ... but HAS ALREADY COME among us.

AMEN.

ADVENT I (advntI)

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo

December 2, 1990

Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"ON ALERT!"

"Watch therefore - for you do now know when the Master of the house will come - in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning - lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Watch." Mark 13:36-37

There is no one sitting here today who misses the point of today's sermon title. For more than three months - some American families have been "on alert;" for the past three weeks or so, many more American families have been called "on alert;" but in the last three days ... specifically since Thursday afternoon ... ALL OF US HAVE BEEN "ON ALERT." The decision by the United Nations Security Council on Thursday afternoon no longer leaves the Middle East crisis in a state of ambiguity. In 45 days, Saddam Hussein either withdraws or the United States will threaten devastating military action. And since that announcement and Pres. Bush's news briefing on Friday morning -- this nation has been "on alert" - praying like never before that negotiations will now work. We have truly become a people "watching, listening, and talking" intently about the coming of possible war in the middle east." Even as we sat at dinner on Friday evening, the table of 8 behind us who had been drinking liberally, became seriously enmeshed in a rather heated discussion of the middle east. America is "on alert" for another potential war.

But contrast this to what's going on in America these DEC. days. As Pastor Michaels summarized last Sunday, we are "on alert" to the parade of possibilities for Christmas shopping. Soon we will be unindated with the parties, the paranoia, and the extra pounds that come with every Christmas. And if any of you are like me, you've been "watching" the ads a little more closely -- looking for that just right gift ... or maybe just looking for something, hoping you'll be able to buy less and enjoy it more this year, or watching to see if predictions about a seasonal slump will mean super sales before Christmas. Let it never be said that Americans don't have eyes, ears, and appetites for watching - we are the best "watchers" of merchandising in the world. No other nation spends more time "watching" and "analyzing" and "promoting" and "marketing" what we believe will be a winner. We are a people obsessed with watching what other people are doing and buying and showing and considering and consuming and driving and eating and drinking. Nothing fascinates us more than watching one another. Yes, we are "on alert" for marketing Christmas!

But are these the essence of Advent -- watching out for war and being on alert for the latest fads of Christmas? Obviously, when Jesus urges us "to take heed, and watch, for we do not know when the time will come," he is hardly serving as a military strategist for the middle east or marketing analyst for Christmas merchandising.

Advent - which means to come - is strategically set within the darkest time frame of our calendar. From now until just before Christmas, the light of day will continue to shorten until the darkest day of the year - Dec. 21st. Thus, Advent is the time of darkness -- the time while we WATCH for the coming of a new light. But not "watch" in the sense of sitting back and doing nothing. Advent is a time that we fully ANTICIPATE the coming of a light that will be a great hope for the world. Advent is a time that we pray confidently and work diligently to show that this light overcomes every darkness of the world. Advent is a time that we joyfully expect that God will again fulfill his promise to make his light victorious over all the principalities and powers of darkness in this world.

But how can we have such faith? How can we be so confident? How can we expect such hope in the midst of so much darkness all around us? ONLY BECAUSE GOD HAS ALREADY ACTED ... HE HAS ALREADY SHOWN US THE LIGHT THAT OVERCOMES ALL DARKNESS IN THIS WORLD. That light has come as a babe in Bethlehem, as a victor over the cross in Jerusalem, and as a king who will come again to claim us as his own.

Advent is not merely a time of waiting for Christmas -- advent is a time which calls the body of Christ (the church) to go against any force, any power of darkness which keeps God's light at a distance, out of reach, beyond the here and now. Without a doubt, advent proclaims that Christ will come again - but equally without a doubt, advent announces that Christ has come once and for all to be a light on this earth and not only a light in the heavens. He has come so that his way, his truth, and his life might overcome all the ways of darkness in this world.

But just saying that in Advent isn't enough! Just believing in a good Advent-theology isn't enough! Just celebrating with Advent hymns and Christmas carols isn't enough! Today - Advent I - Christ again calls you and me to WAKE UP ... to be the WATCHMEN of his light in this world ... to be the vigilant ones, the ones who will stay "on alert" for his power and presence in this world. To be watchmen, to be vigilant, to be "on alert" can only mean one thing - THAT WE COME TO EACH OTHER AS CHRIST FIRST CAME TO US. In his greatest hour of darkness, he came to us with his greatest power of light -- he came to offer us a new beginning ... to show us that living his way, his truth, and his life DOES OVERCOME ALL DARKNESS OF SEPARATION, including the darkness of death!

Jesus Christ continues to COME in Word and Sacrament. He comes as God's new beginning of grace in Holy Baptism -- and then he continues to COME AND NURTURE that grace in Holy Communion. How can we claim that we are "on alert" and vigilant if we receive the power of his presence and then go on living in darkness as if nothing had ever happened? To come into this place and hear his Word and receive his presence can only lead to one thing -- WE BECOME THE POWER & PRESENCE OF HIS LIGHT IN THE WORLD.

The story told by Stephen Brown possibly best illustrates how that light of Christ comes into our lives -- how we are empowered to come to others with that same light -- how that same light offers a new beginning ... how that light transforms darkness into peace, love, and good will on earth.

She was eighteen; he was nineteen when they met. They fell in love, were married a year later, and now six years later have three children. As she was standing before the kitchen sink with a pile of dirty dishes and even bigger pile of dirty diapers on the floor, she just couldn't stand there anymore. She took off her apron and walked out the door. And she didn't come back that night -- or the next or the next. Once in a while, she would call - to see how the children were doing. On those occasions, he would again tell her over and over again how much he loved her. And he would beg her to come home.

After weeks passed, he finally hired a Private I. The detective reported that she was living in a 2nd class hotel in Des Moines, Iowa. Her husband packed his bags, placed the children in a neighbor's care, and took a Greyhound to Des Moines. He found the hotel and made his way to Rm. 318. His hand trembled as he knocked, fearing the reception he would receive. The door opened, for a moment she stood in shocked silence; then they fell apart in each other's arms.

That night at home, after the children were tucked in bed, he asked: "Why wouldn't you tell me where you were? You knew I loved you - why didn't you come home!?" She answered - "I was afraid your love was just words. But when you came to me - when you finally came, then I knew there was a new beginning for our love!"

God so loved the world THAT HE CAME. He came not to discuss the theology of love, but to be the light of love in the midst of the world's darkness. To be "on alert" - is to come into the darkness of war, the darkness of greed, the darkness of guilt, the darkness of drugs, the darkness of separation and divorce -- TO COME AND TO OFFER THE LIGHT OF CHRIST'S EXPECTATION FOR REAL LOVE & PEACE ON EARTH!

As we watch the continuing crisis in the middle east, let us not be mere Advent Onlookers -- let us be vigilant watchmen ... alerting our political and military leaders to watch for every opportunity for resolution and peaceful solution before we resort to the bloody darkness of war. As we watch the hustle and bustle amidst mistletoe and holly, let us be more than mad merry-makers -- let us be vigilant watchers of the spirit of Christ ... alert to every opportunity where we might come and uplift each other with the power of Christ's peace and good will. As we enter more fully into Advent - let us be vigilant ... "On Alert" to the reason that Christ entered this world in the first place -- to fulfill God's promise TO BE A LIGHT TO ALL NATIONS AND THAT PEACE WHICH PASSES ALL HUMAN NEGOTIATIONS AND UNDERSTANDINGS. AMEN.

ADVENT I
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
November 29, 1992
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"GETTING READY FOR WHAT?"

"For salvation is nearer now than when we became believers; ... so let us lay aside the works of darkness, and put on the armour of light." Romans 13:12f "Keep awake therefore, for you do now know on what day the Lord is coming. Therefore, you must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." Matt. 24:42;44

Have you been getting ready? If there is one thing that is highly characteristic of most Americans, IT IS THAT WE ARE ALWAYS GETTING READY FOR SOMETHING! We are a people who take pride in being well-prepared; we do not like to be caught off-guard; we will remember George Bush with gratitude for his diligence in getting us ready for the Persian Gulf confrontation, even though we now wonder what impact all of our READINESS had upon Saddam Hussein.

Like other responsible bodies of people, Hope Church has been GETTING READY for 1993. And recently I have heard a couple of complaints about all the financial statistics in our bulletin. Please be assured, our aim in reporting these numbers is not to overemphasize or pressure anyone about money. But GETTING READY for a new year of mission takes hundreds hours of planning and preparing by staff, leaders & volunteers. And it also takes faithful people who get ready to give. Without that time, effort and communication about "getting ready" - Hope Church wouldn't stand a chance of success or survival.

Yes, successful people and successful churches spend a huge part of their lives GETTING READY all the time: getting ready for work or school; getting ready for exams or surgery or sales meetings; getting ready for meals; getting ready for retirement or relaxation over a weekend; getting ready for sports events or other forms of entertainment; getting ready for Consecration celebrations and birthdays & weddings & baptisms & Thanksgivings & Christmases, etc.

And as we begin Advent I - our culture has already reminded us that we have only 26 days TO GET READY: to buy, wrap and mail presents; to make cookies and candy; to buy a tree and decorate it and the house; to go to parades and parties in order to Welcome Santa/helpers; to buy, address, stamp and mail Christmas cards; and to worry about running out of time, money and energy as we rush around to get it all READY! But is that it?? Is that all Advent is for?? Obviously, it's a time for preparing for Christmas ... but it's so much more!! The texts before us today URGE US TOWARD A MUCH MORE PROFOUND PREPARATION THAN A ONE-DAY CELEBRATION.

Paul writes: "You know what time it is; it is now the moment to wake from your sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first became believers. So, now is the time to lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light."

What does all this imagery mean? What does Paul mean, "that we are nearer now to the day of salvation?" In simple terms, Paul is saying that according to our faith - both our individual lives and human history is moving toward a goal -- toward the completion of our destiny in J. C. As Christians, we call that moment the Second Coming of Christ. In its simplest terms - that moment is when the forces of darkness no longer reign supreme over the forces of light! I don't know about each of you - but I can tell you I am looking forward to that promise from God. I am looking forward to a day when the newspapers and media will not be filled with more muggings and shootings -- with more death, defeat and despair. As we profess every week in the Creed - I believe that one day "Christ will come again to judge both the living and the dead." For believers - that is not a day of doom and destruction - but rather a day of victory and light ... a day when darkness will no longer reign in this world.

Advent is supposed to be a fortaste of that day ... it is to be a fortaste of the coming of our salvation! Or as one author put it - when God's own son went obediently to the cross to die for our sins and was raised from the dead by the power of God -- the world got a glimpse of God's final assault on the powers of evil and sin. God's power over the crucifying evil of the 1st century is a fortaste of what the Advent season shouts when we sing: "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus, born to set your people free!" Again that author has said that Christ's death and resurrection are God's D-Day. Like the Allied Forces that landed on Normandy's beaches -- those forces still had battles yet to fight (as we do) -- but D-Day marked the beginning of the end of Nazi power and VE-Day was assured. Advent proclaims that God's victory is coming -- we have already seen it in Jesus Christ ... and in God's time, all creation will see that same everlasting victory of God over the forces of hell and destruction.

As Christians, we believe this promise from God. And because we believe it -- it makes a difference in the way we live right now. That's why Advent comes before Christmas. Because Christmas empowers us much like the day of salvation is supposed to ALL THE TIME. As we approach Christmas, people live differently than they have lived during the other seasons of the year: BECAUSE THEY KNOW SOMETHING BETTER IS COMING!! So, at Christmas, people are more giving, more tolerant, more caring, more merciful, more willing to be less greedy! Advent reminds us that this is not just a one-season a-year-reality; it is the spirit of Christians day after day, year after year -- expecting Jesus to come at any moment, and therefore living faithfully for that expectation.

It reminds me of that classic PEANUTS cartoon which has Lucy coming to Charlie Brown saying: "Hey Charlie, Merry Christmas! Since it's that time again, I think we outta bury our past differences and try to be kind and considerate." Charlie responds: "Well, why does it have to be just for now - why can't it be all year long?" Lucy looks at him in disgust and says: "What are you, some kind of fanatic!!?"

The Advent season is for Christian fanatics -- people who believe that we should be preparing for Christmas all year long -- not just for the 26 shopping days before Dec. 25th. That's for whom the bell tolls in Advent--for every Christian who wants to be alert and awake and watchful for the spirit of Christ 365 days a year. That's why you have called me (and Jeff & Larry) as a pastors of Hope Lutheran Church ... TO HELP GET YOU READY FOR MORE THAN CHRISTMAS ... TO HELP GET YOU READY TO CELEBRATE EVERY DAY THE DAY OF SALVATION ... THE DAY WHEN GOD WIPES AWAY DARKNESS & DESTRUCTION AND REPLACES THEM WITH THE LIGHT OF CHRIST!

Obviously, we do not know when that day will come. And our mission is not to worry about it, but to show that we have been faithful to that kind of vision for all of our lives - THAT THE VISION OF GOD'S COMING INTO THIS WORLD HAS MADE A DIFFERENCE IN THE WAY WE LIVE! So, let's at least suggest a few ways during this Advent that we can not only get ready for Christmas ... but get ready for CHRIST'S COMING the rest of our lives!

First and foremost - let us make this advent season and all other seasons a time of less darkness and destruction ... a time that radiates the light and hope and peace of the Christ. Possibly - looking at the life of Alfred Nobel will help us find new possibilities for our lives. As many of you know, Nobel was the inventor of dynamite. One day he was reading the morning paper and was shocked to see his own obituary. Unfortunately, an editor had made an error, confusing Alfred with his brother who had just died. The shock of the misprint was enough, but even more disturbing was what the article said about Alfred. It simply said he was "the dynamite king;" that was it! Alfred had devoted his life to breaking down barriers between people; yet the obituary never mentioned this as his real life purpose.

Nobel decided from that moment the world would know the driving force of his life - he would not be remembered as the merchant of death and destruction. He immediately redrafted his last will and testament making certain that his vast fortune would accomplish the highest ideals of society. We all know the results: the Nobel prizes awarded each year, esp. the most valued one: the Nobel prize of peace!

During this Advent, you and I can make a decision for our lives much like Alfred Nobel. Every day - we can ask ourselves: HOW WILL MY NAME BE REMEMBERED BY THOSE AROUND ME IN THIS WORLD? WHEN PEOPLE THINK OF ME - WILL THEY THINK OF DEATH, GLOOM & DESTRUCTION ... OR WILL THEY THINK OF PEACE, JOY, KINDNESS, GENTLENESS & GENEROSITY?!? This Advent - each of us needs to be GETTING READY to be less hurtful and damning in the way we deal with others; advent is the coming of a more helpful and uplifting spirit toward others.

Secondly, as reflected in Ecclesiastes, let us make this season a time for planting, rather than a time for pulling up what has been planted ... a time for building up rather than a time for breaking down. I sincerely hope all of you have

had time to read the latest issue of the Lutheran. The article entitled "Flashlights and Pea-Green Blessings" tells of the ongoing struggle after Hurricane Andrew. I am so grateful that our Sunday School children will be fashioning "Christmas Boxes" for the needy families who are still living under tension and turmoil in South Florida. As you read that article, you become aware that even a simple gift of a flashlight to 3-yr old Jonathon Wong has finally given that child peace and security to sleep through dark nights. But the real spirit of Advent is uplifted by Pastor John Roth of St. Thomas-By-the-Bay Luth. Church. Amidst the despair of losing his house and half of his congregation (members simply packed their bags and left the area), Pastor Roth and his wife, Bonnie, recently found a blown over mango tree. They hauled it 2-1/2 miles to the back yard of their gutted home and replanted it. That mango tree serves as a symbol of the future - that new life will eventually be born out of death and destruction. That tree symbolizes that "there is nothing in all creation that can totally defeat the love of God!"

Advent is that time that God reminds us to WAKE UP ... TO NOT ALLOW the muggings and murders and gunnings and greed of our society to become the powers of our world. Even in the midst of death and despair, God calls us to plant a mango tree so that his purpose might be seen in this world. This is a year-long season in which God calls us to be lights in the midst of darkness. As St. Paul exhorts us - we are to speak out against drunkenness and debauchery and greed and quarreling and jealousy and sexual exploitation -- ANY HUMAN POWERS WHICH SEEK TO UPROOT THE GOODNESS OF LIFE AS GOD HAS CREATED IT AND SEEKS TO BLESS IT.

Finally, Advent calls us to be WATCHFUL for opportunities to give, not opportunities to judge! Again, Advent wonderfully points to the royalty of Christmas because that is the one season in which God's people finally learn that God's nature is to give rather than to withhold from those who are not yet perfect. Had God expected us to be perfect before he sent his Son into the world -- then there would never be a Christmas. God sent his Son not because we deserved such a gift, but because we needed such a gift.

Such is the same Spirit of Advent: Christ comes not because we deserve to be saved, but because we ARE doomed without his coming. Likewise, our giving at Christmas is not motivated by those who deserve to receive, but simply because there is a need! As we proclaim in our creed: "Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead." We will leave the judgment up to Christ as to whether the needy are truly deserving or not. Our mission in Advent or any other season is not to judge who deserves or who does not deserve -- OUR MISSION, JUST LIKE THAT OF GOD ON THAT FIRST CHRISTMAS -- IS SIMPLY TO GIVE ... BECAUSE IN GIVING WE DO WHAT GOD HAS FIRST DONE FOR US: he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him might not perish but have everlasting life.

So, what are we getting ready for? We're getting ready to make Advent a year-around celebration: to show the world that Christ has come ... will come ... and will never stop coming until he gathers all of us to himself at the end of time! We're getting ready to reveal to the world that HIS COMING HAS MADE A DIFFERENCE IN THE WAY WE LIVE ... that we walk in his light rather than the darkness of the world. This Advent - we're getting ready to be less destructive, less uprooting, and less judgmental of this wonderful vineyard of life that God has given us. And in so doing, we are proclaiming THE COMING OF THE LORD ... NOT ONLY AT CHRISTMAS, BUT FOR EVERY DAY OF THE YEAR AND FOR ALL TIME TO COME!

AMEN.

ADVENT I
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
November 27, 1994
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"TIME TO WAKE UP!"

Jesus said to his disciples, "There will be signs in the sun, the moon and stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ... Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. Luke 21:25-26, 28

There's an old barnyard story of a bird who made a deal with a farmer. The bird could not satisfy his desire for worms, so he said to the farmer: "Let's make a deal: For every worm you find for me, I'll offer you one of my feathers!" They consummated the deal. And the bird got worms and more worms and more worms, but soon he had surrendered so many feathers that he could no longer fly. It was at that point that the bird recognized his true destiny -- he had been created to fly, not to eat worms. Yet the worms had proven too tempting; he was now grounded for life. If only someone had warned him sooner that he was becoming a dodo bird.

As you can imagine -- there are a lot of dodo birds in this world ... and that was apparent to anyone at Franklin Park mall on Friday. If you ever want to see humanity "scrambling for worms," then go to the mall on the Friday after thanksgiving. It's one day that we can truly see how the worms have gotten the best of us ... everybody is grabbing for more worms ... for those short-lived treasures, for stuff, and more stuff. It's the greatest day in which humanity exchanges "feathers of heaven" for "worms of the earth" -- we make the powers, pleasures, principalities and pomp of Christmas shopping THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH!

What the bird needed in our barnyard story was a prophetic voice - someone to WAKE HIM UP to what was happening to his future. There were times on Friday at Franklin Park that I was tempted to be that prophetic voice! I wanted to yell from the 2nd floor: "Hey, IT'S TIME TO WAKE UP down there ... there's more to life than a 10% discount on a sale item!" But there I was ... elbow to elbow, rack to rack, just like all the other dodo birds ... grabbing with gusto for a few more worms.

Is it any wonder that the church has always had an Advent season? This is the season which tries to WAKE US UP TO REALITY ... to call us back to God's loftier flight plan. Certainly there is nothing inherently wrong with Christmas shopping (Larry said whole purpose of Advent). But the prophetic voice of Advent I (not Larry's voice) asks: "Is shopping the real essence & purpose of our festive lives? How many worms does it take to satisfy our shopping hunger? And once we've

become weighed down by these worms (our never ending shopping lists), have we lost any heavenly feathers in the process?" In short, will all the worms that we acquire under the Christmas tree make us more the way God intended us to be?? Or like the dodo bird, will we lose our God-intended feathers in our mad drive to get more and more worms?

Maybe I'm being a little too harsh on the "commercial signs of the times" today. Please forgive me -- I'm not wanting to make this into a Lake Wobegon "True Meaning of Christmas" sermon. But what are the signs of the times? When Luke says, "there will be signs in the sun, the moon and stars ... on the earth distress among nations and people," what is he talking about? Do you think that Luke might be referring to the global soap opera of hijackings and drive-by-shootings and endless series of Somalias and Sarajevos and Rwandas and movies like "Killing Fields" and "The Day After?" When Luke says, "people will be fainting from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world," might this have something to do with the fact that both little old ladies and self-made men today are buying guns to ward off terror in their homes and on the streets?

A magazine a few years ago ran an article entitled, "The Twisted Age." Samuel Grafton, the author stated the following: "This is an age searching for something. It never finds it, but the questing never stops. ... On the dance floor, for example, one would expect to see loneliness dissolve ... But instead, watch; **The dancers do not touch, they do not talk, they do not look at each other, they do not engage.** Each one seems to be utterly alone, caught in a secret melancholy seizure ... shaking, shivering, shuddering and slithering **all alone.** They look as if their bodies are screaming ... screaming for help. In this twisted age, there is fright, despair." Do you see Grafton's signs of the times?? Is this a Twisted Age? What do you make of all the sad faces, the casual sex, the shots of heroin, the abortions of life, the fascination with guns, the mega-salaries of sports, the overdosing with pills, the craze of computer vs. personal communication, the political mud-slinging, the rash of child & people abuses thru racism, sexism, voyerism, hedonism, and every other "ism" that tramples life down? Is the vigilant voice of Advent just some stupid fantasy of the Christian faith ... or **is there a reason for this season which says it's TIME TO WAKE UP??**

Well, over the centuries there have been two religious responses to these Signs of Advent Times. The first voice I would call the Voice of the Average American. This person says, "Well, I'm not a fanatical church person. Oh, I'm in favor of Christianity - it's good for the community. Church is fine, I guess, for people who need it, but I keep my own life straight. That's what really matters, isn't it? The good Lord just wants us to do our best. Just give me simple religion -- good

ethics, without theological trimmings. You know, The Golden Rule and that kind of stuff!" One author calls this religious voice, "A-Do-It-Yourself" theology. This kind of "Pull-yourself-up" from your own bootstraps religion has been the American Way. It's the kind of religion which says, as long as I'm getting my fair-share of worms, don't mess with me or my religion. This kind of religion puts "heaven on earth" into the hands of humanity. It says that "good, sound human ethics" will save the world and solve all of the earth's problems. It doesn't take much of a genius to see how this religion has failed ... because it's not really a religion. This kind of religion says, "Me first, and the rest of the world be damned." This religious morality has led to the Signs of the Times of our World today; it's the same kind of morality that was practiced in Ancient Israel - a godless morality. At that time just like today, it became the official religion of the day, some called it Phariseism ... **which sought to change human laws & habits, but not transform human lives & hearts.**

There is another religious voice of Advent. It is the vigilant voice of prophecy. Contrary to what has often been preached, this voice is not a gloom and doom voice that merely predicts the end of the world. Rather, it is God's voice reminding us of his promises, saying: WAKE UP YOU DODOS to WHAT'S GOING ON AROUND YOU ... "raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near ... the Kingdom of God is coming now!" This voice urges us TO WAKE UP now ... to realize that there is no act of Congress, no legislation, no government subsidy or program, no Golden Rule, no human view of morality that will change the signs of the times. There is only ONE KINGDOM, ONE POWER AND ONE SOURCE OF GLORY that has ever transformed human hearts & lives -- it is the **Kingdom** that was uplifted on **the cross on Good Friday**, the **power** that broke **open the tomb** on Easter Sunday, and the **Glory** that has shown ever since **as a Spirit** of merciful compassion for a fallen world.

This voice says, WAKE UP ... the days are coming when justice and righteousness will prevail! That's why we pray every week: "Thy Kingdom come; they will be done!" Every catechism child knows that "the kingdom of God comes indeed, of its own power, without our praying for it." But we pray this Petition so that it may also come **to us and through us!** That's what today's WAKE-UP CALL is all about! A voice which says that you and I can do more than go after worms ... we can help dodo birds to learn to fly again. With the mercy and spirit of God, we can transplant feathers where worms have become too plentiful.

That was not only illustrated by Martin Luther nearly 500 yrs ago, it was again demonstrated a few years ago by an Army captain who stood tall amidst a world going after worms. It was during the Native American seige and protest at a school building in Minnesota. Passions

were running high among residents in the area. Just like many American attitudes toward minorities, prejudices were very much alive in that Minnesota town. The National Guard had been called out to keep order. A cordon of guards had surrounded the building to prevent violence. **After a few days, the captain gave orders that a truck carrying food should be allowed to pass through to the Indians.** Not only did the townspeople hurl words of hatred at the captain, even some of his own men took issue with him. In reply the captain said, "I cannot change the past nor can I control the future. But I can respond with compassion to the present."

That captain had a choice: he could urge that more and more words separate the townspeople from the Indians. He had the option to be the voice of the morality of the world, which says: "Me first, and let those Indians be damned!" Or, he could be the vigilant voice of God, saying: "It's Time to Wake Up!" Human beings are hungry regardless of who's right or who's wrong. It's time to remember God's promises, that his justice and righteousness are plain and simple: namely, **"when I was hungry, you fed me; when I was thirsty, you gave me drink, when I was alone, you kept me company, when I was in prison, you visited me or at least gave an Angel Tree gift to my child. And when you've done it to the least of these, you've done it to me."** That captain chose the vigilant voice of God's justice & compassion. And that's also why we gather here week after week in Advent and every other Sunday of the year ... to choose to WAKE UP to God's call for justice and righteousness! (And that's why we baptize infants like Julie ... so that every day, she & other little Christians will wake up knowing that God's promise of goodness & grace has been given to them for but one purpose: that they will give his compassion away for the rest of their lives!)

Advent I says plain and simple: "It's Time to Wake Up ... and let the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory of God shine through our lives ... so that the world might soar to the heights of God's justice and righteousness again, rather than be forever grounded by the worms of human greed & consumption. To wake up to this destiny is to live for the purpose for which God has created and baptized us in the first place.

Amen.

Advent I
Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo
December 1, 1996
Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor

“You’d Better Watch Out!!”

Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. Isaiah 64:8 So, beware, keep alert, watch; for you do not know when the time will come. Mark 13:33

If most of you are like me, you can be pretty numb to warning signals. Eight years ago - I was having “shortness of breath” in walking from the tee box to my less than 200 yard drives. But I simply wrote off “this warning” as being a little over weight. Recently, I visited an old friend in my home town; she was having some serious signs of lymph node enlargement; but she didn’t do anything about it until recently finding out that she has lymphocytic leukemia. The next time you’re on a plane--observe how people give attention to the flight attendants re: seat belts, emergency doors, oxygen masks ... and all that other stuff that we’ve all heard before. So often instead of being “WATCHFUL & VIGILANT,” we simply yawn and figure “Why bother, nothing’s going to happen to me or this plane anyway ... I’ve got it made in the shade!!”

If for no other reason -- that’s why we need Advent. We need a time to be more tuned into the way we are responding to God, life & others around us. For Mark, the concern was to be “on watch” for the “second coming of Christ.” Because in Mark’s day, believers were convinced that within their own lifetime JESUS WOULD RETURN IN PERSON--he would intervene in the universe and put things back in order again. In fact, for the 173 years after Jesus’ death, there is no record of any Christian enlisting or being drafted into the military: Christians were convinced that Christ would return very soon, so there would no longer be any discord or war or need for the military.

Well, we certainly know that notion is far from true. Jesus did not return ... and it’s obvious from our texts today that we have no idea when he will return again. So, what are we supposed to do in the meantime? Quite simply as our children sing at this time: “We Are To Watch Out & Not Cry!” We are to “be on alert” ... to be “on guard.” But the question is: FOR WHAT? WHAT ARE WE WATCHING FOR? Obviously, we are to “watch out” for Jesus’ second coming ... but not in the sense that He’s coming down from the clouds and taking instant control of everything. That may be the way he ultimately comes, but in the meantime ... he expects us to keep watch for signs of HIS PRESENCE RIGHT NOW! Unlike Santa, Jesus does not take 11-mos. off to hibernate at the north pole and then make a grand re-entry in a Thanksgiving Day parade. Jesus has been with us all along ... he says that he is present in the body of Christ, his church. And he has called us ... his holy body [“Holy” here meaning useful & concerned] we are the body that is TO WATCH for those things that are both CONTRARY TO HIS COMING & SUPPORTIVE OF HIS COMING!

First, we are to WATCH OUT for signs that are CONTRARY TO HIS COMING! In short, we are to "watch out" for signs of despair and exploitation around us! What do I mean "despair & exploitation?" By "despair" I mean we must "be alert" to those things we do and say that serve to bring pain and hurt to ourselves or to others in this world. And I particularly emphasize this at Glenwood because "interims" are often times when church members say things or do things that could be harmful to the future of this body or other bodies. For instance, the youth are trying to re-establish themselves as an entity with new vision & vitality here. And that is good ... and I have celebrated that spirit of vitality & newness with them. But it takes time ... lots of time to rebuild that which may have been stronger at another time. Just like the people of Israel when they returned to Jerusalem and found it in rubble & ruins -- they cried for God to open the heavens and offer an instant solution. And God answered by saying, "you are the clay; I am the potter; the work of my hand always takes more time than you are often willing to give it."

During interims, patience, kindness & lots of time are so vital to the health of the body. I have heard angry & frustrated words recently ... words of blame and words of hurt ... some who have even been so frustrated that they got mad and said they would never trust so & so again, My dear friends - these are words of despair --- these are words of the devil ... and there is no time or place for them in the body of Christ IF WE ARE WATCHING FOR HIS SPIRIT.

Likewise, at this time -- we must watch out for exploitation -- for we are entering the greatest season of exploitation of the year. Our temptation is to make this season into "that which only glitters" -- to run here and dash there as if all the madness will make a big difference. God says through Jesus today: "Be on guard ... be alert ... watch out in your Christmas preparations that it's not just a lot of madness: DON'T MAKE CHRISTMAS INTO A MAD RUSH FOR THINGS WITHOUT FOCUSING UPON THAT ONE PERSON WHO BROUGHT LOVE TO THE SEASON. Putting it as simply as I can--WATCH OUT that we do not make the second coming of Christ into a SEASON OF THINGS rather than a SEASON OF LOVE & CONCERN FOR OTHERS.

Yes, "despair" and "exploitation" are the things that are CONTRARY to His second coming. We are also to WATCH OUT for that which is SUPPORTIVE of the second coming of Christ. And what might that be? Put quite simply -- it's the use of our time. Put more into the context of faith, it's to use our time as if it's the last play of our lives.

In all my years of preaching, I have only found one way to illustrate this concept of USING OUR TIME AS IF IT'S OUR LAST MOMENT. So those of you who don't understand football -- I beg your forgiveness. But on every football team from junior high to the pros -- there's something called the "two minute drill." It happens during the final two minutes of every game; and every winning team must have a strategy for victory during those final two minutes. It's not that there's more "terror" in those two minutes -- it's just that every

team becomes far more intentional ... for more diligent ... far more determined to play "heads up," as if the whole game would be determined by those two minutes. That's exactly the meaning of Advent for Christians; that's the way Christ wants us to use our faith during this season ... as if every move we make was more important than all the other moves we've played the other 11-months of the year. Advent is God's two-minute drill; a time of greater diligence, greater assertiveness, greater intentionality, greater anticipation of the gifts of the spirit. Because the world is trying to "suck us into the spirit of exploitation" this is a time we have to work that much harder on the real game plan of life: the gifts of patience, kindness, generosity, love, joy, gentleness and self-control. Those who play on God's team seek to work even harder in Advent to redeem every moment with the fruits of the spirit.

So, if we want to be supportive of Christ's second coming -- then we must WATCH OUT as if we're in the last two minutes of the game -- watching out for every opportunity TO LIVE & GIVE THE FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT. And when we do this, YOU CAN COUNT ON IT: Christ will come again ... God will again fashion his clay into appropriate vessels of his grace and light.

So, YOU'D BETTER WATCH OUT ... YOU BETTER NOT CRY ... YOU BETTER NOT POUT I'M TELLING YOU WHY ... JESUS CHRIST HAS COME ... AND IS COMING TO TO TURN DARKNESS & DESPAIR INTO THE LIVING LIGHT & GOODNESS OF HIS SPIRIT!!

AMEN.

Advent I
Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo
November 30, 1997
Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor

“A WAKE-UP CALL!”

Jesus said to the disciples, “There will be signs in the sun, the moon and stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear ... forboding what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ... Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” Luke 21:25-26;28

There’s an old barnyard story of a bird and a farmer. The bird could not satisfy his desire for worms, so he made a deal with the farmer: “For every worm you find for me, I’ll offer you one of my feathers.” They consummated the deal. And the bird got worms & more worms & more worms. But soon he had surrendered so many feathers that he could no longer fly. It was at that point that the bird finally realized his true destiny: he had been created to fly, not to eat worms. But since the worms had proven too tempting, he was now grounded for life. If only someone had warned him that he was becoming a “dodo bird.”

As you and I know - there are a lot of dodo birds in the world ... that’s even more apparent every weekend after Thanksgiving. All the dodo birds have been scrambling for more worms at the malls; these last two days have truly shown how the worms can get the best of us! The mall mania after turkey day shows how we exchange our “feathers of heaven” for the “worms of the earth.”

What the bird needed in our barnyard story was a prophetic voice -- someone who would offer him A WAKE-UP CALL! Is it any wonder that the church has an Advent Season? This is the season which offers A WAKE-UP CALL from God -- God calls humanity back from looking down at the dirt to looking up to the sky ... to a loftier flight plan. Please be assured - I desire not to create any guilt with Christmas shopping after Thanksgiving. Some of my worst sermons have been my Lake Wobegon “The True Meaning of Christmas” sermons where I tried to make everyone feel guilty for Christmas shopping. But in the midst of all the noise, nuttiness & “musac” of the malls -- we need to get a view of the real reason for this season beyond getting “more & more worms.”

Samuel Grafton wrote an article a few years ago entitled, “The Twisted Age.” He stated, *“This age is searching for something. It never finds it, but the questing never stops. ... On the dance floor, for example, one would expect to see loneliness dissolve. ... But instead, watch! The dancers do not touch, they do not talk, they do not look at each other, they do not engage. Each one seems to be utterly alone, caught in a secret melancholy seizure ... shaking, shivering, shuddering, and slithering -- all alone. They look as if their bodies are screaming for help! In this twisted age, there is fright, there is despair, there is isolation.”*

Do you see any of Grafton's "signs of the times?" Is this a "Twisted Age?" What do you make of all the sad faces, the casual sex, the shots of heroin, the abortions of life, the fascination with guns, the mega-salaries of sports, the overdosing with pills, the craze of computers & web sites, the political mud-slinging, the rampant abuse of children, the rash of racism, voyeurism, sexism, hedonism, and every other "ism" that tramples on life. *Is the vigilant voice of Advent just some stupid fantasy of the Christian faith ... or is there a reason in this season for A WAKE-UP CALL??*

Well - over the last 20 centuries -- there have been two religious responses to these "Signs of Advent times." The first voice might be characterized as "Mr. Man-Made-Mindset" - the guy whose always in control. This person says, "I'm not one of those fanatical religious types. Oh, Christianity is o.k. for the community ... and church is fine for people who need it. But I keep my own life straight ... and that's what matters. Just give me simple religion -- you know, the Golden Rule kind-of-stuff -- a-do-onto-others kind of religion." One author calls this "The-Do-It-Yourself-Religion." This "pull-yourself-up-from-your-own-bootstraps" religion doesn't need God -- because it says it can do it all by itself! It's the height of self-righteousness. It's the kind of religion which says - "As long as I'm getting my fair share of worms, don't mess with me or my religion." This kind of religion puts heaven totally into the hands of humanity. It's the religion that was often practiced in ancient Israel called Phariseeism; it sought to change human laws & habits ... but not to transform human lives & hearts.

There's another religious voice of Advent. It's the vigilant voice of God's prophet. Contrary to what has often been preached - this is not a gloom and doom voice that predicts the end of the world. Rather--it is God's voice of Hope -- reminding us of his GOOD & GRACIOUS promises. The voice says, "WAKE UP YOU DODOS--"raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near ... the Kingdom of God is coming now!" This voice urges us to "wake up"... to raise our heads to the fact that worms are not the real answer. This voice tells us--there is NO act of Congress, NO legislation, NO government subsidy or program, NO Golden Rule, NO perfect morality that will change the signs of the times. There is only ONE KINGDOM, ONE POWER, AND ONE SOURCE OF GLORY that has ever transformed human hearts and lives. *It's the KINGDOM that was uplifted on a cross on Good Friday, the POWER that broke open a tomb on Easter Sunday, and the GLORY that continues to be experienced as A SPIRIT of merciful love and compassion for a fallen world!*

This voice says, "WAKE UP ... the days are coming when my justice and my righteousness will prevail in all the land." In fact -- that's exactly what all of my followers pray for every day--"Thy kingdom come; thy will be done!" Obviously, every catechism kid knows that God's kingdom comes and his will is done without our praying for it! But we pray this petition so that it may come TO US and THROUGH US ... esp. at this time of the year. That's what

Advent's WAKE-UP CALL is all about! A voice which says that you and I can do more with our lives than go after worms ... we can help dodo birds learn to fly again. With the mercy and spirit of God the Father, we can transplant feathers where worms have been too plentiful.

So - take your Advent feather with you; may it be your reminder in this Advent Season *"to raise your head up high to glorify the goodness of God who comes into this world to show us His Way ... to help us aspire to more than worms ... to fly with His vision of heaven on earth -- where justice and peace, righteousness and mercy will be a reality for all people!"*

AMEN.