

THE MOST WONDERFUL TIME OF THE YEAR

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A sermon preached at Valley Presbyterian Church
in Brookfield, Connecticut
on November 27, 2022

Texts: Romans 13:1-14 & Matthew 24:36-44

Romans 13:11-14

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Matthew 24:36-44

"But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

Today we enter the most wonderful time of the year—a time we look forward to with great anticipation; a time that requires patience and preparation; a time that brings joy and fulfillment; a time that unites us in a common hope and a common purpose; a holy time that gives our lives meaning.

Of course, I'm talking about the time between Black Friday and Cyber Monday. Because let's be honest, that's what most people are thinking about right now. They're not thinking about baby Jesus. They're wondering, *Who's having the best sales? How many shopping days are left until Christmas? What in the world am I going get for that person on my list who already has everything?*

And it's not just the shopping and the presents we get excited about. It's the whole Christmas package: trimming the tree and decking the halls; baking cookies and listening to carols; hanging stockings and sipping eggnog. Who doesn't love that all stuff? This is my fifty-third Christmas, and it never gets old. I still get kind of giddy when the weather turns cold and I see that first snowflake coming down because I know what it means. It means Santa's on the way.

So it's a little discombobulating coming to church this morning and hearing this decidedly un-festive reading from Romans. This is the season for indulging—having that extra helping of mashed potatoes; spending a little more on presents than you should've; staying up past your bedtime to watch "It's A Wonderful Life" (or whatever your favorite Christmas movie is). And here's Paul, telling us to live "not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness." He's like the Grinch who stole Christmas. He takes all the fun out of everything.

So what I'm wondering is: Do we really need to hear that right now? Can't we save Paul for some other time of the year and just enjoy the holidays without feeling guilty? And wouldn't it actually be better for the church if we did? I mean, from a marketing perspective, if we really want to bring people in and fill the sanctuary, wouldn't it be better to lean into the holiday spirit instead of throwing cold water on it? We could go to Lowes and get some giant inflatable reindeer to put up on the roof. We could sing "Jingle Bells" instead of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." We could put nutcrackers in the nativity instead of shepherds and wisemen. The greeters could dress up like elves and hand out candy canes.

I think it's a great idea. In fact, think I'm going to talk to the session about it.

Just kidding. We're not putting anything up on the roof, don't worry. But it is a fair question. Why do we need to hear this reading now? What does it have to say to us at Christmas? I think the answer is pretty clear if you think about what we go through every year after Christmas—after all the parties are over, after all the presents have been opened, after all decorations have been taken down and put away. That's when we feel it: the post-holiday let down. That's when we realize all the fuss and all the commotion didn't mean a thing. January comes, life goes back to normal, we settle into our old routines, and there's nothing to look forward to but a long, dark, cold winter.

But before it all begins, right here on the first Sunday of Advent, if we're open to it, Paul has something better to offer—something that's real; something that doesn't disappoint; something that offers true hope and lasting comfort.

When you think about it, what the holidays have to offer is a kind of negative peace—peace that comes from getting to the point where our cravings leave us alone. But the problem is, it never lasts very long, and it never turns out to be quite as satisfying as we thought. In fact, sometimes we end up feeling worse. You wolf down a

turkey dinner with all the trimmings, and instead of feeling pleasantly full, you feel like you're going to barf. You drink a nice bottle of Beaujolais Nouveau, but you can't savor the experience because the room won't stop spinning.

Even opening presents on Christmas morning—it may not give you a hangover, but it never quite delivers on what it promises. I remember one year when I was a kid, all I wanted was a Bionic Bigfoot doll, and I bugged my parents about it for months. I even drew a circle around it in the Sears catalog and left it open on the kitchen table. I thought I was being subtle. But when I finally got the thing, and I held it in my hands, I was mildly disappointed. It was kind of cheap looking, and it didn't really do much. It had a panel in the chest that popped off, and you could see all the bionic circuitry inside, but that was about it. I played with it for a couple of hours, and then I threw it in the back of my closet.

What Paul offers is so much better than a junky piece of plastic, a huge meal, or an expensive bottle of wine. It doesn't disappoint, and it's not something we're going to regret an hour later. "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ," Paul says, "and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." And what he means by desires of the flesh is more than what you might think. He means all the desires that fill our minds and drive us relentlessly: the desire for money and power and status; the desire to be seen as accomplished and successful; the desire to have more and more and more.

Don't waste your time chasing after those things, Paul says. They're not going to give you what you really want or need. They're only going to leave you feeling empty. The only lasting joy, the only true peace, the only fulfillment that remains comes from God.

And why is that? Personally, I think it's because God is the ground of our being, the breath that animates us, the well from which we sprang—pick your metaphor. God is our source, and until we're connected to that source, we're always going to feel like there's something missing, and we're always going to be looking for something to fill that void, but nothing ever will—at least not for long.

As Martin Luther put it, "We are restless until we find our rest in God."

So when I get home this afternoon, I'm going to bring all the Christmas decorations up from the basement. And later this week we're going to go get the tree we tagged on Friday. And at some point I'm sure we'll bake some cookies, and I'm sure I'll watch "It's a Wonderful Life." Because honestly I think Andy Williams was right—I think this really is the most wonderful time of the year. And I plan to fully enjoy it, and I hope all of you do, too. Just remember, there's something even more wonderful, and if you focus on that, and make it the center of your life, it'll never let you down or disappoint you. Amen.