



Rev. Chris Taylor - 12.01.19

"Bearing Light"

Roman 13:11-14

With this first Sunday of Advent we begin a new year in our liturgical calendar. Like any beginning, this one is full of hope. We enter into Advent with a sense of anticipation – preparing to celebrate the birth of our Savior, and at the same time looking towards that day when Christ will come again. That places us in an “in-between time”; a time between Christ’s birth on the one hand, and that moment when he comes again on the other.

The crucial battle has been won. We know now how it is all going to end. But the final victory is yet to come.

It is to this in-between time that Paul’s exhortation in our lesson this morning is addressed. “Salvation,” he writes, “is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near” (Rom. 13:11-12). He is talking about Christ’s return. He is talking about that final victory when all that is evil and unjust and wrong is finally abolished, and we enter into the fullness of God’s Kingdom. To say that it is nearer to us than when we first believed is as true for us today as it was some two thousand years ago. It is as close to us as our own demise when (for us) the linear time of this earth will come to an end. It is then that we enter into an altogether different kind of time; then that our next waking moment is in the very presence of God, surrounded by all who have gone before and all who are yet to come around God’s own banqueting table; members forever of God’s eternal Kingdom.

How should we then live in this in-between time as we await that glorious day? “Put away the works of darkness,” Paul tells us. “Put on the armor of light” (Rom. 13:12). More specifically, v. 14, “put on [that is, clothe yourselves with] the Lord Jesus Christ”.

I love the image: moving up into Christ the same way we might don a seamless robe; raising our hands to heaven, and letting him slip over our heads and shoulders and descend down to our very feet so that it becomes Christ who envelopes us; Christ through whom we interact with the world around us.

Do that, and we will begin to see the world through a very different lens. We will begin to experience the world as Jesus himself did: as God’s creation; a world in which

God is moving; a world in constant conversation with us revealing God's nature and God's will.

When you are out on a sailboat it is crucial to be attuned to the world around you; feeling subtle shifts in the wind so that you can adjust the sails or change course accordingly; seeing the ripples across the water that warn of an approaching gust; watching the barometer as it offers clues of the weather to come; looking to the flags just outside the harbor that reveal the strength and direction of the wind just beyond the land masses that might otherwise block it; paying attention to the channel buoys – which way they are leaning and how far – that you might know which way the current is running and with what kind of strength.

So as Christians we want to become attuned to the world around us; seeing the Father's hand in the richness and beauty and wonder of this creation; searching for that purpose that God has for us in the signs we see all around us. That's where Jesus' lived. He knew the Father was constantly moving in this world; constantly at work. He sought to become one with that movement; a part of what the Father was doing at any given moment.

“Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise.” (Jn. 5:19). Carefully watching the world around him for evidence of the Father's hand, Jesus would then become a part of it – joining in that movement of God's Spirit in our midst.

Look at the world that God has given us! Think about all the ways in which it sustains us and provides for us: oxygen and water; gravity and food; sunshine and rain – a world perfectly designed to meet our every need. And what does it mean that we find not just one kind of flower or one kind of tree but an endless variety that delights the eye and fills our senses? Does not creation itself speak to us of a God who loves us dearly? Small wonder, then, that when God came to us – became one with us – God came not in judgment or condemnation, but offering grace and love to a people in desperate need.

Life through the lens of grace: that's part of what it means to clothe ourselves with Christ. Not to judge, or to condemn or to push away. “This is my command: that you love one another” (Jn. 13:34).

Tom Junod, whose Esquire article about Mr. Rogers back in 1998 became the basis for the new Tom Hanks movie, wrote a follow-up piece in this month's Atlanticⁱ. He still marvels at the impact that Rogers has had on his life; still wonders why Mr. Rogers would choose to be his friend when Junod was known at the time for a kind of cruel, cut-throat journalism. It is fair to say, as the movie makes clear, that Fred Rogers had an enormous impact on Tom Junod's life and career. Sixteen years after Mr. Rogers died, Junod still thinks about him, still wonders "What would Mr. Rogers do?"

At one point in the article, Junod talks about the harsh reception extended to Pam Bondi, Florida's attorney general, at a showing of the Roger's documentary, "Won't you be My Neighbor". She was confronted by protesters who shouted their condemnation for her legal challenges to the Affordable Care Act and for her silence in the face of the administration's family separations at the southern border.

They yelled at her and called her a "horrible person," and when I spoke with her a year later, she told me that they'd tried to stop her from entering the theater, shouted in her face with such vehemence that she was flecked with spit, and bullied her boyfriend in an attempt to provoke a fight. She watched the movie, but she was "shaking the whole time," and when she was on her way out of the theater they accosted her again, videotaping her as she attempted to go to her car. On the tape, a woman is heard yelling: "Would Mister Rogers take children away from their parents? Would Mister Rogers take away health insurance?...What would Mister Rogers think about you and your legacy in Florida, taking away health insurance from people with preexisting conditions? Pam Bondi, shame on you!"ⁱⁱ

Junod fully grasped the irony of the moment: people attending a movie about Fred Rogers; treating another human being like dirt. "What [Fred Rogers] would have thought of Pam Bondi's politics is one thing; what he would have thought of Pam Bondi is quite another, because he prayed for the strength to think the same way about everyone. She is special; there has never been anyone exactly like her, and there never will be anyone exactly like her ever again; God loves her exactly as she is. He repeated this over and over, and that his name was invoked as a cudgel by activists who probably shed tears over the documentary has haunted me since I first saw the video from Tampa."ⁱⁱⁱ

Fred Rogers got it right. He saw in every human a much loved child of God. That's the gospel. That's what Jesus was all about. It is why he died on the cross for us. We can't earn that kind of love. It is, rather, simply who God is; it's God's nature. The grace

extended to us in Jesus is an expression of a boundless love that not even our sin can quench.

To put on Jesus, to be clothed in him, means learning to see those around us with that kind of love. No matter what someone's position on a given issue, no matter how hurtful they might have been, it means realizing that they were children once, too. It means learning to see beyond those things that push us away and remember that they, too, are God's beloved – hurting, struggling, broken children trying in their imperfect way to make it through this life as best they can just like us.

If we want to love as Jesus did, then first we need to see the world through his own eyes. We need to clothe ourselves with Christ. If we can begin to see people through the lens of grace, then kindness will naturally follow. See people as God's beloved, and we will find ourselves learning to love and to forgive even as God in Jesus Christ has forgiven each one of us.

Clothe yourselves with Christ. Put him on. See the world and see others through this lens of grace. Then you will begin to love as he loved. Then the light of God's love will start shining through in everything you do, and in everything you say.

ⁱ Tom Junod, "What Would Mister Rogers Do?", *The Atlantic*, December, 2019

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 84

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*