



First Light

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given September 10, 2017
Romans 13:8-14, Proper 18A*

When I was eighteen years old I started college, and the very first thing I did in college was to go on a month-long backpacking trip in the Uinta Mountains in Utah with 22 other first year college students in August, before we started classes in September. We were in wilderness territory the whole time, which meant that we saw almost no signs of human habitation for a month other than the trail we were walking on. There were no buildings, no electric wires, no roads or poles or even campfire rings. We ran into maybe 2 or 3 other people the whole trip. It was very high in the mountains, so that much of the time we were above the tree line, and there were nights that it snowed and we woke to a skin of ice in the water in our bottles.

This was long before the era of cell phones, but part of the program was that we could not even have watches or any way to tell time in an artificial way. So over the course of the month we grew closely attuned to the natural rhythms of light and dark. We learned how to figure out how much daylight there was left by the position of the sun in the sky. We lost all track of what day it was – Sunday or Wednesday or Friday or Tuesday, we had no idea. And the way we knew when to wake up in the morning was by a system we called First Light. The night before, our leaders told us to wake up either at first light, second light, or third light. First light meant that the very first time we opened our eyes and the light was anything other than pitch black, if there was a hint of grey or if you could see anything at all, it was time to get up. Second light meant that you could essentially hit the snooze once – you could let your eyes close again after that first minute of realizing that day was near, knowing you'd need to get up pretty soon. And third light meant, sleep in. Do whatever you want, we aren't going anywhere right away.

I am a person who loves sleep. I have almost always had the gift of sleep. It's always been tough for me to wake up in the morning. So this First Light business

was hard for me. It even felt unnatural. I think if Adam had been there he might have created a Fourth Light category. But the truth of course is that for millennia, this is how most people have lived their lives – attuned to the rhythms of light and dark. When you wake up at First Light, there is a definable, discernible moment in the movement of night to day when everything is still mostly dark but in some almost imperceptible way, the light shifts, and you know that day is finally coming. In that backpacking trip that shift meant First Light, time to get up. Time to leave behind our comfortable sleeping bags and get out into the cold predawn alpine air and get ready to pack up and go. The arrival of day wasn't like the glaring flick of a light switch that blinds you when you turn it on. It was slow, and steady, and it inaugurated the journey of the day.

In the Romans text from today Paul tells the Christians scattered across lots of house churches in Rome this. He says, you know what time it is. It is time to wake up. Salvation is nearer than when you first became believers. The night is almost gone. Day is at hand. Wake up. The word Paul uses for time in this text, when he says “you know what time it is,” is the Greek word *kairos*. There are two Greek words for time: one is *chronos*, and it means the hands on the clock moving around the 24 hour day in linear time. But the other word for time, *kairos*, means sacred time. *Kairos* means the significance or meaning of a moment. It is liminal time. It means time that is infused with a call, a spiritual presence. So when Paul says to the Romans you know what time it is, he is saying with every tool in his disposal, look around you and recognize that something is different. You may have been living in the dark, but something new is coming. Things are shifting and it is time for you to shake free from patterns of behavior that numb you to your ability to see clearly, and be ready for action, and do the one thing that actually matters: which is to love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

Every spiritual tradition talks about waking up in a spiritual sense. Buddhists talk about enlightenment and yogis talk about liberation. Christians have many ways to describe this spiritual reality. We talk about being born from above. We talk about the light of Christ dawning on those who have been sitting in great darkness. We have beautiful scriptures that talk about the revelation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ that shines like a light within us. But what does all of that mean, to twenty first century Minnesotans at St. Stephens today? In actual life, we are worried about relatives in Florida, we are sending kids to school or getting ready to have babies. Some are writing dissertations and some cannot go to school

even though you would like to. Some of us are burying our beloved ones. What does it mean to wake up?

The truth is that most of us spend a good deal of time in patterns of thinking and behavior that could best be described as being on autopilot or even numbing ourselves, because life in all its beauty is also messy and terrifying or overwhelming or just heavy sometimes. Paul gets a little heavy handed in his description of bad behavior here – he talks about licentiousness and adultery drunkenness and all those things we describe as shameful, but we know that those kinds of behaviors are just unwise numbing techniques. They are just slightly worse coping mechanisms, like overwork or too much Netflix or candy crush or porn. What if we could truly find a way to walk through life undefended – not needing to numb ourselves or be asleep and oblivious to the full beauty and pain within us and around us, but walking fully conscious in the light of day? I think for Paul, wearing the armor of light is just walking around with the capacity to cut through the complexities of human interaction and be freed to love our neighbors as ourselves. He talks about putting on Jesus like putting on clothes – trying on a way of being that is the difference between sleeping and waking, the difference between being numb or oblivious and being intentional, the difference between going through the motions and learning truly to love one another.

It doesn't start that way. It starts with First Light, with opening your eyes in the fog of sleep and noticing for the first time that something is a little different. We ourselves don't create the light. We do have the eyes to recognize it, that Kairos moment in time when we suddenly realize that things are changing. It may not seem like things are changing. We continue to listen to the news and we might have anxiety when we see what is happening between North Korea and Donald Trump. We continue to struggle with racism and violence, and such deep divisions that often people on the opposite sides of the political spectrum feel like they can't believe they live in the same country, they see things so very differently. We see giant climate events like Hurricanes Harvey and Hurricane Irma, one after the other, and wonder where is this light, where is the hope, where is the sacred future and the healing that God promises in scripture?

But there is hope. There are the constant sprouts of new life, of healing and transformation and peace and nonviolence, that are happening all the time. Sometimes they are hardly noticeable. But they are Kairos moments that call us to wake up and shake off our oblivion and our sleep and our numbing and take the

risk to walk, undefended by anything but light, the light of a willingness to love our neighbors as ourselves. I have a relationship with someone that is pretty complicated. I'm sure none of you can relate to that. It's a relationship with someone I've known a long time, and that person and I have often just rubbed each other the wrong way. Not too long ago we were at a dinner together, and the person said something that I interpreted as harsh, and I overreacted and said something harsh back. You know how that goes - the conversation at the dinner table came to an uncomfortable halt and then someone spoke into the silence and changed the subject. But there it was, like the elephant at the dinner table. Both me and this other person, I think, were acting on autopilot – triggered by lots of interactions with each other that had started to form habits of conflict. But afterward we ended up having some amazing conversations that started with a mutual expression of desire to let go of this conflict. Neither of us wanted to keep interacting that way. I don't want to operate like that. It's as if now that we can see ourselves more clearly, even though I'm sure our temperaments will still occasionally rub each other the wrong way, we are waking up to how we actually want to be with one another, and things will not be the same. We have arrived at First light, and we have a choice: to wake up, throw off patterns of conflict on autopilot, and choose the intention of loving each other. We won't change all in a day, but we also are not going back to sleep. We are choosing to walk in the light of day, with all the vulnerability and courage and humility that that entails. And I believe that the light will increase, as we follow the way of Jesus together and choose to love one another again and again and again.

Now is the time to wake up. Paul doesn't say we need to reach a supreme level of spiritual attainment to wake up. He doesn't say we need to become super ethical disciplined people to wake up. Waking up is all about our perception. It's about opening your eyes and realizing that it's no longer the middle of the night – that it's time for change, time to get up, time to stop sleep walking. It's time to see our neighbors differently. It's time to recognize our own contributions to the darkness around us, and let them go. It's time to choose no longer to defend ourselves with the old habits of power and conflict, but walk forward with vulnerability and humility and courage, and nothing but light to protect us, because that's what following the way of Jesus is about.