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Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come. Amen. Today we will consider God's Word from the book of Romans: *"The night is far gone; the day is at hand."*

Night and day. It's that time of year in our part of the world where daylight hours are a precious commodity. It's not only dark but cold, so we await the sun's light eagerly. Scripture uses the image of night and day to illustrate the timeline of salvation history. Right now it's night time. Regardless of what your clock tells you, it is nighttime now. The whole world is in the dark. What does that mean? It means evil is afoot. It means the devil and his angels are prowling around setting traps for believers. It means temptation is lurking around every corner and sin crouching at the door. It means we are fighting in a cosmic battle. Allow me to illustrate with a scene from my favorite book and movie series: The Lord of the Rings.

In this part of the story, there is a battle between the people of Rohan led by Theoden their king and an army of terrible monstrous creatures called orcs. Theoden's people have taken refuge in a fortress that sits in the lowest part of a valley. As night falls, the orcs surround the fortress and begin their onslaught. Theoden is severely outnumbered, even with young children and old men volunteering to take up armor and weapons. They fight the enemy all night long but it is clear they are losing, being forced to retreat farther and farther back into the keep as the orcs break through gates and walls, killing everyone in their path.

The battle against satan, the sinful flesh, and the world is *that* kind of night. Tireless striving, a sense of being overpowered, the seeming certainty of defeat...and yet the young and old together with the strong continue fighting because it is a cause worth fighting for and because even though the odds are not in our favor, we still have reason to hold to hope. We hope and we wait, as we prayed today, for the Lord to rescue us from the threatening perils of our sins. The Psalmist conveys this hopeful longing in Psalm 130, *"My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning; more than watchmen for the morning."*

Theoden's embattled army also had reason to hold to hope. Earlier, the wizard Gandalf had saddled a horse and ridden off toward the horizon, promising to find more soldiers to help them. Before he left, he told them, "Look to my coming at first light on the fifth day. At dawn, look to the east." As things continued to worsen, I'm sure those words faded from memory and doubt grew stronger in their hearts. It seemed no one was coming to help after all. Finally, King Theoden, a tiny remnant of his army, and a few faithful friends were holed up in the castle but their last defenses were about to give way. The orcs were about to batter down the door. In that moment when Theoden was about to give up in despair, Gimli the dwarf glimpsed the color of the sky through a window, and recalling Gandalf's promise, he said, "The sun is rising."

Courage welled up in them and even though they knew they would probably die, they threw open the doors and rode out onto the castle's bridge with swords swinging and shields clashing. They were about to be overtaken when they saw a figure on horseback with the rising sun at his back. Gandalf had returned with a

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vast army of horsemen behind him. He led them charging down into the valley where they mowed down the orcs and rescued the king and his companions.

I love to tell that story because, well, for one thing it's just a great story! Tolkien was a genius. But also because I think it reflects the Gospel so well. Here we are hunkered down in the valley of the shadow of death, fighting this relentless battle through a long night. And we also have a word of promise to hold to. In Revelation 22, Jesus says, *"Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me."* When? We can't know but here in Romans we read, *"salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed."* Every moment we live that is true, isn't it? We are closer to Jesus' return than we were yesterday. It continues, *"The night is almost over; the day is at hand."* Like Gimli, we can see the color of the night sky beginning to change. In fact, that is what Advent's deep blue is meant to convey – the color of the night sky just before dawn. The sun is rising. Jesus is almost here.

Therefore, the Apostle Paul urges us to wake up! *Throw* off the works of darkness, put on the weapons of light; put on the Lord Jesus Christ! This is the imagery of baptism. The old self has been crucified with Christ. Throw it away! Then wake every day and put on the new self with its redeemed, purified desires and follow Jesus. Essentially, Paul tells Christians to double down in the fight against sin and Satan and focus harder than you've ever focused before on walking with God because Jesus will be here soon.

What does the timing have to do with the call to increase our intensity? There are jokes and memes out there – Jesus is coming, better clean your room! Jesus is coming – look busy! And people, myself included, have thought about how we wouldn't want Jesus to show up while we're doing something he wouldn't be proud of... Of course the joke is that Jesus knows what we're doing all the time, doesn't he? Jesus knows our hearts, he knows our desires, our thoughts. He even knows the number of hairs on our heads. So what difference does it make what we're doing right before he arrives?

The call to throw off sin and live as we are called is not in order to avoid punishment. It's not to gain our salvation – Jesus already did that for us on the cross. We aren't primarily motivated by fear of punishment. We just want to live lives that are pleasing to God! We want to be already oriented toward heaven when Jesus arrives.

It sort of parallels Theoden and his handful of comrades riding out to fight thousands of enemies. They knew their efforts were not going to bring them to victory. But if they were going to go out, they wanted to go out fighting! And if Gandalf did keep his promise to return, they wanted him to come back and find them giving their all rather than hiding like cowards. They came out to fight knowing that if they were going to have victory, it would not be from their efforts – they were simply engaged in the battle as they awaited the one who would give them victory.

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And what of us? We've been fighting the foe long through the night and will we have victory in the end?

You bet we will! Because the Jesus we're waiting for has already proven himself faithful. He has already fought and won the war for us. To paraphrase Jesus, he told his disciples, "They are going to crucify me. I am going away for a while to contend with death for you. But look to my coming at first light on the third day. At dawn, look to the east." Jesus paid our ransom on that glorious Good Friday. But for bewildered disciples those three days were one long, sad night. And then it happened. John reports, "*On the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb.*" That was the turning point of all human history. At Jesus' resurrection, death was undone and the world was changed forever. A new injection of hope and courage filled the hearts of Jesus' disciples, and the Holy Spirit continues fills us with that hope and courage today. It's one of the many things Jesus gives us through the Word and the Sacraments. Here faith is strengthened; We are weak and weary soldiers but when Jesus comes into our midst, then "hearts are brave again and arms are strong. Alleluia!"

Yes the night has been long and we continue this fight in the dark but God's Word encourages us: keep fighting, keep waiting, and keep awake – the night is almost over, the day is at hand. The sun is rising. Even so, come quickly, Lord Jesus. AMEN.

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.