

“Nearer To Us Now”

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.

Nearer To Us Now

Romans 13:11-14

November 30, 2025

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I.

Help! I have fallen down a rabbit hole home to the likes of Pythagoras, Nietzsche, and Poincare (among others). Please be careful where you step.

Though it has been an abiding constant throughout my ministry, today I am *acutely* aware that I have no idea if these words of mine, proffered through the prodding of the Spirit, will be of any real or lasting value to you the listener or reader. Yet, I will gladly say them to you anyway, and keep saying such words to you over and over.

What makes this somewhat humorous is that my original intent was to simply regale you with a heart-warming and hopeful experience and, perhaps, plant a new seed for our future. I am getting ahead of myself, though. This all began with a rare desire (at least for me) to pursue and proclaim a status symbol here in the latening stages of my life.

II.

Long story short (after all, most of us are still groggy from the effects of the turkey's tryptophan, as well as a heavy dose of pumpkin pie) a month or so ago our youngest child, Arlo, purchased a new car (his first). While it was certainly a big moment in *his* life, it was a big moment in *our* lives as well. It meant that we ended up with his old car, a 2014 Honda CRV, which was once my car, but was originally my mother's car purchased new by her just prior her stroke some 11 years ago.

While one might not consider it a step up to repossess a car with 179,000 miles on it, complete with an assortment of dents, scratches, and sundry detractions (the most egregious of which is the missing trim around the front passenger side wheel well from when the tire and rim came off while traveling 60 mph on the highway) when your truck (cool as it may be) gets 12 miles to the gallon, having a car that gets 25 mpg is a game changer.

III.

After checking the oil and giving it a thorough cleaning (which was *sorely* needed) the next thing I did was to scrap off all the old band and music stickers Arlo had affixed to the windows. However, I left intact the Ithaca College sticker which I had put on the side window back when I drove it and Arlo attended IC. For my birthday I asked for and received a Hampshire College sticker, our son Tucker's alma mater, which I promptly added to the window. To complete the trifecta, Tuesday on my way home from work I stopped to get a SLU sticker from the St. Lawrence University Bookstore, as our oldest child, Nicole, is a graduate.

Having turned 61 years of age, I could think of no better status symbol than driving around an old beater car with 179,000 miles on it with three stickers from the three colleges my kids had attended. I considered it both a reward and a status symbol for paying college tuition (and associated expenses) for 12 long years. A rather prideful act, to be sure, but there it is.

IV.

All of which explains how I found myself standing at the checkout counter of the SLU Bookstore late afternoon this past Tuesday before Thanksgiving. I had intended this to be a quick dash in and out, so it took me a bit to realize that only customers in the store were me and an older couple who were milling about. After all, the university was on break and all of us regular townfolk were either already either *at* home in anticipation of the holiday, *on* the way home, or at the grocery store prior to *going* home.

As I was paying for my SLU sticker, and because I was in such a mood, I engaged in a most pleasant and rather lengthy rap with the two students at the checkout counter. Both of whom, as it turned out, were international students. One fella from Sudan, a big tall drink of water majoring in Biochemistry, the other a woman from the Netherlands or some nordic country who was creating a major in public health cobbled from two, now nonexistent, departments. I admit that once I heard her name, Doris, I kind of tuned out on her country of origin.

V.

Well, you know how I can get. Pretty soon we were laughing, and listening, and telling stories. Turned out they both went to high school in Tanzania, and had been great friends, with each ending up at SLU unbeknownst to other until they arrived. She was knitting a hat, and I had just stolen a cool, knit hat from the library's "Free Shelf." Apparently last year was their first winter which, as you recall, was a doozy. Pretty soon, a third, and a fourth and, then, a *fifth* student joined us (there wasn't an awful lot going on in the store at this point). All international students, one from Hungary, one from Indonesia, and another from a country I didn't catch. They were all sophomores (apparently last year was a bumper crop for international students) and staying on campus for the school break. I suggested they walk down to the Park Friday to get a dose of the Holiday of Lights if they were looking for something to do. Finally, I asked what their plans for Thanksgiving dinner? When they told me the dining hall would be closed so some of the international students were gathering for a potluck Thursday, I will confess my heart got a little heavy.

VI.

After I left the Bookstore I went out to my car and sat in the parking lot for a good long while. Was I really going to call Linda and tell her she had to pack everything up and move *back* to town after she had *just* moved everything out to the lake? Because that is what it would mean for me to walk back into the Bookstore and invite those international students to the manse for Thanksgiving dinner. It is not like we haven't done it before, *many* times; particularly for international students, but church folk as well.

Alas, I confess, in the final analysis I had to admit I've plumb run out of steam for such herculean acts hospitality. I was very much looking forward to sitting fireside and watching football on Thursday, just Linda and I together in our cozy cottage. More to the point, it would be a lot to ask of Linda. Driving out to the lake and feeling like the Grinch who had just stolen the Roast Beast from the few Whos left on campus in Whoville, I inexplicably began to feel my heart grow three sizes as I realized that these students, living bravely as strangers in a strange land, had captured the true spirit of Thanksgiving.

VII.

In that moment I realized that these young people had given me a gift. Call it what you will: expectation, optimism, assurance, brightness, wonder, possibility, or just plain old-fashioned hopefulness. I was left feeling somehow “nearer” to where I wanted and needed to be than I had been prior to entering the Bookstore. Ground had been gained, progress made, some measure of distance travel. Which, as I am about to explain, is no small thing.

Today we begin the Season of Advent in preparation for Christmas and in celebration Jesus’ arrival into our world; both at his birth and in the last days. There is no need for me to tell you how enormously challenging it is to allow oneself the time, space, and energy to simply enjoy and appreciate the season, let alone to delve into its theological significance. It seems as if the hands of time spin fastest when we round the corner into Thanksgiving and rush headlong into Christmas. Like Bill Murray in the movie *Groundhog’s Day*, we open our eyes and are startled to realize, “Here we go again! How can this be? Same old same old.”

VIII.

As we get older and Christmas returns, yet again, we labor to stave off catching a bad case of the fuddy-duddies or the bah-humbugs. Save for the delight of experiencing Christmas anew through the eye of the children in our lives and in our church, many of us would probably just as soon fast forward straight to the bleak mid-winter. Might as well get it over with.

While I can certainly appreciate the sentiment, my experience at the Bookstore on Tuesday helped to remind me that the *real* reason we celebrate Christmas is to, once again, consider our conviction that “salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; (that) the night is far gone, the day is near,” that ground is being gained, things are growing better and more clear, progress is occurring, and that we are being moved closer to God. Even, and especially, when everything in the world around us would point to exactly the opposite. Hear me when I say, it takes a *powerful* faith to believe we are moving in a positive direction. Hopeful expectation, my friends, is the minority position.

IX.

I told you at the very start of the sermon to be careful where you step. Look at you now, down here with me in the rabbit hole of the Eternal Return (or Eternal Recurrence). Welcome! Have a seat and take heart, for we are not alone. Pythagoras is here. He taught "after certain specified periods, the same events occur again" and that "nothing was entirely new." The Stoics believed the universe is periodically destroyed in an immense conflagration, and then experiences a rebirth with these cycles continue for eternity, and the same events repeated exactly in every cycle. Qoheleth, the author of Ecclesiastes, is a big fan of the Eternal Return, "*What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, 'See, this is new?' It has already been in the ages before us.*" (1:9–10)

X.

In his Reoccurrence Theorem, the French Mathematician and Theoretical Physicist Henri Poincare states that "certain dynamical systems, such as particles of gas in a sealed container, will return infinitely often to a state arbitrarily close to their original state." However, my man Nietzsche is the one who puts the fine point on it with a thought experiment found in his book, The Gay Science (section 341):

What if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness, and say to you, "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence" ... Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: "You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.

XI.

For Nietzsche, and all those down here in this rabbit hole who came before and after him, one must inevitably accept a kind of despair which recognizes and bears that there is nothing new under the sun. Hence, one *must* formulate one's *own* moral imperative based on the eternal consequences of each thought and every act echoing endlessly throughout time as a means of

easing a life of a universally experienced *nausea* (as Sartre called it) because this is *all* we've got and all we are ever *going* to get.

Or, shall we follow the Apostle Paul in placing a foot upon the first rung of the ladder that leads up and out of the rabbit hole of the Eternal Return and believe, instead, the words of Romans 13:

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. (Along with this comes the moral imperative to) lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

XII.

While such a choice between the "Eternal Return" and what Paul might call the "Resurrection of the Eternal" is always at work in each new moment (or old moment, depending on how you chose to see it) the Season of Advent presents it to us in a remarkably poignant manner which is difficult to ignore. Though Lord knows we try. With all the commercialization, the busyness, the excess, the financial stress, the decorating, the increased pressure we place upon ourselves to be happy rather than find happiness in simply being, we obfuscate and avoid the only real question that is Christmas: are we stuck down in the rabbit hole of the Eternal Return, or do we believe God is nearer to us now than when we first believed and that the world, and we along with it, are moving toward a better end? Or, failing that, at least have the *potential* to one day do so?

XIII.

Boy, I have to be honest, sometimes I really don't know. I look around and see what we do to each other, to the planet, and to ourselves and it seems like having hope for something new, something better is a pretty tall order. Then, one day, you run into a bunch of international students trying to make a future for themselves by coming here to this small college and town set at the edge of the frozen tundra, 1000s of miles from their home and family, and you are made to realize and reconsider that maybe we *can* do this after all!?! Or, more to the point, if *we* cannot get it done, it will get done for us by the grace of God, as a gift, as a child born in a manger, as a Savior who will return to us and shall wipe away all tears from our eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain; for the former

things will have passed away. That all such as this might be nearer to us now is the *only* thing that has the power to truly put the merry into our Christmas.

XIV.

Finally, my interaction at the Bookstore caused me to realize that we are missing a tremendous opportunity. Back in the day, Paul built the Church by going from city to city and country to country proclaiming the Good News. Now, people from some of those cities and a few of those countries are coming here to our community. Might it be possible for us to *rebuild* the Church in demonstrating the Good News? Not necessarily so they accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior as do we, but so they can see that new and better things are possible when one does.

Maybe, next year, we reach out to the International Student Services Department at SLU and International Programs Office at SUNY Canton and hatch a plan to partner with campus faculties and other community groups to share Thanksgiving Dinner across cultures and countries, either in individual homes or as a potluck at the church, that *we* might be the ones who can move this world along such that, now, we are nearer to each other. Amen.