

A Far Gone Night

Texts: Isaiah 2: 1-5; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

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The night is a time of rest and recuperation, a time when our bodies restore themselves and our minds get to go on a dreamy vacation. It's a time when bed beckons and the pillow summons and sleep calls, when the worries of the day can give way to peaceful slumber.

Unless, of course, you have sick kids. Then night never seems to end. The children beckon and the coughing summons, and your spouse calls from the Emergency Room, and the worries of the day seem as nothing compared to just trying to make it to the morning.

Each hour passed is part of a countdown of hours of possible sleep: if he falls asleep now, I could get five hours, four hours, three hours, two hours one hour of sleep, blast off: he's asleep! But it's time to get up!

I got to experience firsthand what the great Greek poet Homer in the Iliad and the Odyssey called "rosy-fingered Dawn", as I was up in time to see the sky begin to take color in finger-like streaks long before the sun poked its sleepy head up above the horizon and climbed out of bed.

It was not different for the ancient world, a world, remember, lit only by fire, where the moon, the lesser light to light the night, as the Bible calls it, was the only light, a dim companion to the sun, and an inconsistent friend at that, with its pattern of waxing and waning that seemed to leave even its dim brightness always at half strength. For the ancient world, the end of night was a great relief.

For them, every night was potentially a time of real terror. Night was the time of thieves and robbers and brigands and cut-throats, a time when evil was afoot and sin was hidden in the darkness, a time of lurking and skulking and prowling, where no one could see what was coming.

The end of night brought the hope of a new day.

It's not surprising then that they used the metaphor of the night for all that was wrong with the world, all that stood in the way of God's rule, of goodness and compassion, of justice and mercy and truth.

Israel often found itself oppressed from the outside by the nations, and distressed on the inside by its own inability to keep the law. They were God's people, but still they struggled.

The great day of the Lord's triumph had not yet come, and they had no choice but to keep on waiting through the darkness of sin and oppression until the light dawned and the Lord's day came.

It is for this day that they were longing in the prophecy we heard from Isaiah this morning, a longing for a new day to dawn when the nations would stream to Jerusalem, not, as they were in the habit of doing, streaming as invading armies going straight to the palace with swords and spears to plunder the kingdom, but streaming as pilgrims and seekers heading straight to the temple, with open hearts ready to learn God's ways and with willing spirits ready to walk in God's paths.

Isaiah knew that swords and spears had their cost, and not just in blood. He knew, as President Dwight Eisenhower put it 2600 years later, that

“Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired, signifies in the final sense a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. The world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.”

Every sword and spear that was made was a plow or pruning hook that would never be made, and, in a real sense, a stomach that would not be fed, a harvest that would not be brought in.

That is why they longed for the day when the swords would be beaten into plowshares and the spears into pruning hooks, and the nations would thrive on tending creation and not on destroying it.

As long as they lived in the night of their reality, they would have to long for the day to come when all things would be set right.

It is this night that Paul says is already far gone.

How does he know that? He knows it because he has seen the rosy fingers of the dawn beginning to illuminate the sky.

No, not everyone has been healed yet, but with the coming of Jesus, a few have been healed: the leper, the woman with the flow of blood, the blind man, the lame man, the boy with epilepsy, and many others. Some, but not all. A rosy finger has appeared.

No, not all the hungry have been fed – yet, but with the coming of Jesus some have been fed, the five thousand, and the four thousand and even the guests at the wedding in Cana, who got some great wine to drink. Not all, but some. A rosy finger has appeared.

No, not all have been reconciled, but with the coming of Jesus, Jews and Gentiles have come together at last to worship the one true God, slaves worship with the free, men worship with women, children are included in worship as Jesus' special guests. A rosy finger has appeared.

No, not everyone has been raised from the dead, but with the coming of Jesus, the daughter of Jairus has been raised, and the son of the widow of Nain, and Jesus' friend Lazarus, and finally Jesus has been raised and the power of death and darkness has been broken. A rosy finger has appeared.

Paul knows that the dawn must be coming because he has seen the streaks across the sky, he has seen the hints that the *sun* will soon be rising on the great day of God because he knows that the *Son* of God has already risen on Easter morning.

Whenever the unknown day and hour of Jesus' return is, Paul knows that we are closer to its dawning now than when we first believed.

It is in this hope that we live. Yes the night has gone on longer than Paul expected, but the message of Jesus and his resurrection has spread, the light of the world is coming up over more and more nations and more and more people, and the day will surely come.

Isaiah saw the rosy fingers from afar, and that's why he could say in chapter 9, "the peoples who walked in darkness have seen a great light."

He knew, even though he was still deep in the night. He knew even then that the dawn would come on God's great day.

And he foresaw, not just the day of Christ's final coming, but the day of his first coming, when the sky first began to lighten and the black of night began to give way to the colors of the dawn.

Isaiah saw it and wrote “unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

The day could not come before the dawn, and the promise of a return could not be made until the Messiah had come. The rosy fingers could not appear until Christ was in the world.

And that is what we celebrate at Advent. The coming of healing and feeding and rising from the dead, not yet the full day, but the first rosy fingers streaking across the sky as the promise of a new day’s dawning.

We live in that hope, and we rejoice in those rosy fingers. And we know that it all began ... when a baby was born.

For when a baby is born, things change, the night changes. When a baby is born, sometimes you open your eyes and you see the sky changing, the future lighting up. When a baby is born, if that baby is Jesus, you know that at some dawn, early on the first day of the week, death and darkness will be defeated, and God’s light will shine on all the world.

The full light of day is not here yet, but there is one more rosy finger here in our midst. On this table, in the bread and the wine, by the power of the Spirit, there is the body and the blood of Jesus, and where Jesus is, there is light.

Here on this table is the ongoing promise that the night is far gone, that swords will be beaten into plowshares, that the darkness of death will give way to the light of resurrection.

Come to the table and experience the rosy fingers of dawn shining in the darkness. Come and be joined with Christ, the light of the world.

Amen