

“The Christ Patch”

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

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Le Patch. It’s marketers felt it was the greatest thing since sliced bread, calling it a “cutting edge, advanced appetite suppressant, metabolism booster and energy enhancer...all in one weight loss patch.”

Almost too good to be true. But not the only patch in town. Nichoderm CQ for nicotine addiction; Ortho Evra, a birth control patch, the Eden Weight Loss Patch; the IcyHot Patch, a pain reliever. Perhaps best of all, there are these patches on disposable diapers that did what the old cotton cloth diapers did very well: make a baby uncomfortable, a sure incentive to toilet training!

Getting “patched up” used to have something to do with heading to the emergency room for bandaging after slicing a finger instead of the turkey; or to sew up the road rash rip in your leg from losing the battle to gravity with your bike.

Today getting “patched up” has more to do with internal than external medicine, with medications being delivered by an adhesive patch worn in places sometimes not appropriate to mention in polite company. One wonders if soon will come the day when you’ll be able to roll up just about anyone’s sleeve and see some sort of patch that offers them better living through chemistry.

Such developments lead to stories. Whether true or urban legend is the guy who showed up at the cardiologist for a follow-up appointment complaining about one of his medications. “It’s the patch,” he said. “The nurse told me to put a new one on every six hours and I’ve run out of places to put them. The doctor hoped what he thought was true wasn’t, told the man to undress, and found that he had 50 patches stuck all over his body. Directions were changed to tell patients to remove the old one first.

And then there are the ubiquitous “uniform patches” which tell us all sorts of things about the wearer: name, rank, unit, etc. So whether your patches are medicinal or military, when you put them on you can be fixed, identified, or both.

All of this is our modern cultural context for understanding a message of hope on this first Sunday in Advent. From the Latin “*to come*,” Advent is the season of four Sundays before Christmas when we prepare for the coming of Christ. We remember his coming on earth long ago, we prepare for his coming at Christmas, and we strain forward in hope for his second coming in glory: a message both ancient and new.

Romans 13:11-14 is the center metaphor for this message. The apostle Paul employs a clothing metaphor and instructs us to put something on: “*put on the Lord Jesus Christ.*” Quite aware that there can be wardrobe malfunctions among the people of God, Paul exhorts the church in Rome to “*Lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.*” His list is representative, not comprehensive, for those who, like the man in the cardiologist’s office, need a little more instruction. “Drunkenness,” “debauchery and licentiousness,” and “quarreling and jealousy” are some, but not all, of what we need to take off to be truly ready to visit the manger in Bethlehem.

As we start our journey toward Christmas, we need to put on “the Christ patch” that indicates to everyone that we are being patched up and fully filled with Jesus Christ, with love for God and love for neighbor. You’ve heard me say that the church is not a hotel for saints but a hospital for sinners. So it is. But the hospital metaphor is incomplete because it leaves the focus on the patient and not the physician.

The reason you and I are here together is not just that we share a common hope for healing, though it is true that we hope for the coming of God’s realm where, as Isaiah declares, “*they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.*”

The reason you and I are here together is not just that we share a common hope for each other's support in illness and adversity, though it is true that "*we share one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.*"

The reason you and I are here together is not just that we share a common hope for Christ's coming among us, though it is true that, as Paul wrote, "*the night is far gone, the day is near.*"

The reason you and I are here together is Jesus Christ, who has touched our lives and changed our lives; who has given us new life; whose positive, life-giving message has given us new hope: not only for the coming of the Kingdom, not only for our life beyond death; not only for the promise of what might be; but for the power of new possibilities present, here and now. This is what it means to put on "*the Christ patch,*" to "*put on the Lord Jesus Christ,*" to "*put on the armor of light.*" I believe we sometimes hesitate because it means we step up to a new level of commitment, accountability and service.

Some of you know that I and your co-lay leaders, Kelly O'Hara and Leigh Bak, are receiving separate lay and clergy "Vital Congregations" training, a national initiative of our church. MTMUMC is a healthy, thriving place, as reflected in today's program and our November 21st Church Conference. But no church is perfect and there is always room to grow in grace, and this training works toward that end.

The last clergy session focused on Evangelism. A passing comment by a colleague that made me think was, "We ought to do away with the local church Evangelism Committee." What they meant was that is "evangelism" means "sharing the good news about Jesus" then the entire church should be doing it, not just a select group. Indeed! This need not conform to some caricature of the friend or neighbor who needs to tell you about Jesus. It can be, literally and metaphorically, simply one hungry person telling another hungry person where to find bread.

From time to time I hear our members say, “We want our church to grow.” What “growth” means, and whether that is a majority opinion of our members will, I hope, become clearer in our long-range planning study. But having heard it more than once, let me ask this: *What is the single greatest reason a person attends church for the first time?* The answer is that 70-90% of people attend church for the first time because a friend or relative invited them. Have you invited someone lately? What if, during this Advent, you invited just one person a week who does not have a church home or is not meaningfully active in a church home now? What might that do to offer people the life-changing message of Jesus Christ?

Church: a hospital for sinners. A launching pad for mission and service. The Body of Christ. Put on Christ, and invite others to put him on. Amen.