

What Time is it? Time to wake up!

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
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Romans 13: 11-14

A few years ago I attended a retreat which was primarily a week of quiet reflection and meditation. But early in the week, the leader asked us to draw a picture of something that represented ourselves – not exactly my favorite activity. I struggled with this assignment, but finally drew a clock face that only had 11 hours. That was me – in many ways still is me. Dominated by time - always feeling I don't have enough time – if only I had more time. Think of all I could get done – there are not enough hours in a day.

And I'm guessing I'm not alone in this. So many of us live under the tyranny of time. We consume it just as we do other products and however much we have – as if any of us could ever actually possess time – we never seem to have enough. In the words of Cynthia Campbell, President of McCormick Theological Seminary, "The lives of most American families are completely overwhelmed by the demands on their time: households must accommodate multiple work schedules, with school and extracurricular activities too numerous to count. The school calendar on the refrigerator can no longer manage the schedule a busy family keeps. Even finding time to coordinate multiple calendars can be a challenge. And as the First Sunday of Advent brings the holiday season into full gear, time becomes a scarce commodity indeed." There are only two of us at home and we are still discussing when have enough time to get Christmas tree.

I am reminded of the song by Chicago that asks, "Does anybody really know what time it is?" Do you suppose they read the letter to the Romans before writing that song? Probably not. But it is the question raised by Paul. He is calling us to be awake and aware – aware of what time it really is. In the midst of all of our rushing about and worry about time, do we really know the time? And for Paul, it is a question that goes way beyond the number of shopping days left until Christmas.

Now one could argue that Paul was completely and totally wrong about time. In talking about time and what time it is, he still believed that it was time for Christ's imminent return. This text can be seen as a statement of his sense of real anticipation that the promised return of Christ was close at hand. Certainly many early Christians believed this. Well, here we are, 2000 years later, still waiting. Sorry, Paul, but it looks like you in fact really did not know what time it is. Or did he? I am not quite ready to walk away from Paul and his reflections on time. Believe he is saying something very important here. "It is now the moment for you to wake from sleep... Salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near." Such a sense of urgency... I wonder why?

Well, as the Christian church keeps track of time, it is the time – the season – of Advent – the four Sundays before Christmas. It is a time of preparation to be sure, but also a time, as Paul says, to wake from sleep, to be ready for a bright new day. Because as we look to the birth at Bethlehem, we really are standing on the frontier between the old order of things and the new order, a time when past and future stand still; we stand at what Presbyterian pastor, Joanna Adams, calls, "a turning point in time." In her words, "The past may not be completely finished and gone, but the new has truly come. From this time forth, we are invited to dream along with God of a new heaven, a new earth, a new way of being human, reshaped into God's image as we were supposed to be from the beginning." Yes, it may still look mighty dark outside, but a new day is coming, so we need to wake up, get up, and prepare ourselves for God's new day.

And that is precisely why Paul talks about laying down the works of darkness and putting on the armor of light. We wants us to put on nothing less that Jesus Christ – his life, his way of being – as we prepare to meet God's new future. Paul is not trying to be some puritanical kill joy here. No, he is wanting us to feel his sense of urgency. Now is the

time to put away those things that dull the senses or draw our attention away from what is really going on. Put aside quarreling and jealousy; put away injustice, unfairness, things that destroy community and injure relationships with others. Live instead toward that new day when peace and reconciliation and justice and integrity will be the hallmarks of our life together. Live now as if this promised new day has already begun...because, in fact, in that birth we anticipate, it has already begun.

It was the noted theologian, Woody Allen, who observed, "Nietzsche says that we will live the same life, over and over again. God, does that mean I will have to sit through the Ice Capades again?" I apologize to those of you who love the Ice Capades. But, again, Advent takes us in a whole new direction. Advent proclaims that because of the anticipated birth in Bethlehem, something is now afoot in our lives, in our time, something that is considerably beyond our conceptions of what can and cannot be. In that birth, God has intruded into our time, indeed has transformed time. God has taken our time and made it God's time. Time, not going round and round and round, but moving forward into God's new future.

I want to share a story with you that I shared not long ago because I believe it gets to the heart of our text, indeed of Advent itself. It is told by a pastor: "A man in my congregation had dangerous open-heart surgery. The doctor told him he had no more than a fifty-fifty chance of survival. But he did survive. When I visited him after the surgery I said, 'Well, you did survive after all! Isn't that wonderful!'

"He said, 'No, preacher, I didn't just survive. I did more than survive. I was born again. I am no longer the same person I have been the last fifty years. It's like God reached into my life and, through this illness, made me somebody better than I ever was before. I've been given a second chance and I'm going to be different, better than before.'" He believed, he knew, that God had made an advent into his life, and, because of that, nothing, including his time on earth, would ever be the same again.

I submit to you that this is precisely what has happened to us and to our time because of that birth. Do you know what time it is? It is God's time. Every moment of time now contains something of the eternal; every moment of time filled with infinite significance; every moment of time full of promise.

I am well aware that you will leave this service today, go back to your daily routines, and time will look pretty much like it always has – predictable, tied down, fixed – nothing new under the sun. All the darkness that haunts the world and our lives will still look pretty dark. But the question of this season, of Paul, is...will we continue to make our deadly accommodation to the world's time? Or will we dare to believe that in Jesus Christ, God has commandeered time, disrupted it, transformed it; will we dare to believe that in Jesus we have more future than past, more tomorrows than yesterdays? Are we prepared to believe that a new day has dawned and that, truly, we can put on the armor of light? Who knows what might happen if we stop tearing around in our busyness, unclench our fists and our jaws, and give God a chance to do something with us within the time that we have? We have such a small piece of time. What might it be telling us about the beauty and strangeness and pain and joy and hope of things? Wake up, says Paul, pay attention, God is at work here...do you not see it?

A final word by Joanna Adams: "One winter morning I was driving to work. The day was gray and dreary, as were my spirits as I negotiated my way through Atlanta's infamous traffic. All of a sudden, I felt a sudden warmth on my left hand as it gripped the steering wheel. I looked down and saw a thin shaft of light warming the back of my hand. 'Impossible!' I thought. 'This is too drizzly and dark a day for the sun to shine!' Nevertheless, as I glanced over my left shoulder toward the eastern horizon, there it was – the sun – buttery, orange, gold, as big as the world. Let us pray for the dawning of the Day of Christ; and until it comes, let us dress ourselves in Christ's light every morning."