

The Fullness of Time 12/1/2013

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; 12 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; 13 let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. 14 Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

A SLEEPING CHURCH

The days after the resurrection must have been exciting for the early church. There were appearances of the risen Christ.

God miraculously came into the lives of the people. They thought the second coming of Christ was immanent.

But, by the time Paul wrote his letter to the Romans several decades had passed.

The initial fervor had died down. In fact, according to Paul, the church was asleep.

We can understand why.

When Jesus told his disciples, "I'm coming again for you" they thought he meant that he was coming in just a few years.

But, many years had passed, and Jesus had not returned. You can stand on tiptoe for only so long.

But, Paul wants the church to wake up from her easy slumber. Paul reminds the church that we don't keep time the way the world keeps time.

We measure time in a different way.

Unlike the world, we know what time it is.

Christians believe that the time of salvation is near. Christians believe that the light is about to overcome the darkness.

When the light streams into the bedroom you know what time it is. It's time to wake up.

In the same way when the light of God's salvation streams into our life, we know that the time has come for us to wake up and see the world as God sees it.

ADVENT

You may have noticed that the church has a unique calendar.

This is not the first Sunday after Thanksgiving or the first Sunday before Cyber Monday.

This is the first Sunday in Advent.

This is when we prepare for the coming of our Lord.

We don't keep time the way the world keeps time. We march to a different drummer. The rhythms of our life are aligned with the music of God's angels.

Our story is in constant contact with God's story.

And each year it begins again. Each year the light comes into our darkness. Each year we ask everyone to wake up, to stand on tiptoe and strain to see the light of eternity in the darkness.

We need this wakeup call.

Every year we need it because every year something happens in our life to make us forget who we are and whose we are.

This year some of us are weighed down by indifference and busyness.

This year some of us are weighed down by grief and discouragement.

This year some of us are weighed down by fear of what might lie just around the corner.

And these struggles blind us to the importance of this day, this particular time in our life.

THE FULLNESS OF TIME

When the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, the world changed forever and so did our concept of time. The world became more than just a collection of random events, one thing after another with no rhyme or reason.

Time was given a purpose.
We were given a purpose.

The Eternal touched the temporal.
God raised Christ from the dead, and the old way of keeping time became obsolete.

In Paul's letter to the Galatians (4:4-7) we read,

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.

And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Notice that God moves into time and redeems us. That phrase, "the fullness of time" suggests that God is entering our time and has changed it.

We no longer are in bondage to time. We are no longer slaves to time and the sins we have committed.

We have all the time in the world and more. We live by grace through faith and not by works.

God is our Father, and we are God's children.
This causes us to look at things differently.
We go through life with a confidence born of God's grace.

The church helps us see this by insisting that we follow the Church Year. The church teaches us to mark time by the seasons of Epiphany, Lent and Easter.

And every year we start over again with the season of Advent. When everyone else is running out of time we are encouraged to stop, look and listen. We are

encouraged to wake up, not to shop but to wake up to the implications of God's grace.

GOD'S TIME ZONE

God's way of telling time has always been different from ours. For example, the Bible tells us that for God a thousand years are like a watch in the night (Psalm 90:4).

And so the task of Advent is to learn how to live in that time zone, God's time zone.

The word that is translated "time" in our lesson for today is the Greek word "kairos."

Kairos refers to more than just the passing of time, seconds, minutes, hours and days.

Kairos refers to the moment of decision.

Kairos is God's time.

During Advent we are challenged to keep time differently. We go by a cosmic clock that collapses eternity into a moment of momentous change.

But, how can we do this? How can we learn to tell time by God's standard?

This is not an easy task.

Several weeks ago I traveled to a different time zone, Central Standard Time. It was just one hour's difference, but I had a hard time adjusting.

As far as I was concerned it was light when it should have been dark and dark when it should have been light. I would wake up too early and go to bed too soon.

And that was just a small change.

Imagine what a difference it would make if we adopted God's Standard Time, eternity.

A thousand years are like a watch in the night.

In other words time, as we know it, ceases to exist.

On our own this is surely impossible.
We are mortal bound by time.

OBSESSED WITH TIME

More than that, we live in a world obsessed with time. Take away my watch and my cell phone, and I will panic. I need to know what time it is!

And this is especially true during the holiday season.

Now we are focused on how many days are left until Christmas. How will we find the time to do what we need to do and buy what we need to buy?

Every year I think that it can't get any worse, and then it does.

The trappings of the holiday season are prominent even before the Halloween candy goes on sale. Black Friday has bled over into gray Thursday, and yesterday I heard that black Friday is continuing into Saturday.

Only in America can Friday become Saturday for commercial reasons.

It's easy to get caught up in the frenzy of the season. It seems as if we have no time. But, we know better. We know what time it is.

THE ARMOUR OF LIGHT

How can we act upon this knowledge? What can we do to wake up to what is really important?

How can we find the time to stand on tiptoe and strain to see the Messiah who still comes?

Paul gives us a clue. In order to wake up to eternity we have to "lay aside the works of darkness" and put on the "armor of light."

Okay, so what are the "works of darkness" they we are to lay aside? The works of darkness are the usual suspects. In this passage Paul mentions "reveling, drunkenness, debauchery, quarreling, and jealousy."

These dark actions often take over our lives when we are afraid and uncertain. And certainly these dark works are often on display during the holiday season.

Even to those who have no faith, the intrusion of these dark works into a season dedicated to family and good will seem strangely out of place.

It's odd that we celebrate Christmas each year with a season of excess and highly charged (and often negative) emotions. But, for those who want to wake up to the presence of Christ, this is just the opposite of what we need to do.

We become attuned to the coming of Jesus by casting aside the darkness and putting on the "armor of light."

Putting on the armor of light according to this passage is the same as putting on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul reminds these spiritually asleep Christians that they have been saved for a purpose. They have been saved to live a life that is holy, a life that is different.

In Advent God enables us to give up the old way of life to embrace the new. We leave the darkness behind and put on the new clothes of Christ.

This phrase, "putting on Christ" refers to baptism.

In the early church, new believers literally put on new clothes after they were baptized. This symbolized their new life in Christ Jesus.

What might it mean to put on the Lord Jesus Christ today? I think it means to live with a sense of heightened awareness. It means to see beyond the struggle of the moment to the greater meaning of it all.

We are baptized. We know what time it is. We know that this is God's time.

What would happen if we were to wake up and act on that fact? How might we be different?

Perhaps, in a world filled with excess, we would live a life of simplicity. Perhaps in a world filled with fear and jealousy, we would live a life marked by peace, gratitude, and a forgiving heart.

NOT PERFECT BUT POSSIBLE

Paul tells us that in a world driven by conspicuous consumption, we are to "make no provision for the flesh." In other words, we live for something other than gratifying the desires of the moment.

I know. This is really hard. This goes against all that is happening right now in the holiday season. It's like going on a diet just before the Thanksgiving meal is served. The likelihood of failure is high.

But, each year our celebration of Advent gives us the chance to wake up just a little bit more to what is really important in life.

We won't be able to do this perfectly, but the perfect should not be the enemy of the good. When we celebrate Advent instead of just celebrating, we get a chance to come just a bit closer to understanding the salvation that is ours in Christ Jesus.

We get a chance to reevaluate our lives and our actions. We get a chance to wake up to what is really important and stand on tiptoe for a while instead of being caught flatfooted.

Paul told the Romans, "You know what time it is."

In other words Paul was saying, "You know what is really important in life. Eternity has already been placed in your hearts. You need to do something with that knowledge. You need to wake up to eternity's call."

LIGHT IN OUR DARKNESS

The despair of our time was captured well by the words of a group that was popular in my youth. The rock band Chicago sang,

"Does anybody really know what time it is? Does anybody really care? ... We all have time enough to cry. We all have time enough to die."

With the bravado of youth we reveled in those pessimistic words set to upbeat music. We thought we were very philosophical and wise for our age.

But, in real life the words and the music are not nearly so upbeat. Time can be oppressive. Sadness and death can be overwhelming.

We need more than just another party or another gift. We need salvation. We need the Lord to come near to us here and now.

The Christmas season is filled with light, and that's a good thing.

Those lights shining in the darkness remind me of what God is doing. God is in the business of letting the light shine into a dark world.

When the world was created God said,
“Let there be light.”

And the rest of salvation history is about God shining God’s good light into a dark world.

A family was touring Carlsbad Caverns. The mother, father, nine-year-old son, and five-year-old daughter were in a tour group in one of the huge rooms within the cave.

The guide, after explaining the various formations within the room announced that he would turn off the lights for a few moments so that the group could experience total darkness.

The lights went out. The room went black.

After a few minutes the five year old reached nervously for the hand of her older brother. The group heard the boy say softly to his sister,

“Don’t worry. There is someone here who knows how to turn on the lights!”

That’s the message of Advent.

There’s someone here who knows how to turn on the lights. And his name is Jesus.

He is the human face of God.
He is the light that shines in our darkness.

What was obscure we now see clearly.

WAKE UP TO A NEW DAY

So every morning when you wake up, decide to wake up spiritually as well.
Decide to live the life God has given you here and now.

Don’t live yesterday over and over again.
Don’t succumb to the temptation to put everything off for tomorrow.

Focus instead on today because today is the day you have been given.

Wake up to the importance of the moment.
Get ready.

Each year at Advent we light candles in our darkness and strain to see the Messiah who comes.

We are a people who know what time it is.
“The night is far gone. The day is near.”

AMEN.