

## New Life in Christ

### Romans 13:11-14

There is a song from the 1970s called “Wake Up Everybody,” Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes. The lyrics tell us to “wake up...no more backward thinkin’ time for thinkin’ ...there is so much hatred war an’ poverty.” It also tells teachers it is time for a change in their methodology so the children will “listen to whatcha have to say, ‘cause they’re the ones who’s coming up and the world is in their hands. The world won’t get no better if we just let it be. The world won’t get no better we gotta change it...just you and me.”

I share this song with you because of our scripture. Paul is saying: You *know* what time it is! Indeed we all do! Most of us who live in North America live under the tyranny of time. We consume it just as we do other products, and however much we "have," as though one could ever really possess time, we never seem to have "enough." The lives of most American families are completely overwhelmed by the demands on our 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! As the First Sunday of Advent brings the "holiday season" into full gear, time becomes a scarce commodity indeed; with all our preparations of gift giving and the numerous social engagements that accompany the season.

The speed of communication in our world has only enhanced time's tyranny. Because we *can* communicate with anyone, anywhere, anytime, we increasingly feel that we *ought* to be connected 24-7 and that all of our electronic systems should be up and running at all times to make this possible. The world of instant

communication has made us more accustomed to perceiving time in digital form—displayed as hour, minute and second that advance literally from moment to moment. In this format, we tend to see time as a series of discrete, disconnected units. What exists is the minute or second displayed before you, and this moment will disappear from your eyes.

Something different happens when time is displayed on a clock face. As the hands move around, you not only see the moment as it passes. You can also visualize both future and past. It is two o'clock ... three more hours until quitting time; two hours since you had lunch; thirty minutes until the big meeting; six hours since you kissed your sweetheart good-bye this morning. This way of "counting" time is somewhat more like the experience of marking time by the movement of sun from dawn to dusk. We know, more or less, where we stand between the beginning and the end of day.

Paul was thinking about time more in this second way, in the sense of moving from past to future—but then he added another dimension. When Paul called his audience to remember "what time it is," he was not thinking about the daily or even yearly round of events and activities. Paul had a completely different horizon in mind. He believed that, just as time had a beginning at creation, so also time will have an end. Just as God brought all things into being, so also there will be a time when God will bring the history of this world to an end and usher in the promised new creation.

This "new creation" is compared to a new day. So Paul told us what time it is: it is time to awake from sleep. It is time to get up out of bed and get ready, dressed for the day. As Paul painted the picture, it is still dark outside when God's alarm clock will go off; the day is "near" but not quite here. Perhaps it is that mysterious moment when the darkness of night begins to give way to shadows, and there is

just enough light to know that morning is around the corner. This is a time of anticipation, and Paul urges us to action. It is time to get up and get dressed!

The clothing Paul wants us to put on is Jesus Christ: his life, his way of being are the garments that we are to put on as we get ready to meet the future. What concerned Paul here is that we adopt a new and more honorable way of life. Put aside partying and drunkenness—things that dull the senses or draw our attention away from what is really going on. Put aside quarreling and jealousy—things that destroy community and injure relationships with others (v. 13). The new day that God is bringing is a time when God and humanity will be reconciled; when peace, justice, and integrity will be the hallmarks of human society. What Paul wanted is for Christians to start living *now* as though this new day has already begun.

In the early years of the Christian movement, believers lived with a sense of real anticipation. The promises they read in the Hebrew Scriptures seemed tangible; the reign of God and all that it meant for cosmic "regime change" seemed close at hand. When they prayed (daily), "Thy kingdom come ... on earth as it is in heaven," they were looking forward to that happening within their own lifetimes.

In light of the time Paul instructs us how to live this new life in Christ. In Romans 13:8-10 he taught:

<sup>8</sup> Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

<sup>9</sup> The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

<sup>10</sup> Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Two thousand years later, our sense of anticipation has diminished. From time to time, communities of Christians have developed a sense of urgency about the "end times"; some have even predicted precise dates for Christ's return, the beginning of "the end." For some branches of Christianity, the belief that God will bring a new day of justice and reconciliation figures prominently in teaching and church life. For many other Christians, however, the sense of anticipation that drove Paul's writing has diminished. To the extent that this is so, we are the poorer for having lost this vision, because for Paul, this anticipation was not so much about circling a date on the calendar as it is about *hope*.

Paul really believed and taught that the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus is God's sign that all of those promises about life and wholeness prevailing over brokenness and death are true, and that God can be trusted to do what God has promised. Paul *knew* what time it was and asked us to also understand the time: it is time to wake up, live today our new life in Christ, and look forward to what God will do in the future and what God is beginning to do now in your life and mine.

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As Harold Melvin and the Blue Note encourage us: "What up...doctors make the old people well...who suffer...*we* don't have so very long before the Judgement Day...wake up all the builders time to build a new land...we can do it if we all lend a hand. The world won't get no better if we just let it be. The world won't get no better we gotta change it...just you and me."

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