

“It Is Now the Moment”
Romans 13:8-14; Exodus 12:1-14
Communion Sunday

Exodus 12:1-14

¹The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt:

²This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. ³Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. ⁴If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it.

⁵Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. ⁶You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight.

⁷They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. ⁸They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. ⁹Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. ¹⁰You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn.

¹¹This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the LORD.

¹²For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD.

¹³The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. ¹⁴This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

Romans 13:8-14

⁸Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹The 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.”

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

¹¹Besides 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; ¹²the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Prayer

Psalm 107:23-31

²³Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the mighty waters;

²⁴they saw the deeds of the LORD, his wondrous works in the deep.

²⁵For he commanded and raised the stormy wind,
which lifted up the waves of the sea.

²⁶They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths;
their courage melted away in their calamity;

²⁷they reeled and staggered like drunkards,
and were at their wits' end.

²⁸Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he brought them out from their distress;

²⁹he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed.

³⁰Then they were glad because they had quiet,

and he brought them to their desired haven.
³¹Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,
 for his wonderful works to humankind.

O God,
 Protector,
 Healer,
 Savior,
 Comforter,
 Dispatcher of human hands of assistance,
 Allocator of human resources,
 including your servants' financial resources,

You are always true to your promises.

You did not promise anyone a human life that is not vulnerable to
 sickness,
 to want, to hunger, to human cruelty, or to natural or human-made
 disaster.

You have promised, in all times and circumstances, to be our God,
 and have created us, sustained us, redeemed us and invited us
 to be your people in all times and circumstances.

O God, the world trembles and shakes;
 wind and water and fault lines are part of this natural environment
 which is not our ultimate, but our penultimate home;
 not our final destination, but a worthy place
 in which human lives can exist,
 can flourish,
 and, if enough abundance is shared appropriately
 and according to your clear instruction,
 can thrive.

In times of anxiety and calamity, as in times of prosperity and peace,

Let us be attentive to, and help others to recognize
 your protection, healing, saving and comforting grace;
 Give us the vision and strength and dedication
 to put our assisting hands and resources at your service,
 so that in abundant giving and boundless good will,
 we may find and share abundant life with all your creation.
 Amen.

The Sermon

In a piece this week in one of the national newspapers, writer Henry Fountain wrote that, although the hurricanes, earthquakes and wildfires that are causing so much suffering this week are—even factoring in global climate change—within the scientifically observable patterns of the workings of our planet,

still, “you could be forgiven for thinking apocalyptic thoughts, like the science fiction writer John Scalzi who, surveying the charred and flooded and shaken landscape, declared that this ‘sure...*feels* like the End Times are getting in a few dress rehearsals right about now.’”ⁱ

Ahmed Ragab, science and religion professor at Harvard, said people tend to think in terms of possible end-times doom during these kinds of catastrophes specifically *because* we see how they affect human beings like us.ⁱⁱ

He said it’s “not just aging infrastructure that cannot survive a strong hurricane,
 or log homes that burn in a fire,
 but economic structures that leave some people
 too poor” to be able to move to safety when calamity strikes.ⁱⁱⁱ

Christiana Peppard, an associate professor of theology, science and ethics at Fordham University, said that “With unexpected cataclysmic weather events, people across time and space have always looked for

explanations,” and these tend to “[fit] into a particular kind of narrative”^{iv} that has to do with looking for signs that the End is near.

But, she said,

“no matter what people might *think* about a confluence of disastrous events,

humans are capable of foreseeing and planning for
predictable kinds of outcome[s]—
flooding and water scarcity among them’;
and “To pretend that it’s such a tragedy
is to pretend
that there’s no social and collective responsibility
for the outcome.”^v

When people are hurting so badly,

these calamities are calamitous enough
without needing to be signs of the end time;
and to ignore the science that can help us understand
why and how these things happen
is to say, Well, it’s just God’s divine will,
so we couldn’t have done anything to prevent it,
and we’re not really responsible for taking care of it
or preventing so many lives
from being disrupted or destroyed
the next time it happens.

But the fact is: we can’t look away from the reminders
of the sacredness and the preciousness
of each day that God has given us—

or the sacredness and the preciousness of each day
that God has given all the *other* people
with whom we share this existence,
and this time, and this planet.

And that awareness reminds us all to think about
 what we believe we are here to do,
 and what we will want to have done before we're through.

Martin Luther King was talking about some specific things that we still
 need to be talking about, but his words apply even beyond that context
 when they echo down the decades to us now, saying,

“We are now faced with the fact, my friends,
 that tomorrow [has become] today,
 [and we find ourselves] confronted
 with the fierce urgency of now.”^{vi}

In the time of Moses and the Exodus, when God gave the instructions of
 how the Passover was to be eaten, the command was that it was to be
 taken

with “your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand;
 and you shall eat it hurriedly.

It is the passover of the LORD” (Exodus 12:11).

But it wasn't just for that one, first time:
 this was to be a *recurring* day of remembrance,
 a festival to the LORD that *every generation* would observe.

The perpetual ordinance, throughout all generations,
 was to respond to God's eternal promise
 by being ready to demonstrate faithfulness to the God of love
 at a moment's notice.

For Paul, writing to the Church in Rome fourteen centuries after Moses
 and twenty years after the crucifixion of Jesus,
 the time is still short.

The moment's notice has arrived; and this is what faithfulness looks like
 now:

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another;
for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

“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 like this:
“Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Now is the time, and this is our moment.

This week, Pope Francis has been in the heavily Catholic country of Columbia, where, over the past fifty years, unspeakable atrocities have been committed in a gruesome civil war.

All war is gruesome, and no war is civil.

Pope Francis was there to hear “testimonies from ex-guerrilla fighters and from victims of their violence,”^{vii}
whose level of grief and loss and pain
at the brutal loss of family members
defies comprehension.

After more than half a century of this insanity, something akin to the Truth and Reconciliation process that was used in South Africa—
something that demanding and painful and radical—
will have to happen
in order to get Columbia out of the cycle of death and retribution.

And Francis said, “Do not be afraid of asking for forgiveness and offering it...

It is time to defuse hatred, to renounce vengeance.”^{viii}

In a country largely populated by Catholic Christians, maybe only someone with the holiness in which the Pope is regarded could say that.

I would feel so inadequate, in my position of relative privilege, comfort and security, telling people who have had so much taken from them, with such cruelty, *how* they ought to respond and *what* they ought to do.

So, thank God there is someone in a position to do so,
 who *will* be heard,
 who *is* taking the message of Jesus Christ
 to people for whom it is incisively real
 and relevant and challenging.

In a letter to Pope Francis that was just published two days ago,
 one of the former leaders of the guerrilla group called FARC,
 who committed those crimes against humanity
 in the name of their cause,
 asked for forgiveness for the atrocities his group had committed.

He said in his letter,
 “Your repeated expressions about God’s infinite mercy
 move me to plead your forgiveness
 for any tears and pain
 that we have caused the people of Colombia.”^{ix}

Now, I know that there are always political considerations involved
 when a public person does something in the public arena.

And it’s appropriate, maybe not to be cynical, but to read something like
 that with our eyes wide open to, you know, “what’s in it for him.”

But it occurs to me that a person who lives by the hope of Christianity
 will take every shred of goodness we can get,

even if it's as small as a tiny mustard seed.

And for that matter, maybe our own confessions and noble gestures have some calculation behind them, too. It doesn't make us evil. It shows us that we are complicated.

Whatever the motivations, whatever the machinations,
in the hell that has been Columbia for more than five decades,
they know what time it is, and that it is now the moment.

His name was Jack, although I can't remember how anybody knew that. Jack had been singing bass in the back row of a small church choir since before anybody could remember, which was part of the reason nobody really knew who this guy was.

He came to choir practice every Wednesday night, and sang in church every Sunday; he wasn't some brooding, dark presence or anything, but he barely, *barely* said a word to anybody, ever. And I guess it had become one of those things where he'd been coming so long, it was just past the point where you'd feel comfortable walking up to him and going, "I know I've been singing next to you for ten years, but um...who are you?"

At one point, the owner of the land adjacent to the crowded church property decided to put his lot on the market, and the fear was that someone else would buy that land, put a restaurant or something on it, and the church that was rapidly outgrowing its building would never be able to expand its facility.

The average Sunday attendance in that church was a little bit under 200 people. We were hoping we could get the parcel of land in question for under \$125,000. It turned out the asking price was \$550,000. The session, baffled by the Holy Spirit, came to the belief that God's will was for us to recommend to the cash-strapped congregation that we go

for it. We told the congregation about it on a Sunday morning, and said anyone with questions or concerns could meet with us after worship.

Worship concluded, we repaired to the session room, and in walked Jack, with a purposeful stride nobody had ever seen from this unknown figure before. And we thought, oh boy, what's this guy going to say? Nobody even knows what his speaking voice sounds like, let alone what his views are about anything, and he's probably going to rip us to shreds for being so irresponsible.

He said, my name is Jack Newton, I've been a realtor for 30 years, and I want you to let me be the buyer's agent so that I can donate my commission to the church—tens of thousands of dollars—in memory of Clara's late husband, Keith's father-in-law, Bob Hare, who used to sing next to me in choir.

Less than two years after that morning, we had, somehow, almost paid off that parcel of land. To our utter amazement, the church would own it free and clear in a matter of months.

But now Jack was being ravaged by a rare disease whose treatments were difficult.

We were at a church event one evening at a private home, and a handful of people were gathered around, and he told us how tough the treatments were; and that he still had several more to go. And before we could choke out any words of sympathy, he slapped his hand on the arm of the chair he was sitting in and said, "But I'd do that treatment a *hundred* times if it would give me one more day in *this good world*."

These were not the words of a guy who was afraid of what lay ahead: Jack was confident that his house was in order.

But he had come to an appreciation—the word is love—of the goodness that God has poured into *this* life, this world, right now;

and Jack was going to wring every last moment of goodness and kindness and positivity out of it, as long as he possibly could.

And I can tell you now that he did.

What do you still have to do,
 to make and share and give the abundance of life;
 to be the person you have intended to be;
 to do what you will want to have done,
 and to treat people in the way you would most want them
 to remember you?

Now is the hour, and this is the time, for us to be as good as we can be:
 as kind, as giving, as beautiful;
 as blessing, as magnanimous, as appreciative;
 as affirming of humanity,
 as careful with creation,
 as we can be.

Owe no one anything but to love them;
 to do that is to fulfill the law God has given you.

All the commandments
 about how to live in the world with other people
 are summed up in this word:
 "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Love does no wrong to a neighbor;
 therefore, it is the fulfilling of the law.

And you know what time it is:
 how it is now the moment you to wake from sleep.
 The night is gone, the day is near.

So let us lay aside the works of darkness,
 and go out into this good world,
 nourished at the table of God's love and grace,
 and clothed in the armor of light.

Keith Grogg
 Montreat Presbyterian Church
 Montreat, NC
 September 10, 2017

ⁱ Henry Fountain, "Apocalyptic Thoughts Amid Nature's Chaos? You Could Be Forgiven." (The New York Times, (<http://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/apocalyptic-thoughts-amid-nature%E2%80%99s-chaos-you-could-be-forgiven/ar-AArwxMi?li=BBnbcA1&srcref=rss>), posted 1:20 PM, Sep 8, 2017; retrieved September 9, 2017.

ⁱⁱ Fountain, "Apocalyptic," 2017

ⁱⁱⁱ Fountain, "Apocalyptic," 2017

^{iv} Fountain, "Apocalyptic," 2017

^v Fountain, "Apocalyptic," 2017

^{vi} Martin Luther King, Jr., "Beyond Vietnam" (Address delivered to the Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam, at Riverside Church, 4 April 1967), in *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* Apparently the "fierce urgency of now" was a recurring phrase in King's lexicon.

^{vii} Delia Gallagher, "Colombian rebels ask Pope for forgiveness" (CNN, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/09/08/world/pope-colombia-forgiveness/index.html>, Updated 7:47 PM ET, Fri September 8, 2017.

^{viii} Gallagher, "Colombian rebels," 2017.

^{ix} Gallagher, "Colombian rebels," 2017.