

Urgency of Now
Romans 13:11-14
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Fifty years ago this April the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke at the Riverside Church in New York City, denouncing the Vietnam War. King believed that the moment had come for people of faith and moral good will to speak out and to act for a new and better nation, one that was closer to our ideals. He spoke of the “fierce urgency of now.”

As the Letter to the Romans begins to wind to a close, St. Paul also emphasizes what Leander Keck called “the moral imperatives of the moment.” We should not wait any longer to be faithful to God and become people of moral character. The time is now.

Hear this word of St. Paul to the Christians in Rome:

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

For the Word of God in scripture,
For the Word of God among us,
For the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God.

What of our time? Do we live in a moment when moral character and faithfulness to God is urgent?

In May I attended the Festival of Homiletics, the annual conference where 1800 preachers come together to listen to a week of preaching and lectures about preaching. This

year the event was in San Antonio, so I also went for the food. I miss Tex Mex and good Texas BBQ. I hung out with my good friends Dan DeLeon of Friends Congregational in College Station and David Breckenridge of First Baptist Memphis and other people I know. It was good to catch up with colleagues, some I hadn't seen in many years.

This year's advertised theme was "Preaching on the Borders" though most speakers seemed concerned with what it means to be a preacher in this particular moment of awful politics, fake news, and alternative facts. That message was emphasized again and again. Brian McLaren, the popular theologian, announced "The time is way too dangerous to waste a sermon." And Amy Butler, the current pastor at Riverside Church, exhorted, "We cannot miss this moment."

Amy Butler's took on a fierce urgency when she told us the story of increased security at Riverside since the attack at Mother Emmanuel. The Department of Homeland Security fears that the most prominent liberal church in New York City (and maybe America) could be a target, so there is now a heavy police presence and new security measures. Yet Rev. Butler has said these new realities have not diminished the congregation's commitments to social justice and prophetic preaching. Though she did warn us, "To be a pastor these days is to navigate a treacherous terrain. You should be scared."

More encouraging was a lecture by Alyce McKenzie, Professor of Preaching and Worship at Perkins School of Theology in Dallas. Her presentation was entitled "Preaching the Good News in an Era of Fake News." She said that the current moment is teaching us "the irrelevance of politics." Plus, she views the current crisis as an opportunity for the church-- "the dust cloud of fake news is enhancing the desire for good news from the pulpit."

According to McKenzie, we counter fake news with biblical wisdom. Biblical wisdom has three purposes: character formation, fool management, and shalom enhancement. I giggled at the middle one.

She then went out to talk about fools. There are a variety of fools, the three most troublesome are the gullible, the know-it-all, and the dangerous. You don't become a fool overnight; there are steps to character deformation, and they are first, the isolated foolish act, which leads to folly becoming a sport, then you eventually move beyond correction, until you collapse and rage.

That week I experienced some of the foolishness of our time. First was an e-mail I received from the company which currently owns our mortgage. They had been named Nationstar Mortgage. This letter was informing me that they were changing their name to Mr. Cooper. According to the e-mail and the follow-up letter, the name change is so they can "create the best possible home loan experience."

They explained the name choice as follows:

To us, it's an identity that represents the kind of person who always goes the extra mile for a customer. He stands for avoiding business as usual and doing everything he can to help. He has a firm belief that one person can make a big difference. That's who we want to be. A company of Coopers.

The name Mr. Cooper makes me think of D. B. Cooper, the famous thief, who parachuted from plane into the wilderness never to be found again. So I wonder if Mr. Cooper the mortgage company will abscond with my money.

Still shaking my head over this absurdity, I heard another. As I landed in Omaha on a Southwest Airlines flight, the attendant said over the intercom, "The next time you need to feel a little love, just buy a ticket and come hang out with us. I promise, we'll give you lots of peanuts."

Both of these are specimens of ridiculous, foolish nonsense, being paraded as if they meant something. They are evidence of intellectual and moral failing. They are dishonest and fake.

Folly has become sport, because we've gotten used to this nonsense and are now faced with far worse as the social and moral fabric of the culture feels ripped apart.

But Alyce McKenzie was hopeful. Just as there are steps of character deformation that lead from foolishness to viciousness, there are also steps of character formation in biblical wisdom. This is the good news we preachers must proclaim.

Those steps are humility resulting from the fear of the Lord, which becomes compassion for others. From that you develop impulse control and, ultimately, the courage to speak up.

The wise person possesses an awestruck attitude, a listening heart, a cool spirit, and a subversive voice. Sign me up!

Like Alyce McKenzie, St. Paul is not painting a gloomy picture about the moral imperatives of our time. Quite the contrary; Paul is optimistic. The darkness is ending, the day of salvation is about to dawn.

Luke Timothy Johnson clarifies Paul's meaning here. Paul is not making "a statement about the end of history." Instead his is "an optimistic prognosis concerning the success of God's cause." Paul isn't saying "repent before it is too late." He's saying "live according to the identity you have been given," for the time is closer than you thought.

God has made it possible for us to be good. God's love is more powerful than any enemy. God has offered us salvation to free us from our sins. God's mercy is freely given to all of us, no matter who we are or what we've done or where we are in life's journey. God's Son has risen from the grave and defeated all the forces that enslave us. God's Spirit dwells within us, to pray for us, to renew our minds, to inspire our courage. And God offers us the chance to become God's good people.

You know what time it is. The time to be good.