

**“What Time It Is”**  
**Romans 13:8-14**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**14th Sunday after Pentecost**  
**September 10, 2017**

Paul told the church that we know what time it is, that salvation is nearer than when we became believers, but our track record at predicting the end of the world seems to say otherwise.

Pat Robertson declared in 1990 that the world would probably end in 2007. It's a good thing he used the word "probably." He was wrong. Isaac Newton, along with Sun Myung Moon, Jonathan Edwards, Ed Dobson, and Jerry Falwell – each one predicted that Christ's reign would begin in the year 2000, though Isaac Newton said the church wouldn't be raptured in 2060 so, technically, there's still time. Tim LeHaye and Jerry Jenkins agreed with the year 2000 adding that the whole end of the world thing would be kicked off by the Y2K computer bug – those two digit computer clocks that were supposed to wreak habit when they flipped to 00 - remember that? They were all wrong. Farrakan said the first Gulf War was the War of Armageddon and would be the beginning of the end times. Wrong. Christopher Columbus predicted the world would end in 1656 or 1658, depending on how you do the math. He was mistaken. Martin Luther said it would be over by 1600. Wrong. Pope Sylvester II tried for the year 1000 – a good, round number. Another Pope - Innocent III - tried 1284, 666 years after the rise of Islam – that was his theory. Wrong again. Maybe the 3<sup>rd</sup> time will be the charm. Hippolytus of Rome and Irenaeus, a couple of the original church fathers tried for the year 500. Nope. They were all wrong.<sup>1</sup>

Paul told the church that we know what time it is, but our track record seems to say otherwise. They've all been wrong, which is comforting since it certainly feels like we're closer to the brink than we've been in recent years. With North Korea putting warheads on ICBMs and massive storms strengthened by climate change wreaking havoc on our country. With thousands of Syrian refugees wreaking havoc on Europe, thousands more fleeing Myanmar. With our nation becoming so hard hearted that Neo Nazis march in our streets, while immigrant children, innocent of their parents' choices are left hanging in the balance.

The world certainly seems like it's on the brink and not just in the dystopian novels that continue to proliferate in the teen section of the library. I can see the appeal in this kind of thinking. These writings are produced by communities in political or social crisis – communities under persecution. Communities

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Wikipedia for compiling a fairly comprehensive list -

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_dates\\_predicted\\_for\\_apocalyptic\\_events](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_dates_predicted_for_apocalyptic_events)

<sup>2</sup> “Apocalyptic writing emerges as a genre of literature in Jewish communities 200 years before the birth of Jesus.” Charles B. Cousar, *The Letters of Paul*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 1996, p. 96.

<sup>3</sup> While I'm using a wormhole as a visual representation of what it might mean for God's love to be “close” I am not substituting one literalist version of a multi-universe for the old three tiered one

disenfranchised from their surrounding culture. “In such communities,” one scholar writes, “times are so bad that it becomes impossible to imagine a solution emerging out of the present. There is absolutely no relief on the historical horizon.” And “while the present is characterized by sufferings, disasters, and hardships, God will soon intervene in a cataclysmic way, to spell the doom of the powers currently in control, save the righteous community, and establish new heavens and a new earth.”<sup>2</sup> (Couser 96).

I can see the appeal of this kind of thinking now more than ever. With no relief on the historical horizon, fear not, God’s about to intervene. Your suffering is about to end. Judgment is about to be served. Justice is about to be done. I suppose that it is a comfort if you actually believe it’s about to happen. If you actually believe that God is about to rip open the curtain separating heaven and earth and step through. If you actually believe that the world is coming to its rightful end.

I suppose it’s a comfort to those who are able to ignore the hundreds of so-called prophets who have tried to pinpoint the day and failed. If you’re able to imagine that the suffering in your time is somehow more of a sign than all the other suffering that has taken place before you. I suppose it’s a comfort. But what if you’re not able to forget all those Johnny-cried-wolf prophets? Suppose you can’t see the logic in a claim that suffering in your time is more likely to trigger Christ’s return than all the suffering that has come before you. Suppose you cannot get out of your head the possibility that all this end-of-the-world hype is something other than a coping mechanism at best, or a fear tactic to build church market share, at worst.

But what if Paul’s words could be read a different way? What if instead of always thinking about God’s intervention coming at the end of time, on our two-dimensional timeline, we read Paul to mean that God’s healing had come near to us? – Like, spatially near to us, if you want to try to visualize it that way. Like wormholes had opened up between the world as it is and the world as it should be. Wormholes that shrink the distance between God’s world and our own.<sup>3</sup> What if Paul is saying that ever since God took on flesh in Jesus, suffered, died, and was raised, we know that God’s world, or God’s reign, or God’s dream is in the process of overtaking our own. We know that God’s justice is accessible to us right now. We know that God’s love is entering our own if you have the apocalyptic eyes to see it. We know that God’s justice is working its way into our world – if you keep your senses peeled to feel it. We know that God is close.

So a hurricane comes along at precisely the time when so many people in our country are grieving deep divisions that seem they’ll never be overcome and we see it is still possible to imagine human beings can care for each other at a basic human

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<sup>3</sup> While I’m using a wormhole as a visual representation of what it might mean for God’s love to be “close” I am not substituting one literalist version of a multi-universe for the old three tiered one (with heaven above and hell below). Language fails to explain here. The important thing to notice is that just as our notions of what’s possible have changed as science has learned new things, we should resist the cynical urge to foreclose possibilities for God’s intrusion into our world. Apocalyptic hope is exactly that – hope, grounded in the experience of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection.

level. The Congress seems like they're on the verge of strangling each other and then the President of all people shows that it's possible to find agreement if leaders have the heart to choose it. Or more locally, that person you've always been disconnected from suddenly and inexplicably wants to reunite. All those things were as accessible last week as they are this one. But most of us didn't see them as possible last week. Most of us couldn't fathom it was possible last week.

And I'm not trying to paint over the very real fights that are afoot in our nation or maybe in your life. Paul himself talks about putting on armor. Sometimes you have to fight to protect your own dignity from being trampled by a sinister part of your family or its past. Sometimes you have to lean into the winds that blow in your face threatening to knock you off your feet. We're going to have to fight alongside immigrants who are the continual scapegoats of our fear. We're going to have to fight alongside people of color whose history many of us - regardless of our color - still do not know. We'll have to keep fighting alongside LGBTQ people for dignity and respect. I don't think Paul is saying just look on the bright side whenever the cancer comes, just look on the bright side whenever the nations rattle their swords, just look on the bright side whenever the world starts to burn. The glass is half full for those with the right attitude.

No I think Paul is saying to the church don't you ever think that God's power isn't available to ground you in that fight. Don't let the priests of despair trick you into believing that those works of darkness are stronger than God's armor of light. Don't be fooled into thinking that peace is not possible, that justice has to be denied. Don't give up on reconciliation with your enemies. Don't give up on healing for yourself. Salvation is near to us. Love can be chosen right now. Justice can be done right now. The fulfillment of so much of what God wants for us. It's that close to us.

And of course I do believe the world is going to end one day. It could be next week. It could be a thousand years from now. We could reap the destruction that we sow from our callous waste of the earth, or our nuclear arsenal which will always be a dead end, or from our neglect of refugees, our inhospitality toward strangers, our disregard for the poor - all barometers that God uses to judge the nations if you know the truth of our story. Or humanity could be so fortunate to make it the billion years that scientists tell us we have until the sun grows so large that the earth starts to burn up. The world will come to an end one day, or maybe just your life. The end for you and for me is not really the surprise.

No the surprise is that with all of our technology, all of our wisdom mined from the depth of our mistakes through the generations, with all of our human achievements, still, the saving of the world or of your life comes down to love. All of our culture, our rapid transportation, the beauty of the art we create. None of it counts for anything without our love for each other. The homes that we build, the resources that we accumulate, the jobs that we hold - they cannot save you or fill you. God's love is what judges and saves us. And while I think predicting the end of the age is a fool's job - Jesus told the church we'd never know what hour he'd return - I think the church has lost sight of Paul's apocalyptic vision. That ability to see that even in the worst that your life can bring, even in the worst of our world's incompetence, even in depth of our violence and despair, God's love, God's forgiveness, God's justice, God's peace is close. It's so close. It's everyone's

beginning and it will be our end. So why would you wait to try and live it? Why would you wait to choose it? Why would you wait to try to risk your life on it?