

St. Andrew Presbyterian
Albuquerque, NM

Rev. Frank Yates
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DECISION DAY
Romans 13:11-14

Today we begin the new liturgical year by thinking about the end of the story. It is as though a play begins with the narrator revealing how the drama will finally unfold. Imagine Agatha Christie telling us in the prologue who done it! That's how Advent begins, with the end. Listen to Paul's stirring warning: "You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep...the night is far gone, the day is near."

This is one of the few places in his letter to the Romans, his last known correspondence, where Paul stresses the end of all things. In his first known writing, I Thessalonians, he hardly talked about anything other than the imminent end of all things, the coming again of Christ our Lord. But only in Romans 13 does Paul emphasize the "world's last night", as C. S. Lewis called it.

This is eschatology, the anticipation of the end of all things when Christ appears in glory on the clouds. The early church was awash in eschatological expectation. The last question the risen Christ is asked at his ascension is this: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6) In other words, when will you return and fulfill all your promises to your people? The Psalmists asked repeatedly, "How long, O Lord?" And so did the apostles and the early church. There was a breathless anticipation that the time was short, indeed. Christ was near, very near, close at hand at the city gate. So life was lived on the edge. Paul reflects this eschatological fervor when he wrote, "The form of this world is passing away"(I Cor. 7:31).

By the time Paul wrote Romans toward the end of his ministry, he had begun to think of every moment as an eschatological moment. That is, a moment of decision. In view of the end of all things, every instant is charged with new significance. It is as though one had been informed that one is carrying a terminal disease, that the "days dwindle down to a precious few".

So for Paul each moment is dear, every second is precious, in each encounter the stakes are sky high. One need no longer ask, "How long?" One realizes that the length of time available is all very relative. In that sense, everything seems quite short and fleeting. Thus, one must get one's affairs in order.

That's why Paul urges his readers to "lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light...put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh." Everything that drags you down, all the darkness that wearies your soul-be done with them. There is no future in living carelessly. That is Paul's challenge. The time for life-changing decisions is now; this moment is charged with crucial possibilities, not to be put off. Today is decision day.

That's how Augustine, that famous North African theologian, first heard this text. As you know, Augustine was a brilliant young student struggling with his faith and his sexuality, his dabbling indecisiveness, his sense of guilt. In the **Confessions** Augustine describes his encounter with our text: "I kept asking miserably, 'How long? How long? Tomorrow and tomorrow-why not now? Why not an end to my depravity?'" Then he heard a young child's voice say, "Take and read." He thought at first these words referred to some child's game.

So Augustine went to where his friend Alypius was sitting and picked up a copy of Paul's letter to the Romans. He opened the book at random and read the first text before him. He was confronted with these words, "Let us not walk in revelry or drunkenness, in immorality, and in shamelessness, in contention and in strife. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ." Listen to Augustine's description of that moment: "I neither wished nor needed to read further. I put my finger in the page and closed the book. Then I turned to Alypius my friend with a calm assurance and told him what happened." This was the decisive moment in Augustine's life, the great turning point, where one life ended and a new life began. It was for him an eschatological moment.

The great Twentieth Century German theologian Rudolf Bultmann interpreted the New Testament through the lenses of existentialist philosophy. That outlook stressed that our decisions make us who we are, that we are in the words of Jean-Paul Sartre "condemned to freedom." Each moment presents itself as a summons to decide.

Sartre tells a famous story of a man and woman going out on a first date. When they get to a small outdoor café in Paris, they order some wine. During the conversation, the man reaches over and puts his hand upon the woman's hand. In that moment, that delicate moment, the woman must choose what to do. She is not really attracted to him-she knows that perfectly well. But she knows that it will be awkward should she pull her hand away. So she does nothing, smiling at him through her duplicity. Regarding this scene, Sartre notes famously, "In deciding not to decide, she decided!" That is, she opted for deception.

Bultmann insists that every moment is charged with possibilities, to decide or not to decide-which is to decide. We are thrust into a world of freedom and we cannot beg off. Listen to Bultmann's words: "Jesus understood his message of the Kingdom of God as a time for decision. One must choose to hear in Jesus' words and see in Jesus' deeds the hand of God or merely a mass delusion. The call of Jesus is a divine visitation where a decisive yes or no of faith is thrust upon us. Will we choose to be our true self before God or forfeit the gift of life? The stakes could not be higher. Every moment now becomes a call to decision, to exercise our freedom to live authentically or to shrink back into meaninglessness."

In that sense, every moment presents itself as a summons, to choose in freedom the life that has been offered to us in Christ. "Choose you this day whom you will serve." We can try to walk away, imagining that we are not deciding. But in not deciding, we have decided. Freedom never lets us off the hook; freedom means we are forever accountable. We can never say, "We had no choice." Choice is what we always have. Freedom, choice, responsibility, accountability-that simply is what it means to be alive and aware. There is no escaping our freedom.

This past week I visited with Steve, one of my older UNM students. Steve is a supervisor in the Albuquerque Police Department, someone who has seen the dark edges of our community. Steve is also a Religious Studies major, who returned to school to answer questions he always had about religion. I suppose he is the only student in my thirty years of teaching college part time that came to class packing a pistol. Maybe others did and I just didn't know it. But Steve typically came straight from work to the evening classes I teach.

On Monday I visited with Steve and mentioned that I had seen him on the evening news recently. Steve is always called out to the scene when a police officer shoots someone in our community. This past year there have been about a dozen of those type incidents. This veteran of the police department then investigates the shooting incident. Steve said that while the officers are on administrative leave, they go over the shooting incident frame by frame, minute by minute. What exactly led up to the incident; what was the decision-making process facing the officer; what could have been done differently; what were the mistakes that were made-all these questions and more are carefully and systematically considered. That's Steve's job. Imagine if all our decisions were so carefully analyzed!

I asked him about the John Hyde shooting some years ago where two officers were killed along with several citizens. Steve said that was his worst day in almost twenty years on the force, since those officers were his

friends. And then Steve said this: “In our line of work, our decisions are often a matter of life and death. Our lives are on the line every day. The people we are sworn to protect depend upon us to make the right decisions. And we know that any decision we do make will be closely scrutinized and dissected. Frank, I can’t tell you how many times I have had to reprimand an officer or testify in court about what an officer did or did not do. We can’t walk away from our decisions. I have officer friends who are still haunted by what they did or did not do years ago. It’s not a job many people can live with.”

The Christian journey is a life-long calling. We can’t walk away from our decisions. They are ever before us as our personal responsibility. Each morning summons us afresh to the call of discipleship. Will I follow Jesus more closely today? Will I see him more clearly today? Will I love him more dearly today? Will I tackle the challenges within my own heart and will I take on the challenges all around me? Will I be a better husband or wife, a better mother or father? A better son or daughter? A better friend or relative or co-worker or neighbor? Will I allow myself to love and be loved? Will I pray and consciously center my life in the Spirit of Christ?

So many choices, so few excuses. We can never walk away from our freedom. Each encounter is an eschatological moment where I decide for or against my true self in Christ. Each moment can be a turning point, a moment of repentance, a moment of clarity, a moment of new resolve. In short, an eschatological moment. As Paul so forcefully reminds us, “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 put on Christ.”

Today is the day of decision.