

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, Newfoundland
15th Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)
September 4, 2005, 10 a.m.

Exodus 12:1-14

Psalms 81 (selected)

Romans 13:8-14

Matthew 8:15-20

Sermon: "You know what time it is"

Rev. John C. Duff

Minister in Association

"Do you know what time it is?" Most of us can hear that question ringing in our ears from our youth. Our mother or father stands over us as we sleep, and the question calls us to action—it is time to get breakfast and run for the school bus, time to grab an equipment bag and go out for a practice, time to go to work. The question breaks in on our dreams and rudely insists that we wake up from sleep and ready ourselves for reality.

"Do you know what time it is?" Through Moses, God put that question to Pharaoh in the land of Egypt. And he supplied the answer: "It is time to let my people go." But the Pharaoh didn't recognize what time it was, and Egypt had been repeatedly subjected to plagues and disasters while Pharaoh hardened his heart and dragged his feet. The contaminated water, the hail, the frogs, the locusts, the diseases, the dust-storms, the darkness did not persuade Pharaoh that it was time to let God's people go.

Moses came to his own people and asked them, "Do you know what time it is?" They might have answered, "The worst of times." Since Moses and Aaron had begun asking Pharaoh to let God's people go, the Pharaoh had burdened the Hebrews with impossible burdens to bear. They had been supplied with straw to make bricks, but now they would have to find their own straw and make the same number of bricks. Their backs, already bent over with toil, seemed ready to break. "The worst of times", they must have said, or thought.

But Moses told them it was time to slaughter a lamb, and to mark their doorposts and lintels of their houses with the blood of a lamb, as a sign to protect them from the death that would visit the homes of their oppressors. It was time to prepare a meal, a meal of lamb, and bitter herbs, and unleavened bread. The meal was to be eaten with loins girded, and sandals on their feet, and with staff in hand. It was to be eaten hurriedly, because they must be ready to leave behind everything that was familiar to them, and set out quickly on a journey towards freedom, and dignity, and new life.

The Israelites in Egypt heard the urgency in Moses' instructions, and did as they were asked. They made themselves ready to evacuate.

"Do you know what time it is?" For the people of New Orleans last week, as Hurricane Katrina gained fury across the Gulf of Mexico, it was time to attend to the looming disaster, and to heed the

call of authorities to completely evacuate the city. Many did, and their lives were saved. Too many did not, and why they did not will be a troubling question, perhaps for years to come. Perhaps they couldn't imagine leaving behind what they had in their homes, for fear that neighbours known too well would break in and rob them of everything. Perhaps they didn't, like more affluent people in the city, have cars, and gasoline in them, and credit cards for the expenses of hotel rooms and meals away from home. Perhaps there were not enough buses or trains; perhaps there wasn't enough information given about how their basic needs would be met if they moved to reception centres outside the area of danger. Perhaps it just didn't occur to those in charge that there would be people unable to jump into cars and leave. Perhaps the people who stayed just did not believe that the hurricane would be that bad. Perhaps long experience made many untrusting of the authorities and unwilling to give heed to the urgent call that it was time to leave.

So many people stayed. Uncounted numbers of them died. We have seen the anguish of people who saw family members drown. Some survived, only to be trapped in attics and on roofs for days waiting for rescue. Some were rescued, only to be brought to a marshalling point where after days of deprivation there was still no food, or water, or anything else to meet their needs. Patients in hospitals and residents of nursing homes were among those who were not evacuated ahead of the storm. Some acutely ill patients died in hospital, for lack of oxygen, for lack of power to run the life-support equipment.

The scene across a broad swath of the Gulf coast is of terrible disaster, disaster to rival that of the tsunami in the Indian Ocean last December. And part of the disaster is that the hurricane has made visible the lack of a sense of community, at least for some of those left behind, the failure of an instinct to stick together and help one another through the danger. It made visible the lack of a credible hope in many people, so that many turned to destructive behaviours, against themselves or against those around them. It has provoked a deep despair.

There must be many stories of people helping one another out, of communities that are welcoming those who had to flee from the coast, of reception centres that are working effectively and meeting the needs of people suddenly bereft of everything. But we haven't heard many of them yet, and we do hear that some communities are reacting with fear to what the influx of needy people might do to them, what dangers might come if desperate strangers were to bring violent ways with them into their communities. So the disaster can bring out the best and also the worst in people. And a disaster of this magnitude can be so overwhelming that the best seems on the verge of being overwhelmed by the worst.

"Do you know what time it is?" In the aftermath of Katrina, it seems that it is the time of apocalypse, of destruction and breakdown, disease and death, despair, and anger, weeping and gnashing of teeth. It seems a time to be look for words to express what time it is in the book of Lamentations, a book originally written about Jerusalem's suffering as a city under siege. Listen to these words! They seem to apply to today's news.

"My eyes are spent with weeping;
my stomach churns;
my bile is poured out on the ground
because of the destruction of my people,
because infants and babes faint in the streets of the city.
They cry to their mothers,
"Where is bread and wine?"

as they faint like the wounded
in the streets of the city,
As their life is poured out on their mothers' bosom.
. . . My eyes will flow without ceasing, without respite,
. . . my eyes cause me grief at the fate of all the
young women in my city.
. . . water closed over my head; I said, "I am lost."
. . . Blindly they wandered through the streets . . .
they became fugitives and wanderers;
it was said among the nations,
"They shall stay here no longer."
. . . Our eyes failed, every watching vainly for help;
we were watching eagerly for a nation that could not save."
[Lamentations 2:11-12; 3:49, 51, 54; 4:14, 15b, 17]

"Do you know what time it is?" It seems like a time of deep darkness, but Paul writes to the Romans, "You know what time it is!" If we trust in the living God, we are "the people who walked in darkness" who "have seen a great light" (Isaiah 9:2). So Paul says, "You know what time it is! It is now the moment for you to wake from sleep." We rub our eyes and look around and it is still dark outside and we wonder what in the world Paul is trying to tell us to do. "The night is far gone," Paul says, "the day is near." How do you know that, Paul? Why do we have to wake up from our sleep even before the dawn?

"How do I know that?" replies Paul. I know that because God sent his Son into the world to come beside us in all our suffering, in all our sense of being abandoned and forgotten and unloved, to take us like children into his arms, to accept us and to bless us. He sent his Son into the world to come beside us in our bewilderment, to lift us upon our feet, to take our hand, and to say, "Walk with me." I know that because in spite of the hostility and hatred Jesus encountered, he continued to reach out to find the lost, heal the wounded, calm troubled waters, and lead people to hope and to life. God proves his love for us, says Paul, in that, while we still were sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). I know that because even on the cross Jesus prayed for his tormenters, "Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing." I know that because God raised Jesus from the dead, and has power to raise us from sin and from death and to make it possible for us to walk in newness of life.

Because of all that, Paul says, you who have heard this good news in Jesus Christ know what time it is. It is time to put on our clothes for the day, and to be about the work of the day.

So we have this image of the Christian, at Paul's behest, like a farmer out in the field behind the plow in total darkness at four o'clock in the morning while other people are finding their way home from a night of drinking and revelry. The people on their way home from their party may laugh at the strange sight, or even throw careless curses at this earnest figure who doesn't seem to notice that it's still dark outside. But the farmer out in the field behind the plow keeps working anyway, as if the day had already dawned, because for him a new day has dawned, in Jesus Christ.

The Christian who gets ready to work even before daybreak is acting like the people of Israel on the night of the first Passover, in the house with sandals on their feet and staff in hand, prepared for their journey to freedom and to a new life in the land of promise. The Israelites, under Moses' leadership, began to act as if the violence, and pain, and humiliation of their slavery was already over

with, as if they had already been emancipated, as if they knew that God was breaking in to do a new thing, as if they knew that a new day was dawning. So also, Paul calls upon Christians to live out the law of love as people who know and believe that the Kingdom of God is breaking in, that we are at the threshold of a new day. He calls upon Christians to live honourably as in the day, as people who treat neighbours with respect, dignity, caring, and love, even in the presence of disrespect, indignity, apathy, resistance, quarelling, jealousy, or open hostility.

The human nightmare that is the Gulf coast after hurricane Katrina, can be overcome if today, all over the world, Christian people listen to these same words from Paul's letter to the Romans, and say, "We *do* know what time it is." It is time to wake up and begin to do the work of the day, though all the world seem dark. It is time to start acting as if we believed that God's Kingdom is breaking in, as if we trusted that the living God who made the heavens and the earth and everything in them is still strong to help, to save, to heal, to forgive, and to grace people with new beginnings.

Last night I attended a service of prayer for the people struggling with the disaster on the Gulf Coast. Some who led in prayer had noticed signs in the television reporting, that God's grace was breaking into this hell. An injured woman being moved around an airport triage centre on a rude baggage cart was helped to her feet by a volunteer, and she was seen to say, "Thank you," as if she was stepping from a limousine. Some emergency workers charged with rescuing people stranded on roof-tops kept at their work in spite of all the horror, kept their promises to people, came back and back and back until everyone was safe. An elderly woman contending with health problems, and lack of food and water, is still able to tell a joke to break the tension in the group around her. And as the people prayed, we became aware that the God who heard the cry of his ancient people in the land of Egypt, hears the cry of his people in New Orleans today, and the prayers of many around the world who lift up those cries to the throne of God, and lift up also the weariness of emergency workers, the heavy responsibilities on the shoulders of leaders who are called upon to provide help to their people in an hour of need, and the numbness of people left speechless and unable to decide anything in the face of the loss of everything they ever had.

It's strange, to be called to do the work of the day before the day is fully come, while it still seems, in fact, very dark. But I believe that many will hear this word in churches all over Canada, and the United States, and in many places around the world today, will be renewed by this word, and will turn to the work of the day, to be part of God's touching of the brokenness that is so evident in New Orleans and in Mississippi today, but is really all around us, wherever we are, and every day.

"Do you know what time it is?" Let all God's people say, "Yes!"

AMEN.