

Ro 13:8-14
 28 November 2010
 1st Sunday of Advent

“Crisis”

In the mid-90s, a movie came out that has a scene that sometimes comes to me when I read our scripture text in Romans 13. It's *The Basketball Diaries*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio. (This was before he became a big star!) The movie is based on the life of punk rock / new wave artist Jim Carroll, when he was a student at a Catholic high school in New York City.

DiCaprio plays Jim Carroll, who becomes addicted to heroin. The scene I'm thinking of is one in which he's having a heroin-induced dream. In the dream, he's shooting his classmates, when all of a sudden, “Whack!” Their teacher, a priest named Father McNulty, slams his cane against his desk and shouts, “Wake up, Mr. Carroll, it's later than you think!”

He could have just as easily been quoting verse 11, where the apostle Paul says, “you know that the time has come for you to wake up from your sleep” (GNB). The NRSV says that “you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.”

It's later than you think! We don't have to be addicted to drugs for that to be a rather ominous warning.

Still, I don't think Paul's comments are intended to inspire fear. They are, however, intended to underline the urgency of the moment. That's not an urgency that suggests, “Oh no! We're all about to die!” Rather, it's an urgency that says that “salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near” (vv. 11-12).

Listen to the way the Revised English Bible puts verse 11, and see if you can't detect a **tiny** note of urgency! “Always remember that this is the hour of crisis: it is high time for you to wake out of sleep, for deliverance is nearer to us now than it was when first we believed.” Always remember that this is the hour of crisis.

A month ago, when I preached on 2 Thessalonians, I pointed out what may be considered an awareness of emergency. Among the followers of Jesus, almost all of them expected that he would return in their lifetimes. I think it's safe to say that we can sense that tension, as Paul writes to the Romans.

Stepping back somewhat, it seems that over and over in human history, people have felt it necessary to say, “Always remember that this is the hour of crisis.” The time with the most importance...the time with the most danger...the time with the most promise...always seems to be the present generation, the ones who are currently drawing breath.

Maybe it's inevitable. We should be charitable in regarding our ancestors and the things that terrified them and the ways they lived their lives. Future generations could just as easily (and probably will) look back at us and wonder why we were such boneheads in the way we lived **our** lives!

Our English word “crisis” comes directly from the Greek κρισις (*krisis*), literally, “decision” or “judgment.” Oddly enough, that word **is not in** the letter to the Romans,

but it does appear throughout the New Testament. I guess the translators of that particular version of the Bible used the word “crisis” to underline Paul’s point: the time is at hand. Wake up!

So what’s the story? Are we dealing with too much drama?

As Jeanyne Slettom, co-pastor of Brea Congregational UCC in California puts it, “This passage intensifies the urgency of decision.”¹ A time is coming—even, a time that has arrived—when a choice must be made. Exactly, what decision is it that the apostle is pressing for? He uses images of light and darkness: “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” (v. 12).

Paul speaks of two ways of living. On the one hand, there is living “honorably as in the day.” On the other hand, there is “reveling and drunkenness,” “debauchery and licentiousness,” “quarreling and jealousy” (v. 13). It’s the difference between being wide awake spiritually—and sleepwalking through life.

Returning to the example I mentioned at the beginning, we can drug ourselves without using mind-altering chemicals. There is a multitude of ways in which we lull ourselves to sleep.

One way that we do this is through our almost manic determination to **buy** stuff, just for the sake of buying stuff. I sometimes watch people when I’m at a store or a shopping mall. It looks like they’re in a trance, the message of commercials burned into their neurons. “I am a consumer...I am a consumer.”

Another way we sleepwalk involves being overly engrossed in television, in what my dad occasionally would call “the idiot box.” What TV shows would warrant such a label? How about *Dancing with the Stars*? (Okay, I know that it’s easy to criticize something I don’t like! It’s also possible to drug ourselves with shows like *The Office* or *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart!*)

Let me mention one more way in which we need to rouse ourselves from slumber. It’s by indulging in ideology. By that, I don’t mean simply having a set of beliefs, be it political, religious, artistic, whatever. What I **do** mean is letting our beliefs lock us into a box: a box in which we can imagine no other possibilities, and we refuse to listen to others that we’ve **already decided** we are going to disregard.

That’s the very **opposite** of what Paul says about clothing ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ wakes us up to experience real life!

Getting back to Paul’s sense of urgency, he doesn’t just drop this in out of the blue. He begins verse 11 with, “Besides this,” or in the Good News Bible, “You must do this.” To what is the apostle referring? What is “this”? To what is he linking “this”? To know what he’s talking about, we need to look at what he’s already said.

He begins chapter 13 by telling the church in Rome that they should be good citizens—and that includes paying taxes. It’s when we get to verse 8 that he speaks the language of love.

He tells the church that they are to “owe no one anything, except to love one another.” After all, “the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” He includes some things prohibited by the Ten Commandments, but the idea is that if we’re following the law of love, we won’t live that kind of life anyway. Thus verse 10: “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”

¹ www.processandfaith.org/lectionary/YearA/2010-2011/2010-11-28-Advent1.shtml

Here's a question. How does love fit within the context of crisis? As we just saw, Paul is linking love with his sense of urgency. He wants people to wake up. So what's the connection?

A good way to approach this is to recall that this is a scripture for Advent. It's all about preparation. What are we preparing? Are we preparing our homes? Are we festooning them with festive frills? Are we preparing special meals? Are we basting birds with broth? Perhaps.

But that's not what Advent is about. It's about preparing ourselves. This is a preparation that involves waiting, waiting for the One who comes. This isn't the type of waiting we do in the doctor's office, or at the airport, or anywhere else where we have no control on what we're waiting for.

Waiting for the Lord isn't that same type of helpless lingering, in which we're trying to figure out ways to kill time. Waiting for the Lord requires awareness, and awareness is impossible if we're sleepwalking through life. We have to be awake in order to show love and faithfulness.

Henri Nouwen elaborates on this a little more.² "If we do not wait patiently in expectation for God's coming in glory, we start wandering around, going from one little sensation to another. Our lives get stuffed with newspaper items, television stories, and gossip. Then our minds lose the discipline of discerning between what leads us closer to God and what doesn't, and our hearts gradually lose their spiritual sensitivity.

"Without waiting for the [Lord], we will stagnate quickly and become tempted to indulge in whatever gives us a moment of pleasure." That's what Paul's talking about in the prohibitions he mentions. It's not simply about morality; it's about keeping us awake. Nouwen continues, "When we have the Lord to look forward to, we can already experience him in the waiting."

That is the urgency Paul expresses. That is the crisis—the decision, the judgment call—he presses upon us.

So, as we enter this season of Advent, what are we preparing ourselves for? Have we given that any thought? Do we welcome Christ? Do we welcome his Spirit into our lives: as a community, as a church, as individuals? Do we hear the call to wake up? It's later than we think!

² www.henrinouwen.org (Daily Meditation for 23 Nov 2010)