

“The Night Is Far Gone” / Romans 13:8-12 / 1 July 2012

“Love your neighbor. You know what hour it is... Salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand.” Such urgency in Paul’s impassioned words. I never know what to do with other people’s urgency. Do you? What’s the most urgent thing in your life right now? What’s so pressingly important to you that it lingers at the outer edges of all your thoughts, every moment of every day?

In the movie *Atonement*, there’s a scene where thousands of English soldiers are trapped on the beach at Dunkirk. It’s a frenzied, panicked scene. The Germans are fast advancing by land toward the coast, and the English soldiers know that they’re far outnumbered and utterly fated for disaster. As if to mock the doomed men, the beach still has all the cheerful trappings of a seaside resort: a boardwalk, carousels, movie theaters, clown faces painted on buildings. In the chaos and hopelessness, different people cope in different ways, as under extreme stress a person’s character is reduced to its rawest elements. Some men stare blankly at the ocean, hoping against hope to see all the way home to England, or maybe a British vessel on the horizon. Some men fight each other like wild dogs. Some get drunk. Some men line up all the horses and shoot them. I don’t know why. Some men sit in the theater and idly watch a movie. Some desperately try to mount a defense. Some few stand in a gazebo and sing over and over, “Abide with me, fast falls the eventide. The shadows deepen, Lord with me abide! When other helpers fail, earth’s comforts flee, help of the helpless, O, abide with me!” The urgency and sorrow of the scene is intense, and it’s something that really did occur within the lifetimes of some here! Of course, we know that the British government commandeered every private vessel on the English coast in order to rescue the soldiers off Dunkirk beach, just in the nick of time. But in the film, those hopeless soldiers didn’t know yet that their salvation was near. Everything was urgency and fear.

The world has always been fraught with a sense of urgency, and today is no different. That wild and terrified scene in the movie *Atonement* sometimes strikes me as a metaphor for the world today. Think how Egypt overthrows a dictator only to become a fundamentalist theocracy. Think how the euro—a great idea at the time—stands on the brink of collapse. Listen to the strident opinions in this country about Obamacare, and Citizens United, and fracking, and the 99%. Haven’t we got our own larger version of Dunkirk beach, all of us coping as best we can with a looming sense of strandedness and dread? Perhaps some of us staring at the horizon, urgently hoping for a rescuer.

And after all these centuries, the ancient words of the Apostle Paul still ring with comfort and truth: “Love your neighbor. You know what hour it is... Salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand.” Paul and I have had our little differences of opinion down through the years. But despite some quirks, Paul’s a scholar and a thinker. He’s a poet, a mystic, and a man of colossal passions. Paul is urgent, consistently, strangely, pervasively urgent. He was a man driven by a vision of God and of life, a man made eccentric by his overpowering drive to share that vision with the world. And how frustrating for urgent people when others don’t catch the vision! Paul is driven in a way that others typically are not, and it makes him cranky at times, and pushy, and—well—urgent, the kind of guy who makes you nervous. And what is his urgent drive? Paul believes that all creation hinges on the moment when God will finally and fully break into to every situation, every human relationship, every government, each joy and fear, each tired old life, making all things urgently new.

Paul, like those men stranded on the beach, felt the full weight of his moment in history. And some of us do, too. If all the world today is Dunkirk beach, which of those stranded soldiers are we? If all the world today is an urgent, frolicking, desperate, frightened fury of people caught between the devil and the deep blue sea—perhaps the twin threats of manmade violence and Mother Nature’s revenge—how are we living amid the chaos? Are we the drunken revelers who, seeing no

real future, decide to live for whatever pleasure we can get before the other shoe drops? Many of us are surely the listless moviegoers, staring vacantly at the silver screen, passively waiting to see what will become of us. A few of us might be the crazy guy who decides to shoot all the horses. Some others are among those hardy few who dare try to organize some sort of defense. Or are we the ones in the gazebo, singing a sad but comforting hymn?

And here's another question: Is the church even addressing the sense of urgency that people are feeling today? A lot is said nowadays about the secularization of America and the decline of religious institutions in all western countries. But have you ever wondered why Christianity declines while do-it-yourself spirituality flourishes? When Matt got home from Sunday school, his mother asked him what he learned. Matt said, "Our teacher told us how Moses went behind enemy lines to rescue the slaves and lead them out of Egypt. When they got to the sea, his engineers built a pontoon bridge and led them across safely. Then he used his walkie-talkie to call for reinforcements, and they sent bombers to blow up the bridges so the enemy couldn't cross over after them." Matt's mother said, "Now...is that really what you learned?" And Matt replied, "Well, no, mom, but if I told it the way the teacher did, you'd never believe it." Some people think that the church is in decline because people don't find its stories believable anymore. And that could be part of our problem. People need to read the Scriptures for spiritual—not literal—truths. It's amazing how many folks are still taking their science from the Bible!

Still, I don't think the miracles described in Exodus pose the greatest threat to our credibility. I know an old married couple who have been bickering about every detail of their life for forty-five years. Their frustration and disappointment with each other are palpable and endless. And yet, it doesn't prevent them from offering me marital advice. We all know people who have sat in front of the TV for the past two decades, sharing all their waking hours with Jerry Springer and Oprah. And yet, those are usually the very people who tell others how to be healthy. What makes such people think their check is good in our bank? That's how the modern world feels about taking moral and spiritual instruction from the church. The church is not immune to the loss of credibility that afflicts pharmaceutical companies, and insurance companies, and brokerage firms. People are losing faith in all the major institutions of our society. After decades of cover-ups and corruption, people are losing faith in the government. After self-serving practices that have bankrupted millions, people are losing faith in our financial institutions. After more than a century of poisoning our air and water, people are losing faith in the energy industries.

"The night is far gone, the day is at hand." There's such urgency in Paul's impassioned words. It echoes the urgency of a world where people are losing respect for the very things that used to make them feel safe. If all the world is Dunkirk beach, then how should you and I be living, while our neighbors shoot the horses and sing their sad songs? Our period in history is not so unique. Paul too believed that the world was coming unglued. His answer to it all...was love. He says in verse 8, "Love one another, for the one who loves his or her neighbor has fulfilled the law." What would it mean for you, amid all your life's pressing urgencies, amid all the swirling urgencies of our world, to simply remind yourself daily, "My only job is to love other people"? It might be hard, but it's not complicated. I am called to a life of love. Fear made the fellows at Dunkirk beach all go their own separate directions. But some did cling to hope and tried to rally everyone for some kind of defense. It was a defense they didn't end up needing—but they threw themselves into the cause of hope and togetherness all the same. What would it look like amid all the polarization of our world to lead lives that bring people together around the causes of hope? What would it look like to say, "I can't fix the world, but I can love the people in it, one at a time"? The greatest urgency of all times is still this: Whatever happens, lead a life of love. Amen.