

# Knowing the Time

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



*"Dawn" by Nikolina Car Jergović*

## Prayer of Illumination

O God, you are our beginning and end,  
by your command time runs its course:  
bless our impatience, perfect our faith, and  
while we await the fulfillment of your promises,  
give us hope in your Word.  
Amen.

## Background

Our morning's New Testament lesson from the lectionary is famous. Not only because it's the Bible, but because of its influence on a famous person several centuries after Paul wrote it.

There was a time St. Augustine wasn't a saint. He was just Augustine. In his classic *"Confessions"* (the first memoir ever written), Augustine shares about his conversion.

He was walking in a garden—feeling both distressed and depressed. He felt stuck and entirely unable to live the good life. The monkey voices in his head kept chattering,

*“How long? How long? Tomorrow and tomorrow—why not now?  
Why not this very hour end my depravity?”*

But then suddenly, right then and there, he heard a very different voice saying, *“Take and read...Take and read.”* It was the voice of a child, sounding as if it were singing some kind of nursery rhyme, but it was different. It continued, *“take and read, take and read.”*

It so happened, the only book near Augustine was a Bible. So he took the child’s cue.

*“I snatched it up and read the first passage my eyes fell upon: Let us not walk in revelry or drunkenness, in immorality and in shamefulness, in contention and in strife. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, as a man puts on a garment, and stop living a life in which your first thought is to gratify the desires of your selfish nature.”*

Augustine then shares, “I neither wished nor needed to read further. With the end of that sentence, as though the light of assurance had poured into my heart, all the shades of doubt were scattered. I put my finger in the page and closed the book...And with a calm countenance I told my friend,

*“Out of his word, God has spoken to Augustine.”*

The poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge once said he believed the Bible was inspired because *“it finds me.”* God’s word always finds a way to the human heart. And may Christ, the Word made flesh, find a way to your heart this morning.

### **Scripture: Romans 13:11-14 (NRSVue)**

<sup>11</sup> Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is already the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; <sup>12</sup> the night is far gone; the day is near. Let us then throw off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; <sup>13</sup> let us walk decently as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in illicit sex and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. <sup>14</sup> Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.***

## SERMON – “Knowing the Time”

One of my favorite songs (and videos) by the band “Talking Heads” is the 1981 hit *Once in a Lifetime*. The song starts off with these words:

*And you may find yourself in a shotgun shack  
And you may find yourself in another part of the world  
And you may find yourself behind the wheel  
of a large automobile  
And you may find yourself in a beautiful house,  
with a beautiful wife  
and you may ask yourself,  
“Well, how did I get here?”*

Or maybe you find yourself like Bill Murray in the classic movie *Groundhog Day*, where he gets stuck in the same day, February 2nd, living it over and over and over. *Groundhog Day!* In these times we ask ourselves:

*How did I get here?  
How did this become my life?  
How do I get out of this rut?  
How can I find myself again?  
Can I really live life with newness again?*

Philosophers have a cool word for this experience: *thrownness*. Thrownness is the feeling that even though we’ve lived our lives, and made our decisions, the accumulation of all these choices seems to take on a life of its own, almost like a snowball effect. And so it feels like we’ve been thrown into a life that we didn’t really choose. We’re just spectators on the sidelines watching our life played out before us. Like Augustine, sometimes we feel in our lives like we’re going nowhere: lost, disoriented, at a standstill, or just going in circles.

But there’s another form of lostness—not losing track of *where* we are, but *when* we are. We feel, not like “nowhere,” but “nowhen.” We lose track of time and seasons.

- Am I supposed to be asleep? Or awake?
- Is it dawn or is it dusk?
- What am I supposed to be doing right now?

We feel like everything is rushing past us and we can’t keep up. The fancy name for an inability to keep track of time is “dyschronometria.” Dyschronometria can be experienced literally or figuratively. We can blissfully be unaware of the past. What’s that phrase: *those who fail to learn from history are doomed to what?... repeat it!* Not only world history, but our own personal history. Do we study and pay attention to patterns of how we respond or react to situations and people over the years? Do we keep repeating the past?

We can also miss the significance of the present. Are we oblivious to current events—in society or the present challenges in our own lives—and just pull the sheets and blankets over our heads

and hope we can just sleep it off and things will just disappear? Or we can become so pessimistic about the future that we give up hope and become grumpy, surly people wishing we lived in another time.

The Apostle Paul is giving us a wake-up call this Advent. *Know what time it is!* —it's time to rouse yourself from slumber. Get out of bed. Make your bed. Arise, your light has come! Today is a new day! Some of us are night owls—we're night people, we're just getting going by 10pm.

*How many of you here are night owls?*

Others of us are larks—morning people, early birds looking for the worm.

*How many larks are here?*

But spiritually we're in the same time zone, all of us belong to the day: *You are children of light!* So *carpe diem*. Seize the day!

The season of Advent reminds us we're called to spiritual timekeeping, not clock watching or just clocking in. Philosophy professor James K. A. Smith says that we have an invitation from God to enjoy the spiritual adventure of time. So, take the time for what really matters. Don't waste time or squander it. Stop procrastinating. Have the time of your life.

Spiritual timekeeping takes prayerful attention, pausing, waiting, reflecting, and acting. The good news is this: Christ not only teaches us to tell time, He redeems our time. He shows us how to fully dwell in and inhabit time. He equips us to: understand our past, learn from it, and be reconciled to it, Christ helps us face the future courageously, and not be paralyzed by fear. And He is with us, helping us live faithfully and joyfully in the present. He is the fullness of time. When we take the leap of faith and commit ourselves to follow in the footsteps of Christ, we've moved into another existence, a new possibility for life, change, and hope. We still live in this present age that is passing away, but in faith, Christ gives us the resources and resolve not to be conformed to the world, but to be renewed in our thinking and living. We do this by "putting on Christ."

Now the usual way to prepare for a new day is to dress after waking up. Taking off our pajamas and getting dressed for the day gets the day moving for us. Paul tells us that in faith we can throw off or put off the deeds of darkness and put on the person of Christ. Christ helps us shed our dirty laundry of selfishness. It is the "desires of the flesh" Paul is talking about self-destructive living, sleeping around, or causing drama and strife wherever we go. God rouses us from that living nightmare. Christ gives us a fresh new wardrobe. To put on the Lord Jesus Christ is to be born again—to begin again, to begin anew.

"Behold," says Jesus, "I make all things new."

God isn't bound by our tired, ragged ways. His way is different from our way. Clothed in Christ, we can smell the freshness our new self, our true self, our best self, that's pressed and fitted to the image of Christ. Clad in the armor of light, we're equipped to face a new day: When you put on Christ, you are what you wear. Our tune is changed, and we're given a new song—

we sing praises to the Most High of his mercies and goodness. Dressed in Christ, we conduct our lives with integrity, character, and respect. We honor others, honor God, honor ourselves.

We walk in the light—no more stumbling in the darkness. We know that we belong to God. We're our best selves, by God's grace.

But that of course doesn't mean we're perfect. I love how one of my favorite Bible scholars C.E.B. Cranfield addresses this:

"To put on the Lord Jesus Christ means... to embrace *again and again*, in faith and in confidence, in grateful loyalty and obedience, Him to whom we already belong."

Advent reminds us to wait upon the Christ to whom we belong. It's easy to think that because it's been 2000 years since Christ was born in Bethlehem, his return won't be happening in our lifetime or anytime soon. But in our waiting and trusting, Christ refreshes and puts in perspective our understanding of time. He fills it all with meaning.

It has been said time is a lot like a roll of toilet paper... it goes faster the closer you get to the end! Time is flying by. I can't believe that we're already in the holiday season. Thanksgiving is past. Christmas is coming. 2023 is right around the corner. Kids are now becoming adults. And time will keep rolling along. But each day that passes, is one day closer to when Christ comes again—or when our time comes to meet Christ. So it's all a mystery. Let's enjoy the ride. Hopefully we can live into old age, but there are no guarantees. Even if we do, life will still seem all too short.

Pandemics and the threat of nuclear destruction make us more aware of the fragility of our life and world. So the best way to be ready, in and out of season, Paul tells us, is to dress ourselves in Christ, to try on Christ's character. Step inside and allow him to love and live through us. He'll help us live our lives—past, present, and future to the fullest. He'll help us put aside our selfishness. The good news is we trust in Christ who perfectly fulfilled the law. In Christ, we can love our neighbor as ourselves. We not only do no wrong to them, but we care for them.

When we're known by Christ's love, we're kinder and forgiving of ourselves, too. We want what God wants. We find our true selves and can lay aside our false selves. We dwell in the present moment, We savor it... and we become *love*. And we know it's all a gift, it's all Christ.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "*Dawn*" by Nikolina Car Jergović

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