



Preaching Apocalyptic Texts Resources for Pastors Who Want to "Preach in the New Creation"

Advent 1 A and Sunday, September 4-10 Year A
Romans 13:8-14

Text

13:8 Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9 The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

13:11 Besides this, 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; 12 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; 13 let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. 14 Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (NRSV)

Several other apocalyptic lectionary texts are treated in my book, [*Preaching in the New Creation: The Promise of New Testament Apocalyptic Texts*](#) (Louisville: Westminster

Commentary

The text is fascinating as a preaching text around the turn of the millennia. It combines two distinct sections: vv. 8-10 and 11-14. Yet in placing them side by side, the rhetorical effect is marked, offering exciting possibilities for preaching. **The question for preachers of the Gospel, as it frequently is, is not about what God's will is, but how God makes the doing of that will possible.** The result is not only classically Pauline, but strikingly apocalyptic.

The first part, vv. 8-10, is deceptively simple. The Greek is emphatic by means of a double negative: "(Y'all) don't owe no one nothing!" Paul writes in 13:8, "except to love one another." The sentence embodies Paul's theology in a nutshell. The Gospel is ultimately about freedom, yet not just freedom "from," but freedom "for" neighbors. The argument continues with a commonplace in v. 9: all those commandments can be summed up simply by reference to Leviticus 19:18, namely, to love your neighbor as yourself.

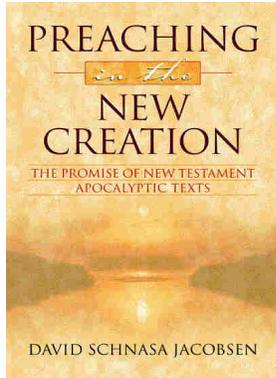
What is odd is that Paul calls this the "fulfilment" of the law. Why does Paul use the term "fulfilment" here? The word sounds odd to our ears. When was the last time the highway patrol pulled you over for not "fulfilling" the law? No, we either break it, or keep it. Fulfill the law? Perhaps it already begins to bring in an eschatological tone to Paul's relationship to the law. If so, the second part of the text, vv. 11-14, should help us figure out what's up.

Interestingly, vv. 11-14 then try to ground the love which fulfills law not in a past-tense revelation (e.g., God said so *at Sinai*) but in a future-tense disclosure of ultimate grace. Consider the apocalyptic eschatology in the balance of our lectionary text. Why should we love?: because salvation is nearer today than it was yesterday. The call to love is not made on the basis of the past (e.g., "Why don't you love others? Didn't I tell you to love others already?"), but on the basis of an emerging future ("Look, God's love for us is coming toward us headlong from the future, so we might as well get with the love program!"). In other words, Paul draws on eschatology, in part, because of the very shape of the Gospel.

If this sounds too good to be true, check out the remaining verses of our apocalyptic section. "The night is far gone, the day is at hand," Paul writes in v. 12. The reference is to "The Day of the Lord" tradition. Yet Paul inverts that tradition from doom and gloom (beginning with The Day of the Lord = "darkness" in Amos 5:18) to the dawning of a new day. In the end, Paul seals the notion by reference to baptismal clothing. We are people of the day because we "put on the Lord Jesus Christ." If baptism is where we first get clothed with grace, we shouldn't be surprised that the most ever-lovin', grace-spiked bash of final salvation might mean we should stay dressed for the occasion!

For preachers, this text is significant. It lifts up the importance of love as the law's fulfilment. Yet at the same time it refuses to set up love as a big, shadowy "ought." Instead, it sets love firmly in the light, that is, God's dawning light of the new aeon. In other words, we don't love cause we *should* love. Rather, we love because God's ever-

John Knox Press, 1999).



lovin' day is about to dawn.

Perhaps this is why Charles Wesley ended his famous hymn with this verse:

Finish, then, thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be.
Let us see thy great salvation perfectly restored in thee;
changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love, and praise.

God calls us to love not as a task long-ago given, but because our destiny is to be "lost" in such wonder and love. Perhaps this is why people love New Year's parties so much. Sure, the whole point is to be up after midnight and to enjoy the revelry of the new year. Yet the joy of party is that the fun begins while the old year is still dying. For love is not just the fulfilment of what was-it is also the fulfilment of what *will be*.

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