

In 1522, a ship originally commanded by Ferdinand Magellan arrived in port at Seville, Spain. Three years earlier, it had left port there and headed westward. It crossed the Atlantic Ocean, sailed past the tip of South America, over the Pacific and Indian Oceans, rounded the Cape of Good Hope at the southernmost point of Africa, and returned home to Spain. This storm-beaten ship had become the first vessel to sail around the world.

But when the sailors arrived home, there was something that puzzled them. They were baffled because it appeared that a day was missing. By the sailors' accounting, it should have been Wednesday when they landed. But those in Seville said it was Thursday.

The mystery continued to confuse voyagers for some time, until 1884, when representatives from all over the world gathered to solve the problem. Their solution was the establishment of the International Date Line. Because what they realized was that you have to establish a point of origin to make sense of time all over the world.

In an even deeper, more profound way, we need a point of origin to make sense of time. Or, more specifically, we need a point of origin to make sense of our times. Because we live in times that don't make much sense.

It seems we live in times where up is down and black is white. Where something as basic as your gender is up for debate. Where 150 years after the Civil War, our country is still tearing itself apart over race. Where mass shootings have become an expected part of daily life. Where dozens of people on the east coast died from water right before dozens of people on the west coast died from fire.

And that doesn't even take into account the suffering and confusion we've dealt with on a personal level. With our job, family, or finances. With unexpected illnesses and tragic losses. Our times could well be described by the list Paul gives us in our text from Romans 8: tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, and danger.

And these things just don't seem to make any sense. Aren't we God's people? Isn't he all-powerful? Shouldn't he be with us when our times seem to be falling apart? Where is he when the world seems so bent on ignoring him and his will, and making life so miserable for us? Will it get worse? It sure feels that way. What will next year bring?

So we need a point of origin to help us navigate both the perils of the present and the uncharted waters of the future. Even if 2018 was a good year for you, there's no telling what 2019 will hold. For all this and more, we need a "date line" to make sense of our times.

And that's exactly what our Epistle reading does for us. It points us to a date – and even more so to a God – who can make sense of our times. Tonight, as we mark the transition from one year to another, we look to this God to help us navigate through time.

This date that enables us to make sense of all time can be called the "Eternal Date Line." It is *the* reference point for all of history. And it's a date we just celebrated: Christmas. Not Christmas 2018, but the original Christmas. The one that occurred two thousand years ago.

Christmas is God's Eternal Date Line. The day that marks the coming of God into human history as a human. It marks the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In fact, we even align our calendars according to that date: 2018 A.D. 2019 A.D.

A.D. stands for *Anno Domini*. Latin for "the year of our Lord." Every year before that date is B.C.: "before Christ." Every year after it is A.D.: after the Lord appeared. Even secular historians who have tried to scrub God out of our textbooks by using the terms "Common Era" and "Before the Common Era" still use that special day to calibrate their calendars. It was undeniably the most important event in all of history. The appearance of God in human flesh.

And that event brought to us the solution to all our problems – past, present, and future. Because the eternal God entered into our times in Jesus Christ to take on himself all our sins – past, present, and future – and to suffer their consequences on the cross. Romans 8:32 puts it succinctly but powerfully: “[God] did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all.”

Through his Son, God did not just make sense of our date. He did not just make sense of our times. He made sense of our entire sinful lives. He took lives that had no meaning and gave them meaning. He took lives that had no identity and gave them an identity. You are God's beloved child. That is your present reality.

And that present reality gives you a future. On this New Year's Eve, we look to the future – 2019 and beyond. And we don't know what the future holds. But the message of the Eternal Date Line, the message of Christ's coming, is that you need not fear.

The message of the angel to the shepherds on that first Christmas night is a message for you and for me tonight. “Fear not,” they said. Why? Because the one who loves you, who came to earth for you, who lived and died for you, who rose from the grave for you, who now watches over you, is none other than the Lord of history, the God of all ages.

There's an old saying: “We don't know what the future holds. But we know who holds the future.” I'm not usually one for trite expressions, but that's a good one. We know who holds the future. And we know that the one who holds the future also holds us in the palm of his hands.

As St Paul tells us, “*If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.*”

God is on our side. He is for us, not against us. He has given his Son as proof of this. And God now justifies us for the sake of Jesus. Thus we need not fear his condemnation. Christ is now interceding for us. He takes our side in the heavenly courtroom of justice. So we need not fear his rejection or judgment, now or in the future. God holds our future, and he promises to uphold us in the future.

Of course, this doesn't mean your future will always be easy. It doesn't mean that life in 2019 will be free of pain, loss, hardship, or suffering. This world is still broken and sinful. And we carry in our flesh the brokenness of our fallen, sinful state.

In the coming year, you may experience sickness and suffering, injury and illness. You may be rejected by friends and neglected by family. You will undoubtedly make sinful choices and suffer the consequences of those sins.

But those problems will not prevail. God will prevail. And God's love will prevail. This is because God and his love are more powerful than all those hardships.

“*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?*” Paul asks, “*Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”

The future is confusing and uncertain. But one thing is clear and unchanging: the eternal love of God for his baptized children. So when you look toward 2019, don't forget that the very number itself represents the Eternal Date Line. 2019 AD. 2019 years since our Lord came, showed his love for all mankind, and promised to us a future with him that will never end. Amen.