

The Rhythms of Time
December 2, 2007
Ecclesiastes 3:1-15, Matthew 24:36-44

Here we are at the beginning of Advent, and all I can say is "How did this happen? Where has the time gone?" I have heard these same questions from others in this congregation and from friends across the country . . . there just doesn't seem to be enough time or is it that time has just flown by and there is nothing we can do about it. Where does the time go? Soon a new year will be upon us, but before it arrives we have to buy and wrap presents, bake cookies, gather for Hunter's Christmas dinner, address Christmas cards, decide how much to give to the church and other charities, pull out our coats and gloves, winterize our cars, go caroling, make sure the furnace is working, plan a Christmas party, finish finals if we are in school, eat a lot of food, attend a Christmas concert or two, perhaps shovel snow, and what else, what will we do to fill our time? There is still the need to eat and sleep, to work or go to school, to do grocery shopping, run errands, socialize with friends, and so on and so forth. No wonder we feel like we don't have enough time. We look at the clock or the calendar and try to squeeze in as much as possible in an hour, a day, a week or a year. These human made time tellers hold our lives in their very "hands". And yet is all of this what we hope to get, hope to find, hope to do, hope to be with the time that has been given to us? How have we come to hold up our human made measurements of time as idols that tell us what we can or can't do? How often do we ask the question "Is time on our side?" But what kind of question is this -- time doesn't take sides, it isn't an emotional reality. Time just is. And this time before us is all we've got -- all the time past is just like water under a bridge --no use trying to get it back and no sense in spending more time in regret for what we did or didn't do with the time that has gone before. As our gospel passage told us it is time to "Stay awake." Not in the literal sense of never getting any sleep, but in the sense of paying attention to what we are doing -- to how we are spending our time -- is what you are planning to do today truly the most meaningful, most life giving way to spend your time -- only you can decide. But perhaps the season of Advent is a good time to "take time" to reflect on the meaning of Time and what is truly worth doing with the time we have left here on this good earth.

Perhaps it is good to remember that Christianity views time in terms of salvation history. For Christians, history is not simply a random series of events, but rather history is part of the eternal plan of God to reconcile humanity to the Divine Life. Now this doesn't mean that everything that is going to happen in the future has been planned out for we are in relationship with a God who has chosen to work through and with us in bringing the reality of the Divine Kingdom to us here on earth. When the divine name is revealed to Moses in the 3rd Chapter of the book of Exodus, we learned that God's name is "YHWH" -- which means "I am/ I am becoming". Our God is not a static God bound by the hands of time. Rather our God is a living God who calls us into the future through a relationship bounded by justice, righteousness, mercy and love. When we pray, when we do acts of loving service, when we worship as a community of faith, we are acting together in relationship with the one who was, who is and who always will be. . . The One who created us as finite beings called to constantly seek the divine . . . The One who redeemed us through the giving of the Son not to buy us back, not to win a war from Satan, not to avoid God's wrath, but rather (and this is very important) to prove to us through God's own action that God's love and forgiveness are genuine and true for all time. God in the form of the human person Jesus, took on our sins so that we could truly come to believe that God is with us not only in the good, joyful times, but in times of loneliness, alienation, sorrow, apathy and despair when we suffer from the realities of living a finite human life or when we knowingly separate ourselves from

God and other people. Because it is only when God stands by our side in the midst of this loneliness, alienation, and grief that they are overcome.

The best part is that God's presence is always here/there as the One who sustains us in life, but so often we forget this reality. We think we are alone or we think that time is against us. So we rail at God, why is this happening? Why are you doing this to me or us? And yet we just forget what the author of Ecclesiastes chooses to remind us: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace. What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. God has made everything suitable for its time; moreover God has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. That which is, already has been;

that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by. "

Here ends the reading, thanks be to God.

We forget that there are rhythms to time. Perhaps it was easier for people to remember when most people lived by the seasons of the year -- plowing and planting, new livestock born in the spring, watching, tending and nurturing in the summer, harvesting in the fall, and darkness and lying fallow in the winter -- repairing, and preparing for the seasons that lay ahead. In this modern technological world we have lost the rhythms that God provided in nature. The only rhythms we know are hurry up and it's too late. Fax it, express it, e-mail it, rush, rush, rush . . . but what's the rushing for? Why are we in such a hurry for time to pass on by? I don't know about you, but when I think about all the hurrying we do, I just feel tired and worn out.

Let's all pause a moment and take a deep breath and relax into the quietness of this time -- no rush, no hurry, listen to the stillness as we turn our hearts and our minds to prepare for the coming of the one who was promised oh so long ago. Let's quietly settle into the Rhythms of Time, not our time, but God's time. For Time is the locus of God's activity. In his *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth reflects that saying, "the Word became flesh" means "the Word became time." When God became flesh, God became time; revelation became history; history became sacred time. Thus time is intimately related to the Incarnation as it is intimately related to the creation of the world for on the second day, according to our biblical text, God created time -- dividing the day into day and night which God then declares good. Time began as one of creations "goods." As Thomas Merton explains: "Time for the Christian is then the sphere of his or her spontaneity, a sacramental gift in which he or she can allow him or herself the freedom to deploy itself in joy." And yet, do we receive time as a good gift from God? Do we experience time as one of the many aspects of creation that we are to enjoy and to steward, or do we experience time as a taskmaster? Do we manage our time or does time manage us? What would happen if we truly believed that God has made everything suitable for its time; to know that there is nothing better for them -- for us -- than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live.

We have been given the gift of time to be used for enjoyment for as long as we live. Now I can already tell that some of you might possibly be thinking that one can't always enjoy life – we have hardships, struggles, jobs to go to, tests we have to take, friends who die, family members who hurt our feelings – life is too hard, we can't just be fooling around. Of course, maybe none of you were thinking that, but just in case . . . This is it folks, this is the time we have, this is what matters – the present is all there is – the past is gone and the future is yet to be. If we are not happy in your life, perhaps we can try something different . . . eating something new for lunch, praying at a different time of day, driving down another street or sitting in a different pew . Now all of us are going to have times when we are grieving the loss of a loved one or feeling bad from a fight with a friend -- the Teacher in Ecclesiastes isn't denying that -- remember all the lines before this, a time for laughing and dancing, a time for sorrow and tears -- but these are moments of our lives -- not the entirety of life itself.

Being happy and enjoying oneself doesn't mean party, party, party; it's not about being irresponsible or stepping all over others; it isn't about me, me, me – although it does include taking care of oneself. To be happy means listening for the call of God -- if you are not happy in your life right now, it's probably time to do some soul searching -- pray, meditate, journal, go for a walk. Why are you unhappy? What can you do about it? What does God want you to do? Each person has to answer these questions for him or herself.

But if we really spend time listening for God's call, we will find ourselves connected to the foundation of all life. To be grounded in God's time is to find stability, hope . . . A reason to live and a life worth living. But we must take the time, "If we want to hear God speaking in our hearts and in our lives, we must slow down to a human tempo so that we will have time to listen . . . but for this we have to experience time in a new way . . . The reason why we don't take time for prayer, for listening, is that we have to keep moving. This is a real sickness. Today time is a commodity, and for each one of us time is mortgaged . . . we must approach the whole idea of time in a new way. We must live in the fullness of time. Every moment is God's own good time. The whole thing boils down to giving ourselves in prayer a chance to realize that we have what we seek . . . Our hearts and flesh cry out for the living God, who is here, right now, among us if we but receive that Divine Presence. The call to "take time to be holy" is a call to integrate prayer and life as we remember that all time is God's time." (*To Everything is a Season: a Spirituality of Time*, Bonnie Thurston)

And so we sit here together on the first Sunday of Advent taking time to begin to prepare for the coming of Christ. At the same time, we are aware that Christ has already come to reign in and among us. And as we live into this paradox of life and love, let us close with these tender, powerful words from Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

Faithfully and quietly surrounded by benevolent powers,
wonderfully guarded and consoled,
thus will I live this day with you
and go forth with you into another year.

Still will the past torment our hearts.
Still, heavy burdens of bad times depress us,
Ah Lord, give our startled souls the grace for which we were created.

And if you pass to us the heavy, the bitter cup or pain, filled to the brim,
we will accept it, grateful, without trembling
from your good and beloved hand.

But if you wish us to rejoice once more in this world
and the brilliance of its sun,
then the past, too, we will remember
and so our entire life will belong to you.

With warmth and light let flame today the candles
that you have brought into our darkness.
If it can be, bring us together once again!
We know your light is shining in the night.

When the silence spreads around us deeply,
let us hear that full sound of the world stretching out invisibly
around us; let us hear your children's praising song.

Warmly protected by benevolent powers,
with confidence we wait for what may come.
God is with us at evening and at morning
and most certainly at each new day.

In the name of the one who has made time for us and calls us to return our time with gratitude
and praise. Amen.