

I suppose I should congratulate you all for being on time, today on the day when clocks lie. By tomorrow I suspect most of them will have figured it out but today is a dangerous day, because you never know whether any particular clock will have gotten the right message. Now we live in an era of cell phone clocks, and they seem to just do this for themselves, but still, this particular morning, there's always this lingering doubt. Has that clock been set? That one? To make matters worse, Daylight Savings Time doesn't even happen when Daylight Savings Time used to happen. Does it feel to anyone else like Daylight Savings Time itself forgot to set its own clock forward? It's three weeks before it used to be, it is, even more so than ever, the day when clocks lie.

And so perhaps appropriately it is also the day when we begin, much later than usual, the season of Lent, the first Sunday in the time on the church calendar when we, in the words of the Gospel of Luke, set our face to Jerusalem and prepare ourselves for Holy Week, for Palm Sunday and Gethsemane and Calvary. Lent is, of course, also famously fickle in its punctuality. It is remarkably late this year, which works well for a beautiful Springtime Easter Sunday, but it doesn't always happen this way – it's just the nature of Lent, which seems to come in its own time – via Easter, via Passover, via the lunar calendar, via some formula very few people understand, and I am not one of them. The timing just seems arbitrary. And so perhaps entering into Lent on the day when clocks lie has a kind of poetic symmetry: not only are we entering into new seasons in more ways than one, but we are also simultaneously observing two different kinds of calendar breakdown.

The difference is that, even once you've got your clock set right, Lent still won't get any easier. By this time on Tuesday the Daylight Savings disorientation will be completely gone, but the Lenten one will be just beginning. In a world run by clocks and calendars, Lent seems completely out of time. Advent seems at least to make some sense: it's the end of the year, it fits in this perfect little hole between Thanksgiving and Christmas. The decorations come out, Santa takes over the food court, the carols take over the airwaves. You may or may not like the content, but Advent's on the calendar. Lent, on the other hand. Nobody's out singing Lenten carols in the cul-de-sacs. ABC isn't running Lenten specials all month; nobody on my block has put up their Lenten decorations. It would seem that Lent is thrust upon us with no calendar support; it would seem that we have to do it for ourselves.

To some extent this is what Lenten discipline is about. Whether you give up chocolate or wine or Facebook, discipline becomes a way of claiming that this season is somehow different, that this time of the year is distinct from the mechanical and clockwork schedule that runs the rest of our lives. We have to carve Lent out of our own calendars: a daily meditation, a weekly service, some insistence that we will fight off the regularity of the outside world and make Lent happen, like an exercise plan, or one of those fast-track methods for learning a foreign language – prepare for the Resurrection in just 15 minutes a day! I have on occasion taken up a Lenten discipline: for several years, I gave up caffeine, and we should all be thankful this morning that no such foolish notion came into my head this year. Instead, I, with Cindy and Brian and Mark, are setting Lent aside for a particular kind of study. During Lent, we will be preaching, and singing, and studying, the Psalms. It is a kind of foolhardy task: we have six weeks, and 150 Psalms, and clearly will barely scratch the surface even of the ones we select (though we'll get a bit deeper in adult education, and I'd be remiss not to advertise). But this morning, partially because it seems to speak so well to the changing of the season, and partially because, in Maria's words, the beginning seems like a very good place to start, we are opening the Psalter to the first page. Psalm 1:

"Blessed are they whose delight is in the law of the Lord, who meditate on His law day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season."

There is a tradition in Christian monasticism of reciting the Psalms every day. Not just a few a day: no, reciting the entirety of the Psalms, all 150 of them, every day. The recitation of psalms became central to how the monks understood the passage of time: certain sections of the psalter were associated with certain periods of the day, with certain moments of prayer, and the book became a kind of daily calendar in and of itself. As far as I know this tradition is largely extinct; you can imagine that it might be somewhat taxing. *Blessed is the one who meditates on the law of the Lord day and night.* But you can further imagine that there might be some disconnect between this verse and what follows: *They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season.*

Night-and-day meditation sounds exhausting. But at least it's a organized, controllable, clockwork kind of thing. But wildflowers. Wild fruit. Trees in the streambed have seasons, to be sure, but not like clockwork. You wouldn't set your watch by the first crocuses. They come in their own time – in their own season, "their fruit in its season," quite beyond the reach of our own regular, patterned, behavior. So we have two different kinds of time: the regular-as-clockwork existence we declare for ourselves, and the self-revealed season of God, God's time, to be given in a time outside of time, outside of the mechanical operation of our everyday experience. "My time has not yet come," Jesus says to the disciples, "but yours is already here": God's time by God's rules; ours, frankly, a lot more predictable. It's the one you set your watch by.

I think this is how we think about Lent. We mark off some time on the calendar; it's "our" time, a month like any other month, and we set ourselves to the task of meditation – if not day and night, then, with a discipline, or with a sermon series, or with something that marks these days as different, but ours, given for our purpose, regimented to our task. But we do it knowing full well that God's time is not our time. We do it fully anticipating that God's fruit will come in its own season, not in ours, not in any way beholden to our expectations. We say that we live in the world of clockwork predictability, and God lives in the world beyond measure. Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, Easter – they have significance, to be sure, but they're still arbitrary, still just remembrances, human occasions set aside in our own predictable calendar: a time apart, but still time like any other time.

But we haven't read carefully, and the translator has done us no favor. For all of the wild naturalistic imagery of the "tree planted by streams of water," there's actually design and intention everywhere. The Hebrew that we translate as "streams of water" is actually strongly connected with the verb "to divide": this isn't a natural stream, and it's not the word used for stream most places in the Old Testament. This is an irrigation canal, a division from the main river, carved with purpose to bring water for agriculture. This water is not flowing where it will, it's flowing with purpose, just as the tree is *planted* with purpose: design and intention, everywhere.

It is tempting to think about human time as just such a canal: crafted, ever-forward, predictable. I live by a canal and the difference is striking: carved straight to the land, you could sharpen a ruler against its edge. It moves evenly, ploddingly. This is human time, we would say, that the minute-hand and the hour-hand move in steady motion, ever the same. God's time must be the natural river, flowing of its own accord, running over the underbrush, carving out the valley, since long before we arrived. Beautiful, but powerful. Captivating, but dangerous. In the canal, we have forged something we can control and understand, downstream from the unpredictable current of the Almighty. Ours runs like clockwork. It is tempting to think just this way.

But I want to suggest an alternate interpretation. In his superlative poetic novel *Einstein's Dreams*, Alan Lightman imagines the young scientist, in the summer of 1905, working on his theory of relativity and each night dreaming of an alternate version of the city, each one operating under a different idea of time. In one, time moves slower at high altitudes. In another, time moves cyclically, forcing the people to repeat their lives over and over. In a third, time is absent completely, and the city exists only in images. But in one particular dream, Einstein imagines time moving like a river, with all of the natural unpredictability that follows, with all of the eddies, with all of the undercurrents, with all of the hidden movements. In this dream, people find themselves unpredictably looped back into the past, unable to find their way home, or thrust forward into the future, unable to tether themselves to the world they knew, lost in the undercurrent.

The brilliance of Lightman's book is not just in his poetic encounter with the hard science of relativity. The brilliance is that, at some critical level, the dreams are even truer than the equations. What sounds like poetic speculation is in fact more descriptive of the human situation than any scientific treatise: of course we are stuck in the past, stuck in memories we can't get out of, circling around a moment whose time we cannot let go, torn by an invisible undercurrent between the now we perceive and the now we crave. Of course we are thrust into the future, pushed by the water into territory beyond our control, grabbing for something to keep us moored to the present. I don't know what these currents look like for you: regret, guilt, mourning, these powerful anchors to the past; anxiety, fear, dread, the violent terrors of the future. I don't know what they look like for you, but I know what they feel like for me, and I know enough to know that clocks might run like clockwork, but you and me, we're all over the place.

We don't want it to sound this way. It puts time out of our control, it puts life out of our control, it calls our bluff and makes us confess that we are stuck, broken, torn creatures, adrift in something that we did not make and over which we have no authority. It is a humbling thing to admit. But I am here with good news. If our time is that unruly river, then surely God's time is manifest in that canal, purpose-built, its destination sure. The tree is God's tree, the fruit God's fruit, the planting done not by our hands but His, and if Lent is anything it is this: a time out of our time, a time not just beyond the day-in and day-out regularity of what we think we know, but beyond the tearing, beyond the stuck, beyond the messy stubbornness of our own past and the unknowable terror of our own future, *a time full instead of the certainty of what God has done in Jesus Christ, a time full of the inevitability of what God will do in the age to come.*

Lent is hard. It feels like the most irregular, arbitrary thing; it arrives out of nowhere and would seem only barely to exist were it not for our own efforts in return, our own discipline, our own willingness to carve new time out of overstuffed calendars. But I tell you this morning in all of time there is nothing less arbitrary, nothing more definite, nothing more purposeful than the season which is now upon us. We set our face to Jerusalem, we enter into a season whose beginning could not be more certain and whose direction could not be more purposeful. Here's the paradox: we do not know what life may bring between now and the 22nd of April; but, on Good Friday, Jesus Christ will suffer and die for every one of us. Between now and then, nations may come undone as we have seen in the weeks past, the world may shake and hurl itself against us, as we have watched in horror the news out of Japan; By the 22nd of April, everything may look different. By the 23rd. By the 24th. But, on Easter Sunday, we *will* wake up to an empty tomb, and the world will *be* different again, as it always has been.

So this Lent, set time aside. But not just minutes a day, carved out of overflowing, jam-packed schedules. This Lent, don't even worry about the time we like to think we live in: the predictable, the straight-and-narrow, the ever-forward. What Lent offers can't be carved out in 15 minutes a day. Instead, this Lent, set aside the time we actually live in, the times we actually live in, the eddies, the undercurrents, the rapids. Set aside the memories that haunt, set aside the anxieties of what's to come, set aside the confusion and despair of these broken days. What Lent offers is a glimpse of God's real time, moving slowly, moving deliberately, moving inevitably to the table, to the cross, to the empty tomb. This is God's time. You can set your watch by it.