

Advent and Time

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Romans 13:11-14 and Matthew 24:36-44

“Time keeps on slippin’, slippin’, slippin’ into the future.”

“Time Is on My Side.”

“Give Me Just a Little More Time.”

“Time in a Bottle.”

“Times Like These.”

“Time after Time.”

“Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is.”

Some of you will remember Y2K. There was not only the novelty of partying like it was 1999 becoming 2000, but real and deep concern. Do you remember? For reasons I still don’t fully comprehend, there was anxiety, digital anxiety, internet anxiety, cultural anxiety about the millions and millions of computers that had been built and programmed not anticipating what would happen when 1-9-9-9 became 2-0-0-0. Do you remember? Would airplanes fall out of the sky? Would nuclear missiles launch? Would bank accounts disappear? Most commentators who were well-versed in these things would say something to the effect of “well, we think it will all be OK, but we can’t be totally sure.” And it was. But there were anxious days and many meetings and op-eds about our reliance on all of this.

Think how, in that 20 plus years, we have become even more dependent, reliant on technology, for the little things and the big things, and how trusting – on one level – and distrustful – on another, we are. You can now receive a college major that is focused on preventing cyber-attacks, highlighting our technology anxiety and vulnerability that grows by the minute, making memories of Y2K seem almost quaint. But not quite.

Plus, those in my line of work dealt with an overabundance of prophecies and religious speculations about the end of times, the end of days. That did not happen either, and here we are.

When I was growing up, I played school sports in three seasons. Soccer in the fall (I didn’t play football because the games were held on Sundays.) Basketball in the winter. Baseball in the spring. There might be more baseball in the summer. It’s different now. This might be a little “get off my front lawn,” but maybe not. I mentioned this last week, that kids’ sports are now

seven days a week proporisitons, and I remarked that as much as parents and those who love parents are concerned about that, there is no going back. Or, as a friend once said, in truth, “the god of youth lacrosse is an angry god.” So seven days a week, which means no day of rest. But what also strikes me is that a season never really ends – basketball, baseball, soccer, hockey, lacrosse, never ending. So rather than going from one season to the next, they all run together, and overlap, and co-exist, uneasily. It feels a bit like mutually assured destruction with no sport being able to back down. I love sports, and benefitted greatly from them, but I wonder what the non-stop, never-ending season does to a kid, and to a kid’s family.

“Time is a tyrant.”

“Complete waste of time.”

“Time flies.”

“Killing time.”

“Only time will tell.”

“Time on my hands.”

“Time after time.”

“Serve time.”

“Nick of time.”

“Big time.”

Someone reminded me the other day that in just a few months we will mark the three-year anniversary of COVID, March 2019. Three years. It will take a long time for wise people to determine what COVID did to our sense of time. It felt like more than one thing was true at the same time, about time. It moved quickly. It moved slowly. It stood still. It moved sideways, backwards and forwards. If you worked at home, or had children at home, the concept of a workday, or a school day, simply evaporated. Our connections to phones do that anyway, but COVID only magnified that.

Time became, in a sense, its own player in the COVID drama. On the one hand, the world kind of pressed the pause button – saying things like “after COVID,” or “once we return to normal,” not fully understanding that those days might not ever come. On the other hand, time marched on – work, play, births, deaths. Some things got cancelled or postponed, like weddings and proms and the like. Other things happened in a bubble, a World Series played in an empty stadium, church worship happening into an iPhone. As I said, wise people can help us figure out what this all means, but we who lived through it, in whatever ways we did, know that COVID affected time, altered our perception of it, and time affected and altered our response to COVID.

We live, in a sense, with four calendars. The first one is very personal, idiosyncratic to each of us. We write it down or type it into our phones and live its rhythms. We have lived our family life as a group of four. Come next September, we will be a group of five. It is all good, of course, and we are excited. But it will be a different season for us, a different rhythm, a different time.

The other three calendars are more universal, for all of us. January to December, the calendar year. Or September to June, with the summer thrown in. A school year, academic year, a program year, in the church world.

And this. Advent. The beginning of the church's liturgical year, happening at the end of the calendar year, happening about a third into the school year. It's odd in all sorts of ways. And yet it's crucial as we think about time. And it's crucial as we do the things that Advent invites us to do – prepare, wait, expect, anticipate.

We joked last week that Target had its Christmas displays up in August. Advent doesn't allow us to get there quite yet. I have become somewhat less of a purist. That is, I won't fuss when people get to Christmas too fast or too soon, because we need all the hope and joy and love and peace we can get right now. But for those who are mindful, paying attention, we know how important Advent can be, for our own souls and for the life of the world.

We need Advent. It can't be all one season all the time. We would be exhausted, and, in this case, we would not receive the fullest of Christmas meaning if we did not take the time. We know that all important things need time – time – for us to be ready. That's what Advent does. It allows us to prepare fully, or as fully as we can for such transformative, history-shattering news. And in so doing, it allows us to consider time differently.

We experience that in many ways through Scripture. The prophetic books of the Old Testament are a continual reminder about God and time, about the here-and-now and the not-yet, about living in the moment in all its complexity and challenge and looking to the future with hope.

The Apostle Paul understood that. Jesus had come, and was gone, but not that long ago. Small communities – call them churches – were popping up. Paul, writing to the church at Rome, was worried that they were simply waiting, passively, for Jesus to return, as he promised he would. Waiting passively was a problem. Paul writes “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; the night is far gone, the day is near.”

This is an invitation, Doug Bratt writes, an invitation to preparedness, to anticipation, to wake from whatever spiritual sleep they are experiencing to being ready for whatever comes – whether it be Jesus' eminent return or an opportunity to respond in faith. Daybreak is coming, Paul writes. Be ready for it. Yet there is a balance in all of this, a kind of sweetspot between preparedness and anxiety, about being ready and being overprepared, so much so that you will miss whatever it is when it happens.

Jesus understands that. Today's gospel lectionary passage was referenced repeatedly in those anxious Y2K end times moments. "But about that day and hour no one knows," Jesus says to his disciples, "neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

And he tells them: keep awake; be ready. Since you do not know, live as if the moment could happen at any time.

Jesus tells his followers to be ready, but he doesn't tell them how. Barbara Chaapel writes: "The only instruction is to watch and wait, to be ready, for only God knows the time. It will be sudden, unexpected..." Chaapel calls this "Advent living...living watchfully. Living in readiness — readiness to help, to stand with neighbor, to name injustice where we see it, to look for signs of God's realm and presence in every day, in every encounter, in every moment." Living in this time, she says, "seems *not* to mean that we can rest and relax into God's heaven, but that we should be vigilant and that we have more work to do, more responsibility here on earth for doing God's work of ushering in God's realm...God's presence is certain. Our job is to watch with heightened attention, and to be ready. To put ourselves where we see what God is doing, where we see signs of the in-breaking of the kingdom. To be ready for what we do not expect."

Chelsey Harmon writes that "(W)e understand that we are going about our business and living our lives best when we are doing so with God in mind, with integrated knowledge: faith and works held together, not in opposition. We go about our... tasks until the Lord comes—we don't just hole ourselves up in enclaves or in the sanctuary, holding vigil. We keep at being productive members of the world until Christ comes again. The rest will take care of itself. Cosmically, what is going to happen is going to happen...We wait, prepared, active, alert, awake..."

"For the Time Being" is one of the British poets W.H. Auden's more well-known poems, written in the face of personal grief and the realities of World War II. It's best read after Christmas, after the glow of the moment has faded and we get back to our ordinary lives. But it works here, in this moment, when, to use Karl Barth's imagery, we live in the "chronos" of everyday life waiting for the "kairos," the transformative event — Jesus' coming — to break in, to inbreak.

Auden wrote: In the meantime/ There are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair,/ Irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem / From insignificance."

We need Advent to prepare, to get ready. It is not passive waiting, but active expectation, active anticipation. Because for the time being, and in the meantime, in this time between now and when Jesus comes, we can redeem time from insignificance. There *are* bills to be paid. There are emails to be sent, clothes to be washed, FAFSA forms to be completed. There are cookies to be baked, pictures to be hung, diapers to be changed. There is work to do. There are people to be loved, hungry stomachs to be filled.

In the meantime, and for the time being, there is Advent. Time given us to consider time, to pay attention, to give up our sense of control over time without giving up our call to be a steward of it.

Jesus will come when Jesus will come. That is our hope. And we are to get ready, be prepared, for when that moment comes. For the time being, that is our call. Christmas will come soon enough. Let's redeem *this* time, for *that* time. Amen.