



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker
June 24, 2018 Sermon

In Ordinary Time God is With Us: God's Time and Ours

Scripture Lessons: 2 Peter 3:8-13 and Psalm 13

What, then, is time? Who can explain it? Who can comprehend it? . . . Yet, in our conversation, no word is used more familiarly or more easily recognized than "time." We certainly understand what is meant by the word both when we use it ourselves and hear it used by others. . . . What, then, is time? I know well enough what it is, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked what it is and try to explain, I am baffled.—Augustine, *Confessions* XI, 14.

A person really ought to say, 'The Resurrection happened two thousand years ago' in the same spirit in which he says, 'I saw a crocus yesterday.' Because we know what is coming behind the crocus.
— C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*

[B]y desiring what is perfectly good, even when we don't quite know what it is and cannot do what we would, we are part of the divine power against evil—widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness narrower.—George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

Preface to First Scripture Lesson:

How long is a long time?

It's summertime: the days are long; this past Thursday was the summer solstice, the longest day of the year, at least for us in the northern hemisphere. And on the church calendar, we're right in the middle of "ordinary time"—that time that is not Advent or Christmas or Lent or Easter or Easter season—that time that goes all the way to the beginning of Advent, late November, making it by far the longest time of the year on the church calendar. But to the Lord, that's not a long time . . . To God, even a thousand years is like one day.

Listen now for God's Word reading from 2 Peter Chapter 3, verses 8-13 . . .

Preface to Second Scripture Lesson:

How long is a long time? Our Second Scripture lesson—from the Book of Psalms, Psalm 13 also addresses this question.

As the Psalmist sees it, we were meant to, we were born to, see God's face. But we don't—at least not yet. Therefore, to the Psalmist, even one day—one day not doing what we were meant to do, one day not being what we were meant to be, even one day, in our time, is a long time—like a thousand years.

The Psalm is a short one, and it ends on a note of hope, but the expression of human longing at the beginning—how long, O Lord?—is also beautiful. Listen now for God's Word . . .

Sermon:

How long is a *long* time? Well, it depends: Are you waiting in line at the Bureau of Motor Vehicles or are you waiting for Jesus to come back? There *is* a difference, you know—although, when you're in line at the BMV, it may not feel like it.

OK, so a simpler question: What is time—just in general? Answer: Time is the measure of change, that is, when we measure one change in terms of another—usually a regular and reliable change.

Simple example: It would take about one full day—24 hours—to walk from Columbus to Dayton. You measure one change (before you were in Columbus; now you're in Dayton) in terms of another, regular and reliable, change namely, the movement of the earth relative to the sun—that is, one day. You can use other regular and reliable changes for your measuring—from carbon decaying to galaxies rotating, but for most of our purposes, the movement of the earth with respect to the sun will do, and is still the basis for most of our time-keeping.

OK, OK, but that doesn't get to the real question, which is, "Does anything *really* change? Oh yes, there's change going on all the time, motion and commotion all around us—sometimes the world seems to be nothing but change—but is all this going anywhere, or is it just going around in circles—does anything *really* new ever happen?

The Book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament has an answer to that question: "There is nothing new under the sun . . . futility, futility, everything is futile" (or in another translation, "vanity, vanity, all is vanity"). It is not an optimistic book (preachers don't preach from it much), but it's still a good book to have in the Bible; the Bible, John Calvin says, is like a mirror, reflecting all things human back to us, and especially the full range of all human emotions. We all feel like it's all futile at one time or another—when we're waiting in line at the BMV, for example—and it's good that the Bible recognizes, enables us to see and express, yes, even honors, this feeling.

But elsewhere, the Book of Ecclesiastes can strike a different note. Listen:

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 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.

(Back in the '60's, you may remember, a band called The Byrds made that passage popular with a song called *Turn, Turn, Turn*.) All of which is to say that all those regular, reliable changes in our world—the change of the seasons, the solstices and the equinoxes, the lengthening and then the shortening of days, the rotation and the orbit of the earth around the sun, the stars in their courses—these are not bad things. In fact, they are good gifts from God. They give us our time and the times of our lives: a time to be born and a time to die, times to sow and to reap, Times to weep and to laugh, times to mourn and to dance. It's those regular and reliable changes that allow us to do all that, to track time, to order and live our lives. Without them—chaos. For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.

But those regular patterns of change are *not* the ultimate determinants of reality; If they were, then Ecclesiastes would be right: there would be nothing new under the sun; in the end, it *would* all be futility, going around in circles, going nowhere. But in truth, the ultimate determinant of reality is God; God's word is the first, last, and defining word, and that word comes to us in time as a promise, a promise we can hear throughout the Bible, but especially in the prophets, and especially the prophet, Isaiah.

“There will come a time,” Isaiah says, “when every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low. There will come a time,” Isaiah says, “when the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. There will come a time,” Isaiah says, “when the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. There will come a time,” Isaiah says, “when the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the Lord has spoken.”

And then, Isaiah conveys these words from God: “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating: Jerusalem as a joy, its people as a delight. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be blessed by the Lord—and their descendants as well.”

In other words, all of this *is* going somewhere. It’s not futile. God will bring about the completion, the fulfillment, of all things, of all times, and of all time. There will come a time, the Bible says, when God will be with us, and we will be his peoples; when we will see God face to face, and God will wipe away every tear, when death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more. They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord. God has promised, and God will make it so.

But we don’t know *when* God will make it so. That’s the whole point of saying that a thousand years are like a day to the Lord. Isaiah says that God is *about* to do this, but that’s in God’s time—not ours. And in the meantime, in our time, there are times when it feels like all our labor *is* in vain and our children *are* born for calamity; when it feels like the inhuman world we have wrought will just go right on turning, turning, turning in all its nightmarish stupidity. If you think I exaggerate, check your news feed. Futility, futility, all is futility. If you hunger and thirst for righteous, it’s easy to feel that way, *especially* when you read your news feed—you see that righteousness is not yet at home in this world. So in this world, until the new heaven and earth comes, we should—we must—always hunger and thirst—and *work*—for righteousness, because that is the best—the most human—part of us.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” Jesus says, “for they will be filled.” But how long O Lord, how long? How long is a long time?

Which is why we need to measure our days *not* in hours, days and years, and certainly not by our news feeds, but in faith.

Have you ever noticed that we *don’t* tell time in terms of days, months, and years? At least not exclusively, and maybe not even primarily. Instead, we tell time by the events that shape our lives.

I first noticed this when I was a little boy, when my grandmother would tell a story: “Now this happened during the Depression” she’d say, or “this was during the War,” or “before Pop and I were married” . . . “so you have to understand: things were different back then.” Or when she and my mother were trying to figure out the year something happened, she’d say, “That was right after Pop died, so it must have been—what?—1963, or 1964?”

We all do this—we all organize our interior timelines—our before, during, and after—in terms of the events that shape our lives. Everyone has such timelines and such events—and to know them is to know a good deal about who you are, your life-story. Oh, we still use external ways of keeping time, too—hours, days, months, and years—watches, calendars, and the movements of the earth relative to the sun—all of which have the advantage of being agreed upon and accessible to everyone. But they are not primary to us; and you can tell this because, although we may forget the day or the month or the year, we don’t forget the event.

And if we are to live our lives in God’s time—no, if God’s time is to become our time—then we must measure our days in faith, that is, by those events that show us God’s kingdom at hand in our world.

When Jesus begins his earthly ministry, the first thing he says is, "The kingdom of God is at hand." But: How long, O Lord, How long? "Like a thief in the night," Jesus and Second Peter both answer, "the kingdom of God will steal in upon us."

But if we have faith, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear, we can begin to see the kingdom coming, we can begin to live in that kingdom, here and now, we can begin to organize and live our lives—our days—around and in it.

What is the kingdom of God like? It is like the coming of light to your eyes in the morning; it is like the first voice you hear being that of someone you love and who loves you; like having life and love in you for the goodness of the day; like an awakening sense of gratitude, a prayer, for the gift of the day.

What is the kingdom of God like? It is like the sun warming the earth, and sunlight gleaming through the clouds; it is like good work to do, and good thoughts to think; like a good deed done; like a kind word for a stranger or a prayer from a friend.

What is the kingdom of God like? It is like the gentle fall of evening and the purpling of the night sky; it is like first sight of the evening star. Like peace stealing over you after a good day and a good meal; like good talk, a prayer, and a good night's rest.

How long is a long time? C.S. Lewis wrote: A person really ought to say, "The Resurrection happened two thousand years ago" in the same spirit in which he says, "I saw a crocus yesterday." _Because we know that spring is coming behind the crocus. The kingdom of God is at hand.

How long is a long time? Not long at all—in God's time and in our time. When we measure our days in faith, it is not long at all.

And in the meantime, knowing that the kingdom of God is at hand, that God is with us, and that that day of peace will one day come, we can hunger and thirst for righteousness, by desiring what is perfectly good, even when we don't quite know what it is and cannot do what we would, we can be part of the divine power against evil—widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness narrower. We can work for righteousness—knowing that our labor is not in vain, and that our children—that all children—are not born for calamity, but for life and peace.

In God's time, in our time, in ordinary time: God is with us: they shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.