

James 4:13-17

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

July 7, 2019

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

All in God's Time

A TIME TO EVERY PURPOSE UNDER HEAVEN

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Several years ago, I decided to quit wearing a wristwatch for a while. After the third or fourth time I asked Nancy, "What time is it?" she said, "I don't care if you don't want to wear a watch. But if you choose not to wear a watch, don't ask me what time it is!"

In October 1970, the Chicago Transit Authority released one of the band's biggest hits, "Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is?"

As I was walking down the street one day

A man came up to me and asked me

what the time was that was on my watch, yeah

And I said

Does anybody really know what time it is (I don't)

Does anybody really care (care about time)

If so I can't imagine why (no, no)

We all have time enough to cry

And I was walking down the street one day

A pretty lady looked at me and said

her diamond watch had stopped cold dead

And I said

Does anybody really know what time it is (I don't)

Does anybody really care (care about time)

If so I can't imagine why (no, no)

We've all got time enough to cry

And I was walking down the street one day

(people runnin' everywhere)

Being pushed and shoved by people

(don't know where to go)

Trying to beat the clock, oh, no I just don't know

(don't know where I am)

I don't know, I don't know, oh

(don't have time to think past the last mile)

(Have no time to look around)

And I said, yes I said

(run around and think why)
Does anybody really know what time it is (I don't)
Does anybody really care (care about time)
If so I can't imagine why (no, no)
We've all got time enough to die
Everybody's working (I don't care)
I don't care (about time)
About time (no, no)
I don't care

Those lyrics sound like an updated version of Ecclesiastes 3, especially verse 1, “For everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven” and verses 9-10, “What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with.”

The sermon series for July and August is called “All in God’s Time.” I have selected scripture texts from Genesis through Revelation that have to do with time as we experience it, especially God’s time.

You can take the question, “What time is it?” and turn it around to ask, “Time, what is it?” — which really seems to be the question Chicago asks in its song and Ecclesiastes considers in these famous verses about time. It is an age old and very contemporary question — “What is time?” In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine, who had one of the greatest theological minds, wrote, “What, then, is time? There can be no quick and easy answer, for it is no simple matter even to understand what it is, let alone find words to explain it. Yet, in our conversation, no word is more familiarly used or more easily recognized than ‘time.’ We certainly understand what is meant by the word both when we use it ourselves and when we 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. All the same I can confidently say that I know that if nothing passed, there would be no past time; if nothing were going to happen, there would be no future time; and if nothing *were*, there would be no present time.”¹

Consider how we talk about time. We make time. We kill time. We waste time. We save time. We do time. We wish we had more time. Time flies. Time drags. Time is on our side. Time waits for no one. We have time on our hands. Where did the time go? I had the time of my life.

In this sermon series, I would like for us to think about the time of our lives as people of faith. The first eight verses of Ecclesiastes 3 may be very familiar to you — either because you remember Pete Seeger’s song “Turn, Turn, Turn” made famous by The Byrds in the 1960’s or because you often hear them read at funerals. The mere repetition of “a time to . . . a time to . . .” suggests the ongoing day-in/day-out rhythm of life. You might be tempted to hear a pessimistic tone in these verses — life is nothing more than monotonous drudgery — the same old thing, over and over — and then you die. But that interpretation rips the rhythm of life out of its Godly context. The footnotes for Ecclesiastes 3:1-15 in my study Bible describe the verses as “Human life in re-

lation to God,” and explain, “Life’s good and evil conditioned by God’s time. The contrary pairs are a literary device using opposites to represent life’s totality and variety. The times, which simply happen to people or which require appropriate human action, are inscrutably in God’s hands.”

The New Testament uses two different words for time — *chronos* and *kairos*. The first word gives you the clue you need to know what it means — chronology, chronometer, calendar time, wristwatch time, the rising of the sun and the going down of the same, a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted, 24/7/365. It’s the answer you give when someone asks, “What time is it?”

Kairos time is God’s time, the proper or appointed time, at the right time, such as when the apostle Paul writes, “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly,” (Romans 5:6) and when Jesus announced at the beginning of his public ministry, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” (Mark 1:15) We experience both kinds of time — the day-to-day schedules that preoccupy us as well as the momentous, special, just right times. That just adds to the mystery and meaning of time for our lives as believers.

If you’ve never read C.S. Lewis’ masterpiece, *The Screwtape Letters*, I highly recommend that you do. Screwtape is one of the Devil’s minions. He writes letters to his nephew, Wormwood. They are something like a training manual in how to undermine believers/followers of Christ. On a regular basis, Screwtape cautions Wormwood against boasting too much about his “successes.” Not everything the believers experience is due to Wormwood’s efforts. For instance, in Chapter 8, Screwtape writes, “So you ‘have great hopes that the patient’s religious phase is dying away,’ have you? Has no one ever told you about the law of Undulation? Humans are amphibians - half spirit and half animal. As spirits they belong to the eternal world, but as animals they inhabit time. This means that while their spirit can be directed to an eternal object, their bodies, passions, and imaginations are in continual change, for to be in time means to change. Their nearest approach to constancy, therefore, is undulation — the repeated return to a level from which they repeatedly fall back, a series of troughs and peaks. If you had watched your patient carefully you would have seen this undulation in every department of his life — his interest in his work, his affection for his friends, his physical appetites, all go up and down.”²

Uncle Screwtape’s description of the ups-and-downs of life is pretty accurate, isn’t it? And it sounds a lot like Ecclesiastes 3 with its talk of a time to every purpose under heaven. However, Uncle Screwtape does us a big favor, as do the verses in Ecclesiastes 3, by reminding us that the time we have can and does have value because it is in God’s hands, in God’s time. We experience creation and life in a structured way according to the seasons and the rhythms of life and calendars and milestone events and clocks. Unfortunately, instead of being our servant, time too often becomes our master and we become, as they say, “slaves to the clock and the calendar.”

But there’s another way to think about time, and that’s the point of the sermons in the next two weeks. Yes, we live in a world structured by time. We depend on that

structure, even if, like St. Augustine, we can't actually describe and explain exactly what time is. And yet, we are believers who profess faith and trust in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, who "when the fullness of time had come, sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children of God." (Galatians 4:4-5)

In his classic 1854 work, *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau wrote "As if you could kill time without injuring eternity." While Thoreau wasn't writing theologically, his insight about our involvement in and use of time is very important. At a recent session meeting, Michael Teachey suggested I look at the House of Raeford website and listen to CEO Bob Johnson's comments about FLOCK, Faithful Love Offering for Christ's Kingdom. Bob begins with these words: "We're all born with two things that are equal among everybody and that's time and change. We all have the same amount of time, we're all going to change and things are going to change. It's how we manage that time and what we do with it, what we choose to do with it, and how we manage the change that comes along with life and what we do with it."

Bob makes a very important point — "it's how we manage that time, what we choose to do with it, and how we manage the change and what we do with it." We take comfort in the regularity of life — or at least we depend on that regularity to get by day to day. But there are two dangers in just going along with the ebb and flow of time. First, that's a pretty passive approach to life at best; at worst, we really do become slaves to *Chronos* and its clocks, calendars, deadlines, and demands. The second danger of just floating along in the river of time is that we will never work toward those *Kairos* moments and seize the opportunities to do something meaningful in life.

If you subscribe to the *Wilmington Star News*, you might read Shayne Looper's weekly column in the Saturday *Spirituality* section. About a month ago, he wrote about the "right and wrong side of history." Halfway through his article he said, "A further error lies in the common but mistaken idea that history — in the sense of the progression of time — will somehow make things right and good. Martin Luther King, Jr. understood the flaw in this thinking and wrote in the 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail' of 'the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually, time itself is neutral; it can be used either destructively or constructively.'"³ In his commencement address to the 1965 graduating class at Oberlin College in Ohio, Dr. King spoke against the indifference of those who cautioned "Wait on time." He told the seniors, "Somewhere we must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals. Without this hard work, time becomes an ally of the primitive forces of social stagnation. So we must help time and realize that the time is always right to do right."⁴

Well, I'm out of time for this sermon! In the coming days and weeks, think about the time of your life and how you use your time. Think about how God's redemption of time by sending his only Son in the fullness of time makes a difference in your life.

I have vivid memories of singing Hymn #500 in the old red Presbyterian hymnbook when I was a child. The music and the words themselves spoke to me then, and they still do. You'll recognize the words as our Opening Sentences today:

*God is working his purpose out,
as year succeeds to year.
God is working his purpose out,
and the time is drawing near;
nearer and nearer draws the time,
the time that shall surely be,
when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God
as the waters cover the sea.*

Let us pray: Almighty and everlasting God, in whom we live and move and have our being, you created us for yourself, so that our hearts are restless until they find rest in you. Grant to us such piety of heart and strength of purpose that no selfish passion may hinder us from knowing your will, and no weakness from doing it. In your light may we see life clearly and in your service find perfect freedom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹*Confessions*, 11, 14, PL32, 815, cited in Georgios I. Mantzaridis, *Time & Man* (South Canaan, Pennsylvania: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1996), pp. 10-11.

²C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, Chapter 8, found at www.thespiritlife.net.

³Shayne Looper, "Don't claim the 'right side of history,'" *Wilmington StarNews*, Saturday, June 8, 2019, p. C6.

⁴Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," Oberlin College Commencement Address, June 1965, found at www2.oberlin.edu.