

“Should There Be A Clock in the Sanctuary?”

Text: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Mark 1:14-20

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"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near." Mark 1:15a

Yes, there should be a clock in the sanctuary. Why? So that at least the person behind the pulpit knows what time it is. In many places around the world, congregations don't care what time it is. In China, which I visited with a group of seminary professors in the 1990s, worship services go on for hours. People travel long distances to get to church, many of them setting out before the sun is up. After such a journey, people want a robust, lengthy sermon. Anything less than an hour and a half, everybody feels cheated. Suffice it to say, this is not the way it works in many American Protestant churches.

Not long after I came to Morningside, Philip Hawkins, at my request, installed a clock on the face of the balcony wall. Even if I do not always meet my goal, it is my intention to be in the middle of the benediction when the hands on that clock are lined straight up with the number 12. I want to avoid the irritation of golfers who might have at 12:30 tee time, or other parishioners who want to beat the Methodists and Baptists to Piccadilly. (One of the saddest developments in months has the closing of the Ansley Mall Piccadilly.)

Years ago in Charlotte, there was a preacher who was admirably regarded for always finishing his worship services at exactly 12 noon. Then one Sunday, the impossible happened. He preached until 12:30. On the way out, one of his elders angrily asked him, “What **happened** to you?”

The preacher sheepishly said, “For years I have always put a candy mint in my mouth as the service began, and I tuck it away. It was always gone at exactly 12 noon. That way, I never had to look at the clock or worry about what time it was. But this Sunday, it didn't go away. I finally realized I had put a button in my mouth.”

Preachers are not the only ones who have to keep track of time. Virtually all of us do. There are deadlines to meet, school buses to catch, papers to be turned in. Calendars and clocks have become our masters in modern society. Jeremy Rifkin wrote a book a few years ago entitled *Time Wars*. In that book he tells me something I didn't know - that the idea of our lives and the events in them being controlled by blocks of allocated time is, in terms of centuries at least, a relatively new thing. The idea actually came from Benedictine monks, “whose passion for organizing and filling every minute of the day, grew out of St. Benedict's conviction that ‘idleness is the enemy of the soul.’” (1) Not until the 15th century did clocks begin to rival churches in the town squares of Europe. Not until the

17th century, did those clocks have minute hands. (2) Surely much was gained in terms of production and organization, when life became divided and subdivided into seconds, minutes, and hours. But just as surely, many things were lost. We experience the effects. Our distance from the natural rhythms of life keeps increasing. Hardly anything is really seasonal. I think you can buy a doughnut covered with Halloween decorations right now at Krispy Kreme. Actually, I know that for a fact. You can get tomatoes, summer's most luscious offering, anytime of the year now, though the ones you buy in February are likely to have been shipped 1,000 miles and will surely taste like red cardboard. We also live at an increasing distance from the ancient but timeless understanding that each day, each moment is an unearned gift from a gracious God, rather than a commodity to be traded or spent for something else.

There was an ancient teacher of wisdom who was called in Hebrew Qohelet. We translate the name in Greek as "Ecclesiastes". This wise person understood time very differently from the way it is understood today. He wrote after the Babylonian Exile, an experience that had taught the Hebrew people that human experience was never going to be an uninterrupted walk in the park, and also that time should not to be a tyrant that demanded all our allegiance. Some see Qohelet, or Ecclesiastes, as the ultimate cynic. There is some truth to that – he was a cynic. Thirty-eight times throughout the course of Ecclesiastes, he says, "All is vanity." I would call him more of a realist than a cynic. He was a practical theologian who refused to look at life through rose-colored glasses, and he wanted those to whom he spoke not to have on rose-colored glasses themselves.

In today's lesson, Qohelet takes a deep plunge into the deep matter of time. (No, Pete Seeger was not "Ecclesiastes".) Here we have a catalog of the various seasons of life, 28 of them arranged in sharp contrast to one another, and yet each an undeniable part of human existence. His list rings so true to experience. It begins with that which is the most fundamentally true. One day, we are born into this world. Then, just as inevitably, our life in this world comes to an end. The French composer Hector Berlioz once remarked, "Time is a great teacher. Unfortunately it kills all its pupils." Qohelet would've agreed, though he might have objected to the adverb "unfortunately". For him, things are what they are, set in motion by God. The universe unfolds according to its own inner logic and set of seasons. Why life is set up the way it is, God only knows. In the face of such an inscrutable world created by an inscrutable God, one should not waste energy railing against life, but instead, Qohelet advises, "The best thing to do" - look at verse 12 – "the best thing to do is to be happy and enjoy yourself for as long as you live." That is theological advice at its practical best. Since there are so many things over which we have no control, will never have control, it is wise to be happy and to enjoy oneself as long as we live. The other thing he recommends, his other prescription for life other than not worrying about what you can't control and enjoying the gifts God gives you, is that always and forever we are to stand in awe before God, from whose mighty acts, nothing can be

added or taken away. God is the creator of time, and there is a natural rhythm to reality - a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to get and a time to let go.

It is our job to know what time it is. That is what differentiates the foolish from the wise. Some hold on for dear life to that which is actually finished and done. Some of us refuse to let go of a relationship that has ceased to be nourishing. Others try to breathe life into, say, a church program that has been around for too many years, but no one is brave enough to bury. I have a friend who started a new church outside of Athens, Georgia. That new church was able to come to life because a dying church in that community gathered one Sunday, gave thanks to God for the saints who had gone before them, and for the years of faithful service they had been able to offer. They walked out of the sanctuary, closed the door, sold the building along with the rest of their assets, gave the money to the Presbytery, and said, "Please use this to start a new church."

There is a time to build up and a time to break down, a time to be born and a time to die.

Though the wisdom writer says there will be hatred and war in this world, do not think he is condoning either one. He is simply stating the fact. Let us not forget that Christ came into a world covered up with hatred and war, with injury and mourning. He came to show us the way to higher ground, to the peaceable kingdom, which God originally intended and which Christ has come to restore. *The kingdom of God is at hand*, Jesus announced. He came to defeat all that would separate us from God and from one another. Any time we sanction hatred in God's name, we are doing so in a way that is totally antithetical to our faith tradition. I shudder when I hear some of the hateful rhetoric that is permeating the public conversation in our nation today. Let us never sigh and say, "Well that's just the way things are." If there ever were a time to kill, now is the time to kill incivility and replace it with civility. If there ever were a time to sow seeds of reason, the time is now. If there ever were a time to pluck up the last remnants of racism in American society, this is the time. We need to know what time it is.

The Dalai Lama and an Indian psychoanalyst held a public dialogue, one day, on the subject of hate. The psychoanalyst said that a healthy person should be able to hate and to transcend hating. The Dalai Lama said that was not the Buddhist view. He told the story of a man who had been imprisoned in Tibet and tortured by the Chinese. After he was released, the man told the Dalai Lama that on two occasions, things had gotten really terrible in prison. Had he been close to death, the Dalai Lama asked. "No," the man responded. "Twice, I almost hated the Chinese." (3)

Jesus said, "Love your enemies; do good to those who persecute you." This is the time not to answer evil with evil, ugliness with ugliness. This is the time to follow the way of Christ. This is the time for the reconciling love of God to be released into the atmosphere. How do we release it? You and I can release it!

We ought to release it; we have to release a reconciling spirit in our community, less incivility carry the day.

It's important in our congregation to know what time it is. This is the time for us to let our light shine, so others may see good things and glorify God who is in heaven! This is the time to say thank you for the wonderful chapter we have shared together and to be excited and forward thinking about the new chapter God is surely going to give this congregation. This is the time to rejoice over all what God has brought in to being here.

In every time and in every place, we are to be joyful and grateful people. I love this idea of Sister Joan Chittister in her book entitled *There Is a Season*. She writes, "Joy is the Spirit of God in time. . . Joy is the Spirit of God in time." It's the way we taste eternity within the boundaries of time. (4) Somebody gave me a bumper sticker recently that read, "Don't postpone joy." Qohelet couldn't have said it better himself.

I shared with you before a Sanskrit poem 2,000 years old. A copy of it was given to me one Christmas by friends at Trinity Church. Those friends were the Brumley family. The next year, their lives and the lives of a dozen of their loved ones were snuffed out in a terrible plane crash. If our house ever caught on fire, I would wake up Al, and reach for my copy of this poem. It means that much to me:

"Listen to the salutation of the dawn... Look to this day, for it is the very life of life. In its brief course lie all the realities and truth of existence: the joy of growth, the splendor of action, the glory of power. For yesterday is but a memory, and tomorrow a vision, but today well-lived makes every yesterday a memory of happiness and every tomorrow a vision of hope."

When Jesus began his ministry in Galilee, he said to the people, "The time is fulfilled. The time is now that the kingdom has come near." When we hear that proclamation today, **another** "now" is created: This is the moment of our salvation. That was their moment back there, but now, this is the moment of our salvation, this moment, rich with divine possibility. We stand on the frontier between the old order and the new order, where Jesus reigns and all that is wrong will have been set right. Karl Barth in the 20th century called his age the time of "great positive possibility." This is true about our age too - great divine possibility. The past is not completely finished and gone, but the new truly has come. From the beginning, Jesus knew all there was to know about time. He knew when his time had come to give his life. He knew whom to trust with his life, with his coming and his going. I think of that lovely verse from "O Little Town of Bethlehem" - *Yet in thy dark streets shineth, the everlasting light. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.* Christ **is** the turning point, the fulcrum of all history.

I close with this ancient story: "Where shall I look for enlightenment?" the disciple asked.

"Here," the wise one said.

"When will it happen?" the disciple asked.

"It is happening right now," the wise one answered.

"Then why don't I experience it?" the disciple asked.

"Because you don't look," the wise one answered.

"What should I look for?"

"Nothing. Just look."

"Look at what?"

"At anything your eyes light on."

"But must I look in a special kind of way?"

"No, the ordinary way will do."

"But don't I always look the ordinary way?"

"No, you don't."

"But why ever not?"

"Because to look, you must be here. And you are mostly somewhere else." (5)

The voice you have heard today is that of a harried workaholic, but what I have spoken is the wisdom of the ages.

"Yesterday is but a memory, and tomorrow but a vision. But today well-lived makes every yesterday a memory of happiness, and every tomorrow, a vision of hope."

Let the people say, *Amen*.

(1) From a long-ago column by Ellen Goodman.

(2) *Ibid*.

(3) *Harvard Divinity School Bulletin*.

(4) Joan Chittister, *There is a Season*, Orbis Books, 1999.

(5) *Ibid*.