



Westlake Hills Presbyterian Church
Austin, Texas
27 November 2016 – First Sunday of Advent
Sermon – “Are You Running Out of Time?”
Mark Ramsey

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

During World War II, the U.S. military sought to make their planes
as bullet-proof as possible.

As they returned from missions,
they recorded where those planes had taken the most damage.

Over and over again, they saw the bullet holes
tended to accumulate along the wings,
around the tail gunner,
and down the center of the body.

Wings. Body. Tail gunner.

Naturally, the commanders wanted to put the thicker protection
where they could clearly see the most damage.

But Abraham Wald, a statistician who was assigned to review the data
--said that would be precisely the wrong decision.

The mistake, which Wald saw instantly,
was that the holes showed where the planes were *the strongest*.
The holes showed where a bomber could be shot
and still survive the flight home.

It was **the planes that didn't return** that needed extra protection,
and they had needed it in places that these planes had not.
The holes in the surviving planes actually revealed
the locations that needed ***the least additional armor***.

Look at where the surviving planes are unharmed, he said,
and that's where these bombers are most vulnerable;
that's where the planes that didn't make it back were hit.¹

There is a large industry in this country assisting with TIME management.
Their approach is similar to the misguided attempts
to provide more armor for fighter planes:

It all starts with looking for where there are holes,
and try to plug them--
**— assuming that if you KNOW MORE about time,
you can DO more-and then you will BE more.**

* * * * *

Are you running out of time?

Your answer to that is different

if you are an 86 year old surveying your life,
or a 36 year old with pressing tasks and deadlines tomorrow,
or a 16 year old worrying about all the assignments
you didn't quite get to over the holiday weekend.

Time is different

In contrast to some Eastern religions

Christians live, as Karl Barth said, "between the times." 2

The season of Advent invites us to consider again

the character of our living

NOT in regard to Black Friday or Cyber Monday,

NOT in regard to the best party, pageant, wreath, or tree—

--but how people like us live "between times"

in God's world.

**Advent says to us that TIME does NOT belong to us,
to “manage” on our own.**

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“Christmas is the numbing season,” Rodney Clapp has written.

“There are the ceaseless rounds of Christmas parties,

each requiring preparation of food and gift-buying,
each surfeited with expectations
of obligatory Christmas cheer.

There is the flood of commerce,
requiring a careful parsing of which are the newest
and most “necessary” gift items.

There are the visits to family,
spiked with all the stresses attendant upon such endeavors.

“Finally, there are added church responsibilities of nativity programs,
Christmas Eve services and so forth.
It all feels like a largely numbing endeavor.”³

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***One of the leading causes of this “numbing”
is our determination to avoid PAIN at all costs.***

Several years ago, the painkiller *Mediprin* ran a clever TV ad.
A guy with a hand-held pile driver rattled away
on the streets of New York while chaos, stress,
a noisy racket filled the air.
The guy had a splitting headache.

Then, a sharp businesswoman rushed from meeting to meeting,
conference call to conference call,
not a second to spare.
She, too, had a monumental headache.

Then came the soothing voiceover:
“Mediprin—when you don’t have time for the pain.”⁴

If we are BUSY enough,
perhaps we won’t have time to notice the pain we carry,
or the pain that surrounds us...

* * * * *

“Wake up! Do you know what time it is?”—
--is the underlying theme in both Romans and Matthew today.

And, in waking up—we are invited to live like we KNOW what time it is.
Our time has been commandeered,
overtaken by the living, seeking God.

We are NOT redeemed *away* from time--

--our emphasis is NOT on ***time management***--

--but on a God moves into time,

adopts our time,

redeems us from bondage to time's ravages,

and generates "the fullness of time."

We are encouraged NOT to escape time

(as in some Eastern religions)

but rather to live in time as those who know what time it really is.

Have you ever noted the peculiar tendency of the Gospel stories

to locate themselves in a particular geography,

constantly mentioning place, names,

and specific geographic locations

that no one has ever heard of or is likely to hear of again?

The Incarnation - God coming among us in Jesus Christ –

is thus demonstrated by Judea, Bethlehem, and Galilee

as typical of a God who locates.

But note how the Gospels ALSO take pains

to state that Jesus occurred NOT ONLY in place

but also in time.

Think of how often Gospel writers will say things like,

"*The next day . . .*"

"*It was about the third hour . . .*"

"*Immediately . . .*"

"*On the Sabbath . . .*"

"*It was night . . .*"

I believe this is the Bible's way of saying that--in Jesus Christ--

--God DWELLS in our time.⁵

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But our relationship with time is ambiguous, at best.

A website, "***The Things You Would Have Said***,"⁶

is less about confessions or unburdening yourself

and more about those nagging feelings

about what you wanted to say but didn't.

"*Some of these things can really eat at people*

and they get upset that they didn't say it at the time,"

Jackie Hooper who started the site says.

*"If you didn't have a chance to say something,
and they're still alive or you've lost contact,
it gives you the opportunity to say those things."*

Hooper posts one letter a day and says she's got quite a backlog.
About 70% are to those who have died,
and, just under half are to fathers.

An example is a letter posted by Emily, age 33:

Dear Brandon,
I am so sorry for not answering the phone
a few days before you died.
I wasn't doing anything ...
The kids were gone, and the house was quiet,
and I ignored your phone call for no good reason.
If only I had known,
I would have gotten to talk to you one last time.
I would have told you what a wonderful, awesome,
unselfish, giving and caring person
I thought you were.
I didn't get a chance to tell you that,
and I will never forgive myself.⁷

...If TIME means "regret" – than we are forever trapped.

...If TIME means the endless repetition of unfinished words...

...then we have no way forward.

God is the redeemer of time.
More than that, God shapes time into purpose.

* * * * *

That's hard to believe that some days.

In a largely forgotten movie, *Twice in a Lifetime*,
the character played by Gene Hackman
leaves his wife, played by Ellen Burstyn,
and takes up with Ann-Margaret
NOT out of anger or bitterness...***but out of regret.***

In trying to explain the irrational actions of a responsible, rational man,
he finally tells his eldest daughter:

*"It has been years since I woke up on any given day
not knowing EXACTLY what that day held.
It has been so long since I have been surprised*

by my life or what happened in it today.”⁸

You and I can recognize it as a “mid-life crisis.”

But in the light of Advent,

Hackman speaks of a life
without the shaping—and the urgency—of God’s time.

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Even Jesus’ disciples were NOT immune to falling into this
trap of an ambiguous relationship with time.

In Jesus’ resurrection, everything was turned upside down
and time ceased to be what we humans make of it;
time became what God makes of it.

AND YET...what was the first act of the two apostles in John’s gospel
after they witnessed the aftermath of resurrection?

They went back home!

They attempted to get back to normal.

Whenever the culture's official, predictable,
accustomed time is disrupted,
immediately we move into action
and try to "get back to normal."

We so want things to be predictable, tied down, fixed.

But, in Advent we focus upon,
prepare for,
and explore the significance of a God
who not only loves us,
but who also showed up among us—
--disrupting us,
calling us,
expecting us to live lives
in the wake of Jesus' life.

That's why when something happens--and something ALWAYS happens—
--we need to pay attention.

That's why when our plans and order are DISRUPTED—
--and our plans and order are ALWAYS disrupted—
--we need to be ready.

***“You know what time it is,
how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.
Salvation is nearer to us now
than when we first believed.”***

When Jesus Christ was born among us in Bethlehem,
 we realized that something was afoot
 that was considerably beyond our conceptions
 of just what *can* and *can't* be.

So perhaps Advent is a yearly reminder that at any moment,
your time could become God's time.
 The time that you thought was your own,
 to live as you please, is in reality--***God's.***

But, it's NOT enough simply to finally welcome disruption.
 It's NOT enough to understand that we can be free of past regrets.
 It's NOT enough to work on being fully present in TODAY.

Paul's exhortation takes on our view of time, but moves to action:
***"Let us then lay aside the works of darkness
 and put on the armor of light..."***

God's view of time includes EXPECTATIONS on us.

...The biggest problem
 with "time management" programs
 is that they want you to strive to KNOW EVRYTHING,
 and then you can organize everything.

**God does NOT want you or me to know everything—
 --but God does expect us to DO something.**

We are called to be new people.
 What we do matters.
 How we act toward others matters.
 How we SPEND our time...matters.

God has a way of taking time,
 taking time from you,
 taking time for you.

In your life, it's not just the same darn thing again and again,
 because all that happens in time is not left up to us.

In God's time,
 our PAST is redeemed and our regrets healed;

Frederick Buechner wrote once of Advent:

*The Salvation Army Santa Claus clangs his bell.
The sidewalks are so crowded you can hardly move.
Exhaust fumes are the chief fragrance in the air,
and everybody is as bundled up against any sense
of what all the fuss is really about
as they are bundled up against the wind-chill factor.*

*But if you concentrate just for an instant,
far off in the deeps of you somewhere you can feel
the beating of your heart.
For all its madness and lost-ness,
not to mention your own,
you can hear the world itself holding its breath.⁹*

**God does NOT ask us to know everything,
but God does want us to DO something...**
...but God is NOT asking us to DO everything.

In Advent, our time...is to become God's time
and we confront the hard truth that TIME is NOT ours
to manage on our own...

My modest proposal for this month:
each time you consult your calendar or look at your watch—

--And maybe even hold your breath...
...for the One who carries EVERYTHING
and redeems EVERYTHING...
...is drawing near.

...If we take the time to notice...and follow...

Amen.

¹ This story was told in an article entitled “Fixing What’s (Not?) Broken” by Mary Ann McKibben Dana, May 29, 2013, at www.nextchurch.net.

² Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.

³ “The Numbing Season” by Rodney Clapp, *The Christian Century*, December 14, 2010

⁴ Patrick J. Howell, Theological Perspective for First Sunday of Advent, *Feasting on the Word*, ed. David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor

⁵ William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Fourth Quarter, 2010, Logos Productions

⁶ www.wouldhavesaid.com

⁷ “What Would You Say If You Knew It Was Your Last Chance?” by Sharon Jayson, *USA Today*, November 2, 2010

⁸ *Twice in a Lifetime*, Warner Brothers, 1985

⁹ Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark*, (Harper One, 1996)