

“In the Fullness of Time”

A Sermon for the Second Sunday of Christmas, January 2nd, 2011 Ecclesiastes 3:1-13; Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 1:3-14; John 1:1-18

I suppose it is that time of year when many of us live with a keener sense for the passing of time, even for the fullness of time, than in other days of the year. Gathered in the church the other night on Christmas Eve with candles aglow; sitting around the tree in the living room on Christmas morning sipping some Starbucks *Christmas Blend* and nibbling on holiday goodies; or toasting at the stroke of midnight on New Year’s Eve, there may be a greater feeling today for the passing of time, maybe even for the fullness of time. Another year is fulfilled. Full. You cannot put any thing more into 2010, with the possible exception of making an IRA contribution for last year. A new year is empty, awaiting fulfillment. You have almost everything to put into 2011.

“When the fullness of time had come,” St. Paul writes to the Galatians, “God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law” In the fullness of time; when the time was just right, a time like no other.

Time is passing, we know it, perhaps better today than any other time of year, better maybe as we grow older. Have you noticed that when you are a child, time just can’t pass quickly enough between Thanksgiving and Christmas (how I hated, as a child, lighting only one, little Advent candle on the weekend after Thanksgiving), or until you get your first bike, or until you get your driver’s license. (I can hardly wait until February when the insurance rates will double as another “young driver” in our family, as they call her, gets behind the wheel!). Later on, it seems that time passes all too quickly; as a parent, there is never enough time to get ready for Christmas.

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“But the whole trip rubs it in that time is passing.”

Guitarist Pete Townshend of *The Who* once wrote poetically about the passing of time: “I’m walking by the sea and the shingle sings for me / The crabs are swimming down among the starfish / The rocks all clatter down and the seagulls fly around / But the whole trip rubs it in that time is passing.”

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Today, I’d like to know, just where is time passing? To what end, I’d like to know, does time move?

In J. R. R. Tolkien’s novel, *The Hobbit*, which later becomes the precursor to *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the characters Bilbo Baggins and Gollum match wits in a dark cave in a contest of riddles. If Bilbo wins, then Gollum has to show him the way out of a tunnel. If Bilbo loses, then he becomes Gollum’s dinner. In the fifth riddle, Gollum says to Bilbo:

*This thing all things devours;
Birds, beasts, trees, flowers;
Gnaws iron, bites steel;
Grinds hard stones to meal;
Slays king, ruins town,
And beats mountain down.*

Of course, given the sermon theme for today, the answer to the riddle is: *Time*. Obviously, Bilbo wins

the riddle game and Gollum misses out on a delicious meal; otherwise, we wouldn't have had *The Lord of the Rings*.

Not only is time passing, suggests the riddle, but time is devouring everything in its path, "grinding hard stones to meal," "beating mountains down." "This thing all things devours. . . ." And if you happened to watch New Year's Eve in Times Square on Friday evening, you may have noticed with some sadness that time is devouring even the seemingly immortal Dick Clark; and on another station, Paul McCartney; and then, "Oh, I grew up with these people, and they're not that much older than me." Well, maybe Dick Clark, but then, I never could tell for sure how old he was.

According to Gollum's riddle, time is not moving toward fulfillment, but time is moving toward nothingness. Nonexistence. "This thing all things devours. . . ." Despite the differences between science and religion, and many of these may be rather imaginary, both agree: time had a beginning and time will have an end. But what shall be the end? Nothingness? Fulfillment? I suppose the question defines a fundamental difference between cynicism, even nihilism, and hope.

Notice that the first sentence in the Gospel of John echoes the first sentence of the Bible: "In the beginning God began creating the heavens and the earth."

"In the beginning was the Word," says the Gospel writer, "and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Through the Word made flesh in Jesus, John claims, God created the world, and through the Word made flesh in Jesus, he says, God goes on creating the world by saving it. By the way, remember how the LORD asks Job, when the LORD finally gets to speak after some thirty-seven chapters of the various arguments being presented as in a court of law: "Where were you [Job] when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. . . . Surely you know!"

"He was foreknown before the foundation of the world," echoes First Peter.

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God in the final book of the Bible, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

Here, in Ephesians, and elsewhere in his letters, Paul insists that time is definitely going somewhere rather than nowhere. Time is moving, not toward nothingness, as some would have us believe, but toward fulfillment. In Christ, there is "a plan for the fullness of time. . . ."

The Bible covers a lot of time; as I figure, it presents over four thousand years of history, beginning with the primordial accounts of history in Genesis 1-11 through the latest writings of the New Testament. Obviously, the Scriptures attest to some wonderful, marvelous, miraculous, mighty acts of God which happen, it seems, in the "fullness of time," when the time is just right. . . for God. Yet, considering that

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there is so much history in these pages, don't you think that maybe the wonderful, marvelous, miraculous, mighty acts of God are, well, rather occasional, considering the passage of so much time? You can wait long stretches of time, reading page after page, chapter after chapter, waiting for God to do something really spectacular like the Flood, the Exodus, the Deliverance from Exile, the Resurrection, or Pentecost.

The Hebrew slaves in Egypt, according to the

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Biblical account, waited 430 years for God to hear their cries for freedom. The Bible doesn't tell us why it took so long. We know almost nothing about Jesus until the time he is baptized by John, maybe around his 30th birthday. The Gospels don't have much to say about his first thirty years—his childhood, his teenage years, his young adulthood—other than Luke's story of Jesus in the Temple with the teachers about the time of what we might call his *bar mitzvah*. Paul tells his churches, "You don't need to marry. Don't worry about being slaves. Don't bother about being persecuted. It'll all be over soon. The Lord is coming sometime soon." Well, some of his churches want to know, what's taking so long? And Second Peter answers, "Don't you know that with the Lord, one day is like a thousand of our years? What seems like a long time to you is no time at all to an eternal God."

In my experience, God does not hurry. God is just not on my schedule. And that's hard, especially when you are suffering, or needing an answer, or waiting for deliverance. It is hard, especially in a culture that knows nothing but how to hurry and how to have everything the way we want it . . . NOW! But in a paraphrase of the ancient philosopher, Sextus Empiricus, it is said, "Though the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceedingly fine; / Though with patience stands He waiting, with exactness grinds He all."

God has given us a sense for time. The passing of an old year; the birth of a new year. The rising of the sun and its setting. Summer and winter; spring and fall. Yet, after talking about "a time for this and a time for that, and a time for everything under the sun," Ecclesiastes reminds us that we "cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end." We know that time is passing, but we don't know what any of this means. We work, we wait, we worry, we weep, sometimes until we are weary and worn, and yet, we see nothing. We wonder: Does everything remain as it was? Have we not gone forward at all? Are we like the prophet Isaiah who wonders if he has spent his life for nothing and for vanity?

You know, I've been thinking, Christmas did not come because people worked, waited, worried, and wept over doing something good, or because of the successful

outcome of some human endeavor, or because we deserved it. This is not Christmas. Christmas came because of the "fullness of time." God decided to give us Christmas at the right time. Christmas, as life itself, as time itself, is the gift of the Father which he lays into those arms that are stretched out in longing.

A child is not born until "the fullness of time." A child does not walk until "the fullness of time." A child does not speak until "the fullness of time." We dare not rush any of this until a child is developmentally ready.

Most of life (and time!) cannot be pushed around by us, even though we are deceived into thinking that we can push anything or anyone around the way we please, including "the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

In a Christmas sermon, the German philosopher and theologian, Eberhard Arnold, writes, much more eloquently than I can say it, "Maybe you have waited for years to be freed from some need. For a long, long time you have looked out from the darkness

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in search of the light with some hardship, [some difficulty, some disorder, or disability] that you have not been able to solve in spite of great efforts. And then, when the time was fulfilled and God's hour had come, a solution came quite unexpectedly, maybe even much differently than you thought. . . .

“When we are discouraged by the apparent slow progress of all our honest efforts, by the failure of this or the other person, and by the ever new reappearance of enemy powers and their apparent victories (Arnold was writing in the 1930s about the time of Hitler's ascent to power in Germany), then we shall know: the time shall be fulfilled. Because of the noise and activity of the struggle and the work, we often do not hear the hidden gentle sound and movement of the life that is coming into being. But here and there, at hours that are blessed, God lets us feel how he is everywhere at work and how his cause is growing and moving forward. The time is being fulfilled and the light shall shine, perhaps just when it seems to us that the darkness is impenetrable.

“For the miracle of Christmas comes not only from above; it also comes through us; it is also dwelling in us. . . . Calling, it waits for the hour when the soul shall open itself, having found its God and its home. When this is so, the soul will not keep its wealth to itself, but will let it flow out into the world. Wherever love proceeds from us and becomes truth, the time is fulfilled.”

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