

“The Present Time” / Luke 12:54-56 / 18 August 2013

Jesus says to those day-laborers and farmers of old, with their weary bodies and calloused hands, “You know how to interpret the signs of earth and sky. You know how to read the weather patterns, the earth's cycles and seasons, times for planting and harvesting. How is it, then, that you don't know how to interpret this present time?” And you! Do you know how to interpret the present time...in your life? In our world?

If people have trouble interpreting the present time it's largely because they never saw it coming. Time sneaks up on us. It accosts us unexpectedly with things we'd hoped to prepare for. My study sits just above the boiler room on the north end of the church, and whenever those old boilers kick on, you can hear the water churning through the walls, bubbling, gurgling, steaming away toward far-flung reaches of the building, as the thermostats call for heat. In the colder months, my study sounds like some engine room in the bowels of a submarine. Just this past Friday, I came back from two weeks in balmy Hawaii and opened the study door to find that the great churning—“the sound of many waters”—had already returned...in mid-August. It had been 56 degrees overnight, so the furnace was plugging away. And I asked myself, “Is it that time already?”

With our jet-lagged bodies still operating on Hawaii time, I've been asking myself every morning, as the alarm clock screams, “6:30 already?” And with the kids' summer break ending in just three days, it's pretty much the same question. Where did the time go? Where did the summer go? It went streaming through our fingers like so much sand on a beach in Maui. In the midst of the summer, we were able to take its bounty for granted, but now with a chill in the morning air, we hurry off to the school to meet the new teachers and to tour the new school building, and there's an urgency, a rush that wasn't there before. We ask ourselves, “Is it that time already?” Maybe you know the question...and the feeling.

Time sneaks up on us, and I don't just mean the annual arrival of winter. It sneaks in more personal ways, too. I often get the urge to read my girls a nice picture book like my personal favorite, *Where the Wild Things Are*, only to remember that they've already moved on to Harry Potter, and if I want to revisit the mythical world of Maurice Sendak, then I'll just have to do it by myself because they're no longer interested in going there with me. And like many a parent before me, I must ask myself: Harry Potter, Hogwarts, Dumbledore? Chapter books, fantasy novels, books without pictures? Is it that time already? Just one last time, can't we read *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*? The grandchildren are still a long way off, and I don't feel ready to let go of Dr. Seuss. Is it that time already? Pretty soon they'll be talking about boys and Justin Beaver.

Time sneaks up on us in so many intimate ways. A few months ago, someone was trying to show me some picture in a magazine, and she held it up to my face. I was annoyed that she was holding it so close, so I held it a little further away...then found that I had to hold it even further yet, almost at arm's length. It was then that a realization struck: It's time for me to get bifocals. I, who still occasionally labor under the illusion that the wrinkles are just because I slept badly last night, I, who still think that I can blame the extra weight on the holidays—eight months ago! I'm aging and asking myself, “Is it that time already?”

By the time our hearts and minds have softened enough to really enjoy life, it seems that our bodies have softened too much to keep up. We drift through life not really thinking much about the passage of time. We might wander through our years with a vague sense of something missing, complaining about the things we have or don't have, feeling bored much of the time. We drift through life, not really understanding most of the things that happen to us, but hoping for the best. Every once in a while something comes our way to give us pause and cause us to ask, “Really? Is it that time already?”

What time is it in your life today? You in your pew—perhaps the same exact seat that you've occupied for decades—what new season has life opened up before you while you weren't looking? You who, like most human beings, cherish the hard-won lessons of yesterday, you who hold fast to the

habits, and the beliefs, and the actions that the years have taught you (because they've worked for you in the past): Are you sure that you are not being called forward into something unfamiliar, something altogether new? “You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky,” Jesus says to those ancient folks who did indeed know about such things, “but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?” And you! You may not know how to interpret earth and sky, but you do know how to interpret road signs, and bank statements, and the arrivals / departures board at the airport: Do you know how to interpret the present time in your life, in our world?

What do you think Jesus was talking about, all those centuries ago, when he asked those ordinary folk why they couldn't interpret the times in which they were living? Did he expect them to know that the kingdom of God was at hand? If so, then I can't blame them for not knowing. I mean, we're praying for the coming of that kingdom still today. Those poor people lived off the rhythms of the land. They had all they could do just to keep up with the regular cycles of planting and harvesting. Did he expect them to share his sense of urgency about God's mission for the world? If so, then you really can't fault them for worrying mostly about more immediate concerns, how to stay clothed and fed, how to provide for their families. Did Jesus want the poor of the earth to catch his vision of justice, his understanding of shalom, his dream of well-being and peace for all the world's people? Did he expect them to understand that the world was about to change forever? I wonder if it wasn't just too much to ask of people whose hearts, and minds, and bodies were already burdened with the tedium of mere survival.

Does anyone ever truly understand the urgency of their moment in history? Did the men and women at Pearl Harbor know what their moment in time would unleash upon the world, or did that violent moment take them by surprise and leave them mostly just trying to survive it? Did they know that just two airstrikes on a Sunday morning in 1941 would launch the United States into a cycle of militarization that continues to this day? Did you and I know on a September morning twelve years ago what that day would mean for the rest of our lives, much less the rest of world history? Most of us don't think quite so broadly as all of that. We don't see our moment for its place in history; we judge it merely by the effect that it's having on us right now. It's not that we're shallow, and it's not that we're stupid. It's only that we're distracted by concerns that seem more present; our hands and our hearts are busy coping. Just coping. And does any of us ever truly sense the full weight of our moment in history? Do parents really think about the long-term effects that their words have on their children? Do teachers remember that they're touching and shaping the future? Do we think much about the impact that our lifestyles will have on the planet? Do we see ourselves in the larger framework of history, or do we mostly just want to make it through the day so that we can get home and collapse in front of the TV? Which of us really understands our moments and our days until they're behind us; it's only when they're past that we truly know how precious they were. It's only when we look back over our shoulders that we see them for what they were: gifts to be cherished, celebrated, enjoyed, gifts to be used for the benefit of the world around us.

Think of that bold, impassioned Jesus who read his times with urgency. His very first sermon is recorded in the Book of Mark—the oldest gospel. It's a simple homily about the fullness of time. Do you remember it? “The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe the gospel.” This is urgent stuff. There are things that cannot wait—things in the world and things in your life. The time to change is now. And all preaching—if it is faithful to the person of Jesus—will tell pretty much the same truth: The time is now. The “kingdom of God” really can happen in your life and in our world. Change, and trust the good news. Is it that time already? It is. It is.

Timing is a funny thing. A health-minded couple in their 80s died in a car wreck and went to heaven. (Don't analyze this story for its theology!) An angel gave them a tour of the mansions, the golf courses, the indoor heated pools. Best of all, the angel showed them the heavenly cafeteria with its delicious, cholesterol-laden, fatty foods. The angel said, “In heaven, you can eat anything and never get sick.” The man looked at his wife and said, “You and your bran muffins. I could have been here

ten years ago!”

Yes, timing is a funny thing. On the long flight back from Hawaii, soaring 30,000 feet above shark-infested waters, and 1,000 miles from any land, I began to think about that seat cushion that can be used as a flotation device. I called to mind the emergency airplane landing that occurred several years ago on the waters of the Hudson River. The TV preacher Joel Osteen said that God had timed it all very carefully, putting just the right pilot on board to bring those people all to safety. But by that logic, we would also have to say that God timed other flights less fortunately, that God's plan allowed some planes to plummet into the Pacific. I'm not sure if God willfully puts us in certain places at certain times, carefully premeditating all of our appointments and chance encounters. God may or may not behave in that way; I'm not sure. I used to believe firmly that all our life was preplanned by a very busy God. Sometimes, when faced with tragedy or loss, I find myself returning as if by default to that old “Puppet-Master God” who preordains the destiny of all things. But mostly my Calvinism has softened over the years. I've come to see God not as the One who holds the puppet strings of the world, standing outside of us and above us, but rather as the One who moves within the life of the world, and who in our better moments moves within even us, giving us the courage to be what we are not, the vision to see what we cannot, giving us the wisdom to know our present time...the strength to live into it! And I do believe with all certainty that—whatever our times or circumstances—we are called to see them and to act.

What time is it in our world today? In the long arc of history, even Greece had its day as a beacon of science, and philosophy, and politics. Today, Greece is mostly known as the country that drags down the value of the euro. “*Sic transit gloria mundi.*” Many a nation before and since has gone the way of England and Spain, Nineveh and Tyre. What time is it in America today? Do our noble 18th century visions of equality and self-rule still guide the nation that we've become? Or have greed and the lust for power made the dream unattainable to the many? Is it time to rethink our role on the world stage, time to treat all people with the dignity and respect that we claim to prize? Is it that time already?

What time is it in the church? Now that you no longer need an usher to help you find a seat, and our sermons are no longer published in the local newspapers: What is our calling for this day? Perhaps—now that we're no longer socially fashionable—we stand on the brink of recreating ourselves in closer alignment with the vision that our Founder first intended, for though the Christian churches have had their brush with power and prestige, Jesus was never prestigious...nor socially powerful. His vision of the self-giving life has never really been fashionable. The Jesus who clothed the sick, fed the poor, comforted the bereaved, welcomed the outcasts, and forgave those who were truly guilty—that Jesus has never been popular, no matter how fashionable the mutant imitation Jesus has become in recent years. Is it time for our churches to become like the true Jesus of Nazareth? Is it that time already?

And perhaps just as pressingly, what time is it for *you* today? You who sit in your pew on an August morning, you with all your silent worries gathered invisibly around you. You with your endless store of doubts and regrets, your dreams and desires—both wholesome and unwholesome. O, have courage. O, take heart. This is a new time, and you are being called forward into a new thing. And I'm pretty certain that you already know what it is that the present time demands of you. What are you being called to be or do today? Jesus' message never changes. Echoing down these long centuries of time, his urgency never fades. “The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God is at hand.” Is it that time already? It is. It is. Amen.