

"DOES ANYBODY REALLY KNOW WHAT TIME IT IS?"

Luke 21:5-1

November 13, 2022

York Center Church of the Brethren

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"What time is it?"

Your answer to this question has everything to do with context. For instance, if you are sitting on a hard, wooden pew and the preacher just hit the forty-minute mark with no sermon conclusion in sight, you may think it is time for the preacher to say "amen" and sit down.

If, on the other hand, you are at the end of a two-hour concert featuring your all-time favorite musician you might think it is time for the fourth encore.

The 70's rock band, Chicago, asked, "Does anybody really know what time it is?" According to Bob Dylan, "The times they are a'changin'."

So what time is it?

In chapter 21 of Luke's Gospel, it looks certain that Jesus is running out of time. He is just days away from being arrested and crucified. Looks can be deceiving though because Jesus actually has all the time in the world.

Since he entered the holy city of Jerusalem, on what we call Palm Sunday, Jesus and his disciples have spent every day in the Temple. As he gets closer and closer to the cross his teachings take on a new urgency. Some of those teachings are difficult for us to understand. But they weren't difficult for Luke's first readers to understand because they were living right in the middle of them. What sounds to us like a prediction of the end of the world, is actually a historical recitation of what the early Christians have already encountered and what they **will** encounter in the near future. This isn't a timetable of the end- it is a letter of comfort, courage, and invitation to first century Christians whose world appeared to be falling apart.

Luke is believed to have written these words fifteen years after the massive Temple had been reduced to rubble by the Roman army. The people hearing these words could look out their windows and see the remains of what was once considered to be the permanent, indestructible, home of God.

Herod the Great, a corrupt ruler and puppet of the Roman emperor, began the restoration and enlargement of the Temple, for his own glory. And it took nearly a century to

complete. It was said that 400,000 people could stand in the outer court. Seven years after it was completed the Roman army took it apart, stone by stone. They paraded the looted treasures through the streets of Rome.

Think about what this meant for the Jewish people. The Temple symbolized permanence for a people who had wandered homeless in the wilderness for forty years. It symbolized the center of the universe, the home of God, for a people who had spent generations languishing in exile, enslaved in foreign countries, forced to worship false gods. For first century Christians and Jews, the destruction of the Temple really was the end of the world as they knew it. It was devastating and it was terrifying.

So, years earlier, Jesus and his disciples are standing in the middle of the magnificent Temple, and someone comments on how remarkable and beautiful it is. And Jesus says, *"You think this place is awesome, don't you? You think it is indestructible. But you are wrong. One of these days this Temple will lie in smoking ruins, not one magnificent stone will be left untouched."* Can you imagine their horror?

Just forty years later the Roman army marched into the holy city, crushed the Jews, persecuted the Christians, and destroyed the city and the Temple. Everything the people treasured was gone. The center of their faith, the home of God on earth, no longer existed.

How would you even begin to process this? They were left with nothing. Or so they thought. And then they read these words of Jesus from Luke's Gospel and they realized that Jesus was telling them, *"they could not have a new world without letting go of the old one, which would have to crash and burn before anything fresh could be born in its ashes."*

*"When the end comes, Jesus told them, it will not be because God is absent, but because God is very present, having come in great power and glory to make all things new." (1)*

In this text Jesus is using "apocalyptic literature." "Apocalyptic" is a Greek word which means "revelation." It means an unveiling, an unfolding of things previously not known. Today we define apocalyptic as the catastrophic end of the world, but that is not how the Bible describes the word.

Every generation thinks they are witnessing the end of the world. But when, in history, has the world NOT been ending and changing? It is often changing more quickly than we would like and in ways that we do not understand.

The words of Jesus in Luke's Gospel remind Christ's followers of every age that the only secure future is God's future. Jesus offers a vision, less about world events and more about the real witness of his followers. Jesus never sugar-coated the demands of a

faithful life. But at the center of everything he said, is the promise that God is with them. Even if the Temple is gone. Even if they are persecuted. Even if their families kick them out. Even if everything they cherished is gone. God is with them. It was a reminder that gave them hope in an uncertain world.

I can see how people would read these words of scripture and take them literally. False messiahs are everywhere these days- claiming that they have the only direct line to God; laying blame for earthquakes and hurricanes on people who aren't like them. And while they fill their bank accounts with the hard-earned cash of the gullible, they preach words of judgement, division, and hatred.

Wars and rumors of war? There seems to be no end. And Jesus says, "*Sadly, this is just routine history.*" Tsunamis, famine, corrupt leaders. Again, you will think this is the end, but these destructive forces are as old as time and do not signify the end.

Some days it seems as though our world is changing so quickly; we just can't keep up. Values, institutions, and beliefs that we always assumed were steadfast are now feeling a bit wobbly. The very foundations of our democracy, which we have taken for granted for so long, are now up for grabs, often to the highest bidder. I can see how people of faith would turn to scripture, grab hold of apocalyptic literature, and look for any possible connection or prediction for our times. It is a scary time. The world is changing. We want reassurance and we want answers.

Just as the disciples looked to the Temple for security and permanence, we look to the institutions and structures which have always grounded us. Tom Long warns us about the tension that exists when God's people are *caught between God's formidable future and the seductions of a comfortable past. When God is doing something new in the world and God's people are beckoned to follow, there is temptation, nonetheless, to gaze longingly back toward the seeming security of the way things used to be.*" (2)

After Moses helped the Hebrew people escape from slavery in Egypt, when the going got tough in the wilderness and they didn't know where they were headed, they began to look back at the horrors they faced in Egypt and said, "Well, maybe it wasn't **that** bad."

Tom Long writes, "*Here, then, are the disciples in a familiar situation for God's people, between the seeming safety of the old and the frightening uncertainty of the new. The temple may have symbolized all that opposed Jesus as the Messiah, but it also represented all that was secure about the traditional patterns of worship and belief.*

*So, the rock-solid temple with all its trusted and established structures was behind them; the cross with all its fearful uncertainties and demanding sacrifices was ahead of them.*

*Given that location, no wonder the disciples turned back to admire the grandeur of the temple."*

Tom continues, "*But Jesus would not allow their nostalgic illusion. It was not just the temple that was doomed; the entire old world of which the temple was a part will ultimately pass away. Jesus condemned every institution that clings doggedly to the old patterns and resists the new thing that God is doing to bring mercy and redemption to human life.*" (3)

It seems to be human nature that when God is doing something new in the world that we don't yet understand, we suddenly love and idolize the past that we know. God doesn't need or want our nostalgia. God's people are **always** on the move, **always** called to move forward to a new and unknown future, to new understanding, new relationship. Jesus condemned every institution of the world that clings to its own power and resists the future of God.

Again, from Tom Long, "*Jesus said, it will do no good to gaze longingly at the shimmering splendor of a dying world, even at its most cherished and sacred institutions. The only future is God's future; the only authentic choice is to follow.*" (4)

There is another song about time that comes to mind, from that great theologian, Cher. "*If I could turn back time.*" (Which we did last week.) If I could turn back time, I would take us back to February 2020 when our financial giving was strong, when we had quite a few little ones squirming in the pews on Sunday mornings, we were excited about hiring a part-time Christian Education director, and we shared our building with God's Congregation Worship Center. And then-- Covid hit and life as we knew it changed, almost overnight and we lost many things we cherished.

If I could turn back time, I would go back to February 10, 2022 and I would step **around** that patch of ice on the sidewalk. The year would have played out much more like we all had planned. But it didn't. I am slowly healing physically, but remain broken in ways you can't see. So here we are.

As much as we might want to, it does no good to remain in the past, hoping that something will change. All we have is this moment, right here and right now. And in this moment, we worship the One who said he is the end and the beginning; the One who said he is the dividing line between the past and the future.

We often interpret changes in our world negatively. Whether those changes are political, economic, social, religious, or personal we fall into despair, imagining a better past and a decaying future. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to interpret the events of the world with a view toward God's presence in the world. We are called to acknowledge the

pain and the fear we feel. But we are also called to trust in the One who never ceases to love this world.

We are called to live in the “real” of now while also living in the hope for that which is yet to come. We are called to live out our faith within the world in which we stand right now, knowing that our God is the God of the past, the present, and the future.

All the pastors I talk to these days are trying to figure out what the church looks like now that the Covid lockdown has passed. We know that Covid isn't over, and may always be with us, so how do we minister to our congregations and to our communities?

Not everyone in our faith families has returned to worship- either online or in person. What does that mean for our congregations? How can we be a “whole” congregation when some are missing? What does that mean for pastors who often carry the burden of those empty seats?

Our new reality shines a glaring light on truths we would rather not see: budget deficits, the lack of volunteers to carry out our ministries, and the exhaustion of many of our congregational leaders. We are tired of waiting for God's new future, we look back over our shoulders and say, “That was a good time. That's what I want.”

As Barbara Brown Taylor so wisely suggests, “We cannot have a new world without letting go of the old one. And sometimes the old one must crash and burn before anything fresh can be born in its ashes.” As much as we may agree with this sentiment, it doesn't mean we want anything to crash and burn. In fact, that is too terrifying to even contemplate. But in many ways, the world as we knew it is gone. A new world is taking its place. We can't define it or describe it yet—and that makes us anxious.

Since I first read this quote by Sikh activist Valerie Kaur a few years ago, I go back to it over and over again. In fact, it has a place of prominence on my desk.

***“What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb—what if it is the darkness of the womb?”***

If we believe this to be true- how might we live, minister, and worship within our faith communities?

How might we live our lives out in the world?

If we are not in the tomb- where nothing is expected of us, but are instead in the womb where so much is expected as our new life is just about to burst forth, what difference can that make to us, to our church, to the world?

Next Sunday after worship we will gather as a congregation to take a look at where we have been these past few years, where we are right now, and where we sense God's call to the future. You will have an opportunity to share your fears and your joys. This will be an important conversation. I hope you will participate.

In just two weeks we will begin our Advent celebration- when we thank God for a birth that lit up the world. Advent reminds us that we have no reason to fear for we worship a loving God. We believe in the God of the universe who hung the stars and lovingly created each of us in God's own image.

We believe in the God of the manger, the God of the cross, and the God of the empty tomb. Our God breaks even the bonds of death and points us to a new world, so why do we cling so tightly to the old? We are called to move forward- always forward- with courage, faith, and boldness. We are called to teach and to heal and to preach the grace and kindness of God.

So, what time is it getting to be?

- It is time to trust in our loving God.
- It is time to discern God's vision for our life together.
- It is time to take the call of Christ seriously.

The only future for us is God's future.

The only authentic choice is to follow.

Who is with me?

Let's go!

Amen.

## END NOTES:

- "With Power and Great Glory," Barbara Brown Taylor, from *GOSPEL MEDICINE*, Cowley. 1995. Pp. 135-146.
- MATTHEW, Thomas G. Long, Westminster John Knox Press. 1997. P. 266.