

Worship Series: “Expecting Grace”

“Sent From God”—Sermon Text: Matthew 24:36-44

FUMC Arlington, Texas 76011

First Sunday of Advent: 27 November 2016

**“By the time a man realizes that maybe his father was right,
he usually has a son who thinks he’s wrong”**

—(Charles Wadsworth).

I have a good friend named Tom Butts who now lives in Monroeville, Alabama. When he retired from the United Methodist ministry a church-member gave him a distinctive wall clock for his retirement office. All twelve numbers on the clock are in a jumbled pile in the lower left hand corner. In the middle of the face of the clock, in bold letters, is the word “Whatever!”

Many of us have looked upon clocks and probably wished that we could have a few clocks in our lives like the gift clock Tom Butts received. Many of us are slaves to time, and time, like money, often dominates our lives. Over the centuries, many philosophers have waxed eloquently concerning time.

Yet, for many of us, time is not so much philosophic as it is practical. A contemporary theologian, Sam Keen, once observed: “Wisdom is knowing what time it is in your life.” It is important for us to understand time and also what time it is right now for us. Time is a key Advent theme. There is a superb passage from Ecclesiastes that reminds us graphically and explicitly of this philosophical idea concept of time:

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:
A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;

A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;
A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace (3:1-8).

Three verses later this biblical writer expands the specific into a general theological principal: “God has made everything suitable for its time; moreover God has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.”

Our lesson today focuses on “the time of fulfillment.” In Jesus’ day, as in ours, people were nearly obsessed about the idea of the “end times.” When will it be and how will it come? Questions like these followed Jesus around as they do many modern preachers. We are a curious people: “When will the end come and how will it arrive?” Today’s lesson is part of Jesus’ answer to the disciple’s question. The text from Matthew reads, “When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, ‘Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?’ ” (Matthew 24:3). The disciples asked this question and often so do we. Therefore, listen carefully for Jesus’ teaching on the matter:

36“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 37For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, 39and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. 40Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. 41Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.

42Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour (Matthew 24:36-44).

Note here that Jesus explicitly tells the disciples that “no one knows.” Not God’s angels and not even the Son—God alone knows. But even if we cannot know, nor the angels know, nor even the Son know God’s setting for the divine timetable, the time will come. People were surprised by the flood in the days of Noah. The coming of the Messiah will also be surprising—

“two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left.” Or “two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.” By these metaphors of the end time, Jesus instructs the disciples as Jesus instructs us: “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.” But what does it mean to be ready?

Perhaps you have seen the film “The Terminal.” It is a story about Viktor Navorski (Tom Hanks) whose imagined European country Krakozhia has experienced a coup that has overthrown his government. When Victor lands in New York he has no country and is stuck in the terminal of JFK airport. As a person without a nation, he lives in the terminal itself and makes friends in the airport. The movie portrays what Viktor Navorski does for nine months as he waits for the political bureaucrats to sort out his citizenship issues. The entirety of the film concentrates on what a person does while waiting in limbo. For us, this is a good image of what we do while we wait for the coming of Messiah.

We do not know when the Messiah will come, but Jesus does instruct us to wait in faith. Jesus says, “Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” But what does faithful waiting look like? I suggest that faithful waiting entails no more, and no less, than to be disciples. Jesus wants us to be busy being about the things he has taught. Among these tasks is to certainly do as Jesus taught his disciples in John’s Gospel: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12). To be a disciple is to do what disciples do, whether or not we know how long God calls us to do this activity on behalf of God’s Realm.

Near the end of his life, a young man asked St. Francis of Assisi as he was hoeing his garden what he would do if he found out that he was to soon die. His answer is instructive for all of us. He said, “I would continue to cultivate my garden.”

We can know something about what time it is, but we cannot know everything. That mysterious knowledge is for God alone, but we can know what time it is in our lives. We can



know when to slow down and when to speed up. We can know enough to not let the urgent usurp the important.

Near the end of Rembrandt's life an old friend invited Rembrandt to play chess. He replied: "I have no more time for games. I only have time for my work."

Do you know what time it is in your life and are you ready for the Messiah to arrive? This is our Advent question today—at this very time. Amen.

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