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Thankful Memorial Episcopal Church
Chattanooga, TN / Diocese of East Tennessee
First Sunday of Advent 2022

Isaiah 2:1–5

Psalm 122

Romans 13:11–14

Matthew 24:36–44

Advent—it's about time! By which I mean both, “It’s about time that it’s finally Advent” and “Time is what Advent itself is all about.” Or, put differently, the primary theme or topic of this Advent season is *time*. Hence my children’s homily and this clock on the pulpit. Advent is about time past, time present, and time future. The *time past* of Advent (which means, “arrival”) is the first coming of Christ, 2000 years ago in Palestine, the helpless infant in the Bethlehem manger; the *time future* of Advent is the second coming or arrival of Christ in majesty and might; and the *time present* of Advent is that long period of in-between-ness in which we now wait.

And so in the short Advent season which begins the Christian year but which also ends one calendar year and begins another, we strive to hold together these three tenses of past, present, and future while cultivating a somewhat paradoxical posture of both patience *and* anticipation. That is, we need to settle in for the long haul of life and yet be ready to go at a moment’s notice. In that sense, although Advent is only a four-week season in the Church year, we are also *always* in Advent until the end of time. Striving to be perpetually patient while maintaining appropriate anticipation is one of the major tasks of the Christian life, but it is not easy.

But then, neither is time itself. In a provocative passage from his *Confessions*, Saint Augustine famously wrote: “What then is time? If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain it to him who asks, I do not know.” That’s why I asked the children that very question, “What is time?” I genuinely wanted to see if they could help solve a problem that stumped one of the most brilliant minds in human history. Augustine knew what time was as long as he didn’t have to explain it, but as soon as he tried to define it the concept just slipped away from him. But, of course, sadly enough, it’s not just the *concept* of time that slips away from us: so does time itself. As the Steve Miller Band also famously put it, way back in 1976: “Time keeps on slippin’, slippin’, slippin’ / Into the future.” I have to say, I have never quite understood that line, as it seems to me that time slips not into the future but into the past. Or does it? That’s part of the mystery of time.

Earlier I mentioned the three tenses of *past*, *present*, and *future*. We use these terms all the time (...), but really they are quite mysterious. While we talk confidently about the past and the future, in a very real sense they don't exist: all that exists is the present, or right now. But what is the present? Psychologists study what is sometimes called the "specious present" or "temporal consciousness"—that is, how long is "now" from a human perspective? The answer, apparently, is just under a second. I began this sermon about four minutes ago, and that moment is already irretrievably in the past, never to return; from the perspective of that past moment we are already four minutes into the future; but really we have been in the present the whole time. It's just that the present keeps moving forward, and carries us with it. We leave the past behind, and move into the future, but we are actually always in the present, an endless succession of "now," "now," "now," "now," "now"...

Of course, while we are always in the temporal present, that doesn't mean *we* don't change. We are not, as they say, "frozen in time," but from the moment of our conception to the moment of our death we are in perpetual growth and development, change and decay. The inevitable and inexorable passage of time—that endless succession of "now's"—leaves its mark on us and we measure seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, and decades by these marks of change, both in us personally and in the world around us. This is another part of the paradox of time, namely that we are always in the present but in continual change, and again always moving in the same direction. Time doesn't ever stop, or go backwards.

So then, what is God's relation to time? That is a question that, like Augustine, I cannot answer, other than to say that God's relation to time is different from ours. Some theologians think that God is outside of time altogether, and that God created time when God created the universe; others think that God's relationship to time is more complicated than that, such that God is both inside time and outside time. But whatever God's relation to time may be, it is not the same as ours. Time does not leave its mark on God the way it leaves its mark on us, God's life is not measured by time, and God does not change and decay.

And all of this may be very interesting, but what does it have to do with us here and now in this present time on the First Sunday of Advent, November the 27th, 2022? Time is a mystery, time is a paradox, time leaves its mark on us, but time is also a gift, and a precious one at that. As I said at the start of this sermon, Advent is about time past, time present, and time future. But, as I then went on to say, while we can indeed talk about the past and the future, only the present exists, and in temporal terms we are always only in the present. If time is a gift, then the present is a present, a present to us from God.

So then what do we do with it? How do we make use of the time that we are in? In our epistle lesson, the Apostle Paul writes:

...you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

As you may know, when Paul speaks of “flesh” here he is not talking about the physical body, but a particular mindset that is focused only on our earthly life to the exclusion of any spiritual or eternal reality. That’s why he includes quarrelling and jealousy as works of the flesh, and not just things like reveling and drunkenness. Paul is not against the body and its proper pleasures, he is against the flesh understood as everything in us that is opposed to God, which includes emotions and attitudes and beliefs as well as behaviors. But the point here is that Paul doesn’t think our salvation occurs apart from time, or out of time, but rather it is bound up in time, specifically in the particular moment inaugurated by the first coming of Christ and now anticipating the second coming. As Jesus himself says in our Gospel reading from Matthew, no one knows the day or hour, so we must always remain ready for the long-awaited event to occur at an unexpected time.

What does it mean to be ready? Both the epistle and the gospel highlight the importance of time: of knowing what time it is, using our time rightly, recognizing the passage of time and yet not knowing at what time the time will come. They simultaneously offer a warning and a reassurance: a warning about what not to do and a reassurance about how to live our lives in the time of Advent. And, interestingly, the word that Paul uses to describe how to live an Advent life is “honorably.” We are called to live as *honorably* as we can in the time we have left.

So let us pray: “Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.”