

God and Time

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Isaiah 35:1-10 and James 5:7-11

Delivered on December 15, 2019

Imagine if you would that one day you go to a wedding. Now, I don't mean some Vegas chapel wedding with an Elvis impersonator and pre-recorded music, but a classy wedding, a traditional church wedding. The bride marches in wearing a stark white or ivory dress, there's a veil, a train, and all that jazz. The groom stands at the altar in a handsome tuxedo or a morning coat. There are bridesmaids ushers, somebody gets up to read Paul's poem about love being patient and kind and all that. And finally it comes time for the bride and groom to exchange their vows. A hush falls over the sanctuary. It is the grooms turn to go first and so he turns to his bride and he says, "I Winston do take you Buffy to be my lawfully wedded wife, and I do promise and covenant before God and these witnesses, to love honor and cherish you for the next 30 minutes." And suppose Buffy says the same thing. "I Buffy do take you Winston to be my lawfully wedded husband and I do promise and covenant before God and these witnesses to love honor and cherish you for the next thirty minutes."

What would you say if you were listening to this? Now maybe the bride and groom are nervous and so they are barely speaking above a whisper and maybe you aren't sure that you heard them right. But once you find out that is indeed what they said what would you say?

Or imagine something a little different. Imagine this time the bride and groom did not promise to love, honor and cherish each other for the next thirty minutes but they promised to love honor and cherish each other for the rest of their lives, but only between say, five and six-thirty every night. I imagine in your mind that wouldn't be much better.

But why? What would be wrong with such vows? Well, maybe I can't put my finger on what exactly would be wrong with them. Indeed, maybe none of us can. But I submit that what would be wrong with such vows is not that people in marriages don't need time alone, or they don't need personal space, but there is something deeply wrong with someone only pledging to be your part-time spouse, even if they should pledge to be your part-time spouse until death do you part. In the past you may have had a romantic relationship or even a friendship with someone who had to pencil you into their schedule, who had to pencil you in on the calendar in certain blocks of time. I think there is something disappointing about such relationships. And why disappointing? They were disappointing because you probably didn't feel too valued by the person. There was something about the relationship that made you feel less like the person's friend or their special someone and more like their dental hygienist. Like you didn't have to be thought about or even cared about until you popped up on the calendar in this narrow block of time, and then once the block of time was over you were out of their life again.

We are now in the third Sunday of Advent and as I have already noted in the past couple of weeks, during Advent we read texts which talk to us about the coming of the Lord. You are also aware, and you would probably be aware of this even if I had not told you, that many people have predicted the very day of the Lords' return and some of them even predicted the very the hour and minute of the Lord's return. Just to give you one example, a woman in the Seventh Day Adventist church named Margaret Rowan once predicted that the Lord would come back at midnight on February 13, 1925. I don't know if that was midnight in every time zone so that there would be a separate return for each time zone, or if it was just supposed to happen at midnight in her time zone, but whatever it was, midnight on February 13, 1925 is what Ms.

Rowan thought. Now, in Advent sermons past, I have said that one problem with these kinds of predictions is that Jesus himself said no one knows the day and hour of his return, but let us suppose for just a moment that he had said the day and the hour. Let us suppose he had said that he was going to come back at midnight on February 13, 1925, or let's say February 13th of 2025. Now, in one way that might be kind of nice. But, I submit to you that one problem with that is that if the Lord's return would be sort of like those wedding vows I imagined. The problem is that you could confine any concern about the Lord to a certain block of time, you could confine all your cares about justice, and mercy, stewardship, discipleship to when this block of time rolled around. And so as we read those passages of scripture where Jesus says things to us like do unto others as you would have them do unto you, all of us could easily say, you know what I will worry about that when we get to about January of 2025, for now I'm just going to focus on doing as I please. Or when we read where Jesus says if someone strikes you on one cheek offer him the other people might say you know what, I'll worry about that when I get to about December of 2024, for now, if someone hits me, I'm hitting back. Just like you wouldn't be all that important for someone who treated you like the dental hygienist, what kind of Christians would we be, what kind of disciples would we be if we treated the Lord in the same way.

Well, no one can deny that the Lord is coming back at a certain time, a certain hour and minute of the day. Jesus never said the Lord wouldn't come back at a certain hour and minute, he just said we didn't know the hour and the minute. The problem though is that the writers of these Advent texts we read this time of year did not think about the coming of the Lord that way, and in fact they didn't really think about time that way.

As we open our New Testament lesson today, we read from the Book of James which goes as follows. Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.

What kind of time is being described here when we hear that the coming of the Lord is near? Well, I don't think it is the kind of time which would cause us to look at our calendars and our watches and says is the Lord coming on this day and at this time, rather it is the kind of time I think you might find if you have ever talked to that cousin who lives way way out in the country, out where there is nothing but farms and dirt roads, and where nobody wears a watch. And you say to that cousin when would you like me to come see you and they say why don't you come at supertime or why don't you come at breakfast. This is a cousin for whom all talk of hours and minutes is replaced by talk of supertime, daytime and nighttime, and all talk of months and days is replaced by talk of wintertime, springtime, harvest time, planting time.

When we think about the way we measure time in our urbanized lives, when we think about the watches and clocks and calendars of time, every single moment of time looks exactly the same. Every day on the calendar comes in one of those little square boxes all of them the exact same size, every second is the same length, every minute is the same length. When we think about the way we measure time in our urbanized life it is almost like going to one of those suburban developments where row after row of houses all look exactly the same. They all have houses on a quarter acre of property and every house has the exact same design and they are all have the same amount of space between them. It's almost eerie isn't it?

But we all know that every moment of time is not the same. Wintertime is much different from summertime, nighttime is different from daytime, the roaring twenties were different from the Depression of the thirties, and as Charles Dickens reminds us some times are the best of times and the worst of times.

And that is also what we hear in this passage today. We hear that in this time before the kingdom comes, this time before the kingdom comes is a time that is marked by impatience. It is marked by impatience because we all grow tired of death and disease, we grow tired of warfare and violence. We grow tired of all the nonsense. We get tired of people being cruel to us, betraying us and being dishonest with us. Even pastors are dishonest. I can't tell you how many times I have heard someone in a sermon pass off a story that they've picked up on the internet somewhere and they'll tell the story as if it happened to them. And I know because I read the same story. Why would you do that? Why can't you just say this is a story I read. Why do you have to lie? But in this life we have death, we have suffering, we have people who violate our trust, we have people who are cruel to us. And we get tired of all that. That is part of this time we're living in.

And it is a time when it is natural for us to doubt. It is natural for us to doubt that things could ever be any different in this time when we're waiting for the kingdom to come, because rather than being divided up into minutes and hours and days that all look like row after row of those suburban houses, each time has a character that is so different from every other time, and frankly who knows that better than people who live in Ohio? When you look out over an Ohio landscape in the dead of winter, you can't imagine that anything like spring could ever come. The trees with their bare branches look so colorless and dead they are almost like

skeletons that have been in the grave for a hundred years and have lost all their flesh. And the snow covered ground is so cold, you can't imagine how the daffodil bulbs that lie buried a few inches under the earth could possibly survive. But every year, every year without fail this time leads to a completely different time, just like the time we are living in will without a doubt lead to a different time when the Lord returns to us.

And so James urges us to be patient just as the farmer is patient as he waits for the early and the late rains, the farmer waits for a different kind of time, not just a different minute or hour or day, but a different experience of time. A time that is marked by an experience the prophet Isaiah talks about in our Old Testament lesson today as a time when the eyes of the blind are opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped, a time when the lame leap like the deer and a time when the tongues of the speechless sing for joy.

Or maybe it would do better to give you the words of a different prophet, a prophet by the name of Robert Allen Zimmerman, or you may know him as Bob Dylan.

Come gather round people wherever you roam and admit that the waters around you have grown and accept it that soon you'll be drenched to the bone, if your time to you is worth savin' then you better start swimmin' or you'll sink like a stone, for the times they are a-changin'. Come writers and critics who prophecy with your pen and keep your eyes wide the chance won't come again and don't speak too soon, for the wheel's still in spin and there's no tellin' who that it's naming. For the loser now will be later to win, for the times they are a changin'. Come mothers and fathers throughout the land and don't criticize what you can't understand, your sons and your daughters are beyond your command, your old road is rapidly agin' please

get out of the new one if you can't lend a hand, for the times they are a changin'. The line it is drawn, the curse it is cast, the slow one now will later be fast, as the present now will later be past, the old order is rapidly fadin' and the first one now will later be last, for the times, for the times, for the times, for the times, they are a changin'. Be patient, the Lord is coming. He's right at the door. The times they are a changin'. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.