

Here We Grow Again
December 31, 2017
Luke 13:6-9, Ecclesiastes 3:1-8
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
Pastor Dave Carver

*To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit
<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2017/12/sermon12-31-2017.mp3>*

Don't answer this out loud, but think for a moment... What is your first thought upon awakening on a typical day? Not that groggy, in and out, half asleep stuff, but the first moment that your YOU is present... what fills your mind?

I could be wrong, of course, but I suspect that most of us fall somewhere on a spectrum... there are occasions when we find ourselves sighing, resignedly, "Well, here we go... another day in paradise... Same stuff, different day..." And there are, presumably, some people in the room who wake up delighted with the prospect of spending another day circling the sun, full of hope and purpose for the hours that lay ahead... "A whole new world..."

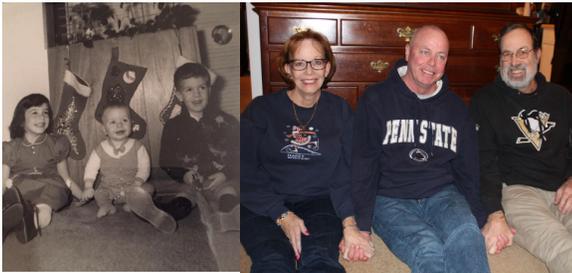


Or do you even think about those kinds of things? How important is time to you? Do you need to know what day, what hour, what minute it is? Are you always early, or chronically late? Do you feel as though you have to be *doing* something – you have to be productive all the time?

And how do you see yourself in the midst of time? I have a hunch that many, if not most of you, see yourselves as following a certain chronology... That could be a daily thing ("Hmmm, well, I have to be to work by four, so that means that I've got to finish the shopping by three..."), or it could be expanded into a longer view ("Yep, I'd better purchase that 2018 fishing license now..." or "Yikes, it's time to clean those carpets again...").

I'm walking around the edges of this relationship that you and I have with time at what I perceive to be an opportune moment. My hunch is that there are not as many times in the rhythm of our lives when we are as apt to say something like, "Oh, we *always* do such and such..." as we are around the holidays. We *always* buy a real tree... Grandma *always* makes the gravy and the stuffing... she *always* visits the cemetery on Christmas Eve...

Oh really? Are those things that, in fact, *always* happen?



I could say that I always spend time with my brother and sister around Christmas. And, in a way, that's true. I mean, photos don't lie, right? Here we are – late December back in '63, and then again on

Friday evening of this week... Yet is this the same thing? In what ways is this "always"? I mean, how many people are there in those photos? Are there three people on the screen? Or six? Obviously, the good-looking kid on the right is me. Or was me. But is the child the same me?

I mean, you think about this kind of stuff long enough and your head starts to hurt, doesn't it?

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I suspect that a part of the conundrum that we experience when we seek to think about and relate to the passing of time is the fact that we are, in some ways, bound to the passing of minutes, hours, days, and weeks. And yet in some very important ways, we are designed to transcend that.

British theologian and writer C.S. Lewis put it this way in his classic book *The Screwtape Letters*:

Humans are amphibians...half spirit and half animal...as spirits they belong to the eternal world, but as animals they

inhabit time. This means that while their spirit can be directed to an eternal object, their bodies, passions, and imaginations are in continual change, for to be in time, means to change. Their nearest approach to constancy, therefore, is undulation--the repeated return to a level from which they repeatedly fall back, a series of troughs and peaks.¹

This inbetweenness – sometimes feeling lost in eternity and other times feeling gripped by the moment was captured in an old *Far Side* cartoon by Gary Larsen:



We are, each of us, always, in both places. We are near to eternity, and we are stuck having to remember that garbage collection is delayed a day this week due to the holiday. And that is precisely why we sometimes find ourselves singing “A Whole New World” even while we’re muttering “same stuff, different day” under our breath. In some way, both are true. There are things that we have *always* done, but the *we* who have done them are different every single time, aren’t we?

I not only use time, keep time, spend time, save time, waste time... I am affected by time. I live within time. I am shaped by time. And, in some way, I am called to shape the times in which I live.



I’m preaching all this, of course, because

_____ (1942, chapter 8).

today is the first time in eleven years that New Year's Eve falls on a Sunday. In our culture, we think a lot about time on December 31. We look back at the year that has past, and we anticipate what is to come. Some of you, no doubt, are hard at work crafting your list of New Year's Resolutions...

Are we, waiting and watching for the beginning of another year, different than we were last year?

Well, yes and no.

How do you view time? A casual reading of Ecclesiastes might lead you to the conclusion that time is circular: we do this, and then we do this, and then this, and lo and behold we find ourselves back to the beginning again. It really is just the same stuff on a different day...

You'd be hard pressed to prove different by looking at our church calendar: there's advent, then Epiphany, ordinary time, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, ordinary time, and Advent... It does seem as though it is circular.

Yet when we remember that we are always moving, always changing, and always being given the opportunity to grow, we confess that time is not merely circular, but rather, it has a structure and a movement that may bring us around to similar places, but not the same place. I like to think of the rhythm of the year like those ramps at Heinz Field or any other stadium. They are built in a circle, and as you get closer to the nosebleed seats, you'll find that you have several opportunities to be looking North, East, South, or West... but when you get to "that" spot again, your vantage point is a little different because you are thirty feet higher than you were the last time around.



Ecclesiastes *does* say that the seasons come, and go, and repeat... but a careful reading will also indicate that they are not the same – because *we* are not



the same. The landscape, and our perspective on it, changes as we mature and, well, encounter more and more seasons.

²Which brings me to December 31 and the parable of the fig tree in the vineyard. Allow me to make several brief observations about these verses as we worship together for the last time in 2017.

First, let us note that in all likelihood, the central figure in this story – the landowner – is supposed to remind us of God the Father. And what do we note about this landowner? His main business is the vineyard. That’s the way that he describes his property. And yet growing in this vineyard is a fig tree. The figs are *not* this man’s main interest. They are a hobby. They, for some reason, occasion his interest or even his delight. He doesn’t *need* the figs. He *wants* them. He is *eager* for them.

The landowner’s central concern is, of course, *fruit*. He is not interested in the fig tree for the sake of the lumber or shade or the quality of leaves it may or may not provide. No, he looks at it and he wants to know if it is bearing fruit. If it is, in fact, doing that which fig trees *ought* to do. Is it blessing him or others? Is it bringing forth richness and nutrition and, well, *delight*? At this point in the story, of course, it is not.

And yet there is a profound sense of patience, and hope, or at least tolerance on the part of the landowner. His servant – whom I would identify as the Christ-figure in this parable – has an eye to the future and an awareness of the fact that things can and do change. The gardener convinces the landowner to care *more* about the tree, and to invest it with the special attention and other conditions that are likely to result in the appearance of some fruit. Interestingly, the verb that the gardener uses when beseeching the landowner is the Greek word *aphes*. In our translation here, it is rendered “let the tree have another year”. *Aphes* – “leave it be; let it alone...” – is also translated as “forgive”. In fact, the One

² *The Vine Dresser and the Fig Tree*, James Tissot (between 1886-1894)

who told this story, Jesus, would use that same word on the day that he was killed – and he looked up to his Father and said, “Father, *aphes* – forgive; let them alone – they don’t know what they’re doing. Give me time here...”

Here’s my point: somehow, against all odds, you and I have survived another year. That is to say, we’ve lived through 2017 (so far!) and we’re still speaking to each other. We got out of bed this morning – maybe singing, maybe mumbling. We’ve got today. We are *not* the same people as we were 365 days ago, and yet many of us are in the same place... What are we supposed to do with that?

In 1999, Annie Dillard thought about the significance of the changing of a millennium and wound up writing a wonderful book entitled *For the Time Being*. In it, she challenges us to consider who we are as creatures who can only exist in and through time. Listen:

Is it not late? A late time to be living? Are not our heightened times the important ones? For we have nuclear bombs. Are we not especially significant because our century is? —our century and its unique Holocaust, its refugee populations, its serial totalitarian exterminations, our century and its antibiotics, silicon chips, men on the moon, and spliced genes? No, we are not and it is not. These times of ours are ordinary times, a slice of life like any other....

There were no formerly heroic times, and there was no formerly pure generation. There is no one here but us chickens, and so it has always been: a people busy and powerful, knowledgeable, ambivalent, important, fearful, and self-aware; a people who scheme, promote, deceive, and conquer; who pray for their loved ones, and long to flee misery and skip death. It is a weakening and discoloring idea, that rustic people knew God personally

once upon a time—or even knew selflessness or courage or literature—but that it is too late for us. In fact, the absolute is available to everyone in every age. There never was a more holy age than ours, and never a less. There is no less holiness at this time—as you are reading this—than there was the day the Red Sea parted, or that day in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as Ezekiel was a captive by the river Chebar, when the heavens opened and he saw visions of God.... In any instant the sacred may wipe you with its finger. In any instant the bush may flare, your feet may rise, or you may see a bunch of souls in a tree. In any instant you may avail yourself of the power to love your enemies; to accept failure, slander, or the grief of loss; or to endure torture. Purity's time is always now.³

I think that the point is this, and simply this: thanks be to the grace of the landowner and the love of the gardener, we have everything we need. As we stand on the brink of 2018, we are able to do that for which we have been created: we can bear fruit in the place we've been planted and the season we've been given. Let us, therefore live and move in these days as those who are interested in producing fruit of love, grace, hope, and peace. It's who you are. It's *why* you are. Thanks be to God, it's the reason you're here and now. Amen.

³ Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being* (Knopf, 1999) pp. 30, 88-89.