

Lydia Neufeld Harder, December 1, 2013

**“Oh, the Mystery of God’s Dwelling. . .in our present”
(Isaiah 2: 1-6, Matt. 24: 36-44, Romans 13: 11-14.)**

When I read the lectionary texts for this Sunday I was struck by the prominence of language that refers to **time**. Isaiah begins with “In the days to come. . .” clearly referring to a future time, Matthew refers to the time of Noah, “past time” and Romans clearly asks us to think about the present, “now is the moment”.

Simple, isn’t it? Time is past, present and future. But time is also a mysterious concept—not only because we are often not on time but because time seems to go faster sometimes and really, really slow other times—regardless of what the clock says. Ask any child who is waiting for a birthday or for Christmas Eve, ask any person who has sat at the death bed of a loved one, ask those who cannot sleep at night because of pain or worry. And sometimes time seems to stand still—when we hear shocking news, when we experience a most beautiful moment, when we catch a glimpse of transcendence in our mundane reality.

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Growing up on the farm I heard many short pithy sayings about time from my parents. When we wanted to stay up late in the evening my Dad would come up with the German saying, “*Morgen ist die Nacht zu ende.*” Tomorrow the night is over! And we knew that even if we didn’t get to bed early we would still have to get up early to cut asparagus before school or be ready to pick cherries as soon as the sun was up. He still held to the belief that we needed to work when the sun was up and sleep when the sun went down!

~~The Greeks were well aware of the mysterious quality of time. They felt they needed two words to speak about the two different senses of time. The term *chronos* from which our term chronology comes is quantified time measured by the clock—seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, years. The second term is *kairos* time, qualitative time, moments, not seconds or minutes—moment that are the opportune time or the right time or the perfect time. Kairos conveys the sense of ripeness, or fullness. In kairos time, a moment seems change everything dramatically, there is a decisive turning point in our lives, when we know from that time on everything is different.~~

~~Kairos time cannot be forced or maybe even planned for. It is often a surprise and conveys feelings of expectation, excitement, but also risk!~~

~~The South African theologians who wrote the “Kairos Document” in 1985 knew something of both the risk and the excitement that would be created by their words. The document began with the words: “The time has come. The moment of truth as arrived...” And then went with the vision of hope, that the time was ripe for change in South Africa. Apartheid had come to an end, something new needed to emerge in its place.~~

A poem came to mind as I thought about all of this. An ancient poem from the book of Ecclesiastes written at least 2500 years ago that has stood the test of time. Let me read it to you:

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8:

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

- a time to be born, and a time to die;
- a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what 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 throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
- a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
 - a time to seek, and a time to lose;
- a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
 - a time to tear, 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 for war, and a time for peace.

We all know that timing is everything and that if we get our timing wrong, everything is wrong.

Babies have hopeless timing; first of all in their coming, they don't ask whether this is the most convenient time or whether we are emotionally ready for them. (Ask Elfrieda's parents) They arrive unexpectedly, often even when we have planned it in every detail. And then those small bundles of joy can be awake all night long and then in the morning ~~fall asleep in their breakfast cereal, fall asleep in in their highchair with their head in a bowl of cereal.~~

Last week I was caring for my two year old granddaughter while her parents were away for 5 days. I discovered a lot about the difference between my notion of timing and her ideas about timing. We were definitely not agreed about when it was time to scatter toys and when it was time to gather them again, nor about when it was time to eat and when it was time to refrain from eating. Yet one thing I did learn from her—it is always time for a hug!

We get to be adults and we get better at the timing of life's challenges;
we get the satisfaction of a job well done exactly when it needs to get done.
~~W~~we've said the right word at the right time; we've made the right decision in the right moment
We persevere and find what we are looking for right when we need it
--or it doesn't happen that way at all¹

This poem, about a time for this and a time for that, is so evocative, I think, because while it seems so straightforward, it is actually very difficult to get our timing right. Even when we try our best, as human beings we make very big mistakes, and we often disappoint each other terribly.

~~No chronos understanding of time will help us when what we need is kairos time! Getting our timing right is difficult!~~

The Greeks were well aware of the mysterious quality of time. They felt they needed two words to speak about two different senses of time. The term *chronos* from which our term *chronology* comes is quantified time measured by the clock—seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, years. The second term is *kairos* time, qualitative time, moments, not seconds or minutes---moment that are the opportune time or the right time or the perfect time. Kairos conveys the sense of ripeness, or fullness. In *kairos*

¹ Inspired by a sermon by Carol Penner

time, a moment seems to change everything dramatically. Kairos moments are often the decisive turning point in our lives, when we know from that time on everything is different. They can be exciting and exhilarating.

But Kairos times cannot be forced or maybe even planned for though we can open ourselves to them. These moments often come as a surprise! Kairos times carry with them risk, for they are decisive times, when change is needed. Whether we are ready or not they interrupt the past and ask us to take a risk and enter into something new.

The South African theologians who wrote the “Kairos Document” in 1985 knew something of both the risk and the excitement that would be created by their words. The document began with the words: “The time has come. The moment of truth as arrived...” And then went on to suggest that the darkness of apartheid could no longer be accepted; something new had to emerge. A decision could no longer be avoided. It was Kairos time!

The Bible is very respectful of the notion of time. It is not surprising that the editors of the Bible, those who brought the various parts of the Bible together, begin the overall story with the seven days of seven days of creation and end with the coming to fruition of all creation: a new earth and a new heaven. There is a beginning and God is there, there is the passing of time and God is there and there is the eternity, the end of time as we know it and God is there. Throughout, the biblical story there is a sense that God is working out his purposes through time even though the people only catch a glimpse of what these purposes are.-

The lectionary passages that were read today all give us a lot to reflect on during this Advent seasonsomething to think about in regards to time. as we think of Christ’s coming to earth “in the fullness of time” and as we reflect on the eternal significance of that coming. The texts were written in different contexts and places but each has something to say to us about “getting our timing right, about decisive moments, of kairos” time breaking into our “chromos” time and challenging us to welcome the new.-

Our first text from Isaiah 2 promises a future where everything comes out right.

It spells out an eschatological vision that was important for the first hearers of this message, who were living in a time of political turmoil when things were not going the ~~ir way~~ way of Judah and Israel. ~~The people needed~~ this vision was spoken to the people of Judah during the time of Isaiah, when the mighty power of Assyria was threatening to destroy them, and the corruption and idolatry was eating away at their very identity as people of God. The promise given was comforting to them while also challenging them to remember the covenant that they had made to be God's people. They are challenged to see beyond the present, to trust that someday their dreams would be fulfilled: ~~was that~~ the mountain of the Lord's house, that is, the mountain where Jerusalem stood and where the ~~tem~~ temple of God stood, would ~~be~~ established as the highest mountain; all nations would willingly stream to it to learn the ways of God and there would be peace among the nations. God would judge between nations and they would beat their swords into ploughshare and their spears into pruning hooks.

This vision continues to inspire us to ~~So does this vision inspire us to~~ weep or to laugh, to mourn or to dance?

For we know today, despite the fact that it seems to be an unrealistic vision when ~~as we look about and see the state of our city, of our nation and of our world~~ or even our own personal lives. This vision interrupts the sense of despair and hopelessness that sometimes wants to overcome us, our fear as we think of where the world is going and what our own future might be.

We also know that the way things are today must end for the new to emerge.

I think underneath our bravado we all share the primordial fear that with the end of the world as we know it there will come judgment. We may not expect a literal second coming of Jesus but we know that there is an end to our lives and perhaps to our planet. In the traditional words spoken during Advent we feel that the "night is far spent: the day is at hand" and the end of the world is coming. We may reject the many different literal interpretations of the second coming of Christ or Armageddon. We may not want to name the day as some religions do but we have a sense that "the last day" is coming. In fact, there is a fascination with this ending in our day, with scientists predictions of climate change and environmental chaos; with science fiction and filmmakers imagining what the end of our planet as it is now would look like...

Isaiah knows this as well. He knows that the end must come but he sees this end as something necessary-- before the new beginning. Isaiah knows that destruction of the old comes before the new can emerge. HeBut he also knows that for us to let go of the presentpresent we need a vision of the future, a vision that brings us hope not despair. A vision that makes the letting go easier, that creates hope.

What makes this vision different from just optimism is that we humans are not in charge of it; it is trust in a God who specializes in new beginnings that gives us hope. Without that faith, the end of life as we live it now would seem unbearable.

And so Isaiah has a word for us across the centuries of time. Into our chaos and confusion, Isaiah speaks a word of hope, a word that has stood the test of time:

There is a new day coming, when God will bring to fruition all of our hopes and dreams, when there will be joy and peace and love! We can believe it because we can already see God at work. We can already begin the dance of love because God is in our present and will lead us on. Jesus's birth becomes the promise that God is not finished with our world yet. God is going to bring to fulfilment what God in his great love had created. Life has meaning because we can be part of this vision of the new, we can already live into the kingdom of God as promised by Jesus. We can already experience some of the reconciliation between people that God is promising. We can already beat our swords into ploughshares and our spears into pruning hooks. And so we can let go of the past and enter the new with hope. We can open ourselves to Kairos time breaking into our chronos with its hope and joy. And this vision is filled with images of joy, of reconciliation, of

The Matthew text is also speaking about the day of the Lord. It is also speaking about Kairos time breaking into chronos time, about the day of the Lord coming during the ordinary things that occupy the day—eating, drinking, marrying, working in the fields or in the home. The focus is on the unexpectedness, the surprise when the Day of the Lord comes. The warning is to be ready, to be awake, that is to be fully aware when that moment comes so that we can enter into it with joy.

Many of us know how what it feels like when one person gets a diagnosis of cancer and the other is cancer free, when one gets a heart attack and dies while the other receives warning signs and lives

because of the necessary surgery. Though we all know that our end will eventually come, we also know it will be unexpected.

The passage In Matthew is more of a call to full awareness than to fear, more of a call to enter already into the newness that Jesus brings rather than a threat that judgment will come. Yet, it does not shy away from the warning that not all people will embrace the newness of the kingdom of God coming on earth. Not all are ready to receive the new, just as not all were ready in the time of Jesus' birth. Therefore be awake so that you will be able to recognize the kairos moment when in the fullness of time God will again interrupt history to bring in the new.

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Paul in Romans echoes the warning but suggests much more concretely what it means to be awake and ready. Paul emphasizes the "now", the present moment! **Now** is the moment for you to wake from sleep, the night is far gone, the day is near! "

Today... Let us lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour 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!"

Today we will be celebrating communion. The invitation will come, inviting us to enter into communion with our brothers and sisters in Christ. But the words that are most important to me this year are the words from I Corinthians: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death *until he comes.*" This symbolic eating and drinking is a way to proclaim not only the past, that is the death and resurrection of Jesus, but also the future, the coming of Jesus again to bring all of creation into its promised fullness. Eat this bread and drink this wine proclaiming that the kairos moment will come and will break into this everyday activity of eating and drinking.

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In our communion we are celebrating that Jesus has broken into human history, into human chronos time in the past--with his first appearance. But we are also anticipating his coming again in an unexpected form, in an unexpected time and in an unexpected way into our human history. We are anticipating that the promises of Isaiah will come true, will burst apart our present time and burst open a new time of fulfillment and joy. With the celebration of communion we are doing away with fear and with anxiety and trusting anew that God is God of all creation, of all the galaxies in the universe and that this God who created all will also bring creation to its fulfillment. With communion we are ready to wake up from our sleep and to dare to invite Jesus Christ to come again into our midst right

now! [We can do this only because we trust the](#) mysterious presence of [God “who so love loved the world that he gave his only son. . .”](#) We can do this because love is greater than hate!

[One of the authors I enjoy a lot is Madeleine L’Engle. She has written a number of childrens’ books including a “Wrinkle in Time” but also several books of personal reflections. I want to read several verses from poems in her book, *The Irrational Season*” that \[express for me both the hesitation\]\(#\) and even fear \[and yet the hope that comes when I think of praying the Advent prayer this season, “Come Lord Jesus!\]\(#\) Come into our midst right now!](#)

Come, Lord Jesus! Do I dare
Cry: Lord Jesus, quickly come!
Flash the lightning in the air,
Crash the thunder in my home!
Should I speak this awful prayer?
Come Lord Jesus, help me dare.

(p. 11)

Come Lord Jesus, at the end.
Time’s end, my end, forever’s start.
Come in your flaming burning power.
Time, like the temple veil, now rend;
Come shatter every human hour.
Come Lord Jesus, at the end.

Break, then mend the waiting heart.

(p. 214)

Yes, come Lord Jesus break into our Chronos time with your transcendent presence so that we can experience the joy of Kairos time today during our time of communion. Amen. [What does this vision call us to do? If we get the timing wrong, we may be in the same position as the people of Judah who were finally led into exile.](#)

