

## **The Grace of Time**

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About a year ago both of my watches were in need of repair. The battery died on one watch and the band wore down and snapped off on the other. And here is what I did about it. Absolutely nothing. I decided that instead of racing off to repair them, as I normally would have done, I simply stopped wearing a watch.

At first it felt strange. Quite strange. I had worn a watch since my parents gave me the Cinderella one for my 8<sup>th</sup> birthday. I found myself looking at my wrist for a small clock face, totally out of habit. It was a bit like flipping the light switch over and over again even when you know the power has gone out. Instinct and patterns and habits are hard to break. Then there was the feeling that there is a prize for always knowing the exact time. Life, it can seem, is measured in minutes and hours. However, even these many months later I have never missed a plane or been late for an appointment. And there are a few things I have learned about knowing the time and here they are.

- 1) There is almost always a clock nearby – on a cell phone or microwave, on the cable box, or the dashboard of a car. There are clocks almost everywhere.
- 2) People are always willing to give you the time, even complete strangers, if you ask politely.
- 3) When we are attentive, most of us have a pretty good internal clock that helps us know how much time has passed since the last time we checked.
- 4) Life is measure in so much more than minutes and hours.

But something more happened to me in this somewhat random decision to go without a watch. It was as if my awareness of time, of the rhythm of the day and the passing of minutes and hours was somehow heightened. Not in an anxiety-producing way that made it feel as if time was rushed or fleeting – which seems to be the norm for most of us these days. But in a cyclical, rhythmic way my sense of time began to change. An hour began to feel like an hour, a day felt like a day, and morning noon and night each followed a repeatable rhythm. It was as if, without wearing a watch, time was falling back into some sensible way as I learned to trust my own intuition and the passage of time was once again becomingly holy rather than harried. What started as a change in practice became a habit and that habit has given way to a grace, a freedom, that has nothing to do with knowing the time, or whether I wear a watch or not . But it does have everything to do with how I live my life.

Holy Scripture is filled with the stories of the passing of time and all that can be accomplished if we are attentive. From the story of creation in Genesis, to the people of

Israel wandering in the desert for 40 years, to Christ himself on a cross from noon to three on Friday we are a people for whom time matters be it 7 days, or 40 years, or 3 hours.

In the church, we mark time in seasons in the hope that grace once again, God's grace, will be known to us. We set aside certain times of the year in order to focus our attention toward the events that are central to the Christian life and faith. They are the times when we pause to ask if we are living our lives according to God's purposes as the church has come to know them. It is not intended to be a punishment or a duty, but rather the seasons of the church year are actually intended to free us up to focus more fully on the things that matter. We hope for the season of Lent to be such a time. A time for focus, for clarity, for paring down. A time to be reminded of our own need for repentance. The Book of Common Prayer is quite clear that the observance of a holy Lent is marked by these seven acts, each of which takes time. They are self-examination, repentance, prayer, fasting, self-denial, and reading and meditating on God's holy word. It is tempting for us to make this season about the one thing we might choose to give up or take on for the next 40 days, but it is really about those seven acts that the church in her wisdom invites us to focus on. It is those seven acts that will travel with us in this time, leading us through the season of Lent and shaping us as we travel down the path toward the cross of suffering and beyond it to the joy of new life. The new life of the empty Easter tomb that awaits each of us in Jesus Christ.

But on this first Sunday of Lent, we turn both our time and our attention to the human condition and to the lure of temptation. Adam and Eve were tempted in the Garden of Eden and despite having access to everything they needed, gave in to their temptation. Not because they needed a piece of fruit from that particular tree in the middle of the garden but because more than anything else they desired to be like God. They were, each of them equally, tempted beyond their ability to say no to the crafty serpent and to each other. We are most of us more like them than we would care to think. Drawn to the things denied us, while we miss all that we have.

In our Gospel story we hear of Jesus being tempted by the devil after 40 days of fasting in the desert. When Jesus is famished, scripture tells us, is the moment the tempter found him. Unlike Adam and Eve, Jesus is not lured by the promise to be like God, for he is already God. Instead, Satan holds before him the illusion of what that power could do – make bread from stones, jump from this peak, behold all this can be yours. Now our own temptation might look a bit different from this but the story of Jesus in the desert recounts two important things for us. First, that we will be most tempted away from God when we are depleted, when our spiritual tanks are running low if not on empty. For Jesus this took the form of a physical fast, but for us it could be the spiritual equivalent – when we have gone too long without prayer, without the sacraments, without participating in the 7 acts of a holy Lent; self-examination, repentance, prayer, fasting, self-denial, and reading and meditating on God's holy word.

Second, Jesus was deeply rooted in the Word of God. So much so that despite being famished he is able to pull up the word of God as a counter to every temptation offered.

There is for us, no better way to know what is deep within us than face adversity, sorrow or temptation. What is the prayer you say, if you say one at all, when all other resources are depleted? Can you pull up not only the words but the belief as well? Resisting temptation then is not a one time thing but rather it is built on a life of devotion and steadfast nurture. It is what Adam and Eve lacked and it is what Jesus had in abundance.

So I find myself struck on this, my last Sunday at Trinity Church, that the lessons for today are about resisting temptation, of which we all know something about. And I can say quite honestly that one of the most difficult temptations for any clergy person engaged in ministry is the temptation to stay put when we have found a people and a place we love and a ministry we care about and to stop listening for God to call us (some might even say tempt us) to the next wilderness experience. But God keeps calling us – each and everyone one of us – in all times and places so that we might follow Him and His son Jesus Christ, through the working of the Holy Spirit. And we never, ever know where that will lead us.

As people of faith, we are invited to give generously, lavishly of the most precious gift any of us has to give and that is our time. Keeping track of that time is not something we do because we wear a watch or keep an eye on the clock. Keeping track of time is an awareness that in the end it is not ours to give. It is God's. And the few fleeting moments we think we can control are ours only to learn to be generous, to love deeply, and to know God more fully. And that I have had the gift and privilege of overlapping with you these past years is nothing but grace for which I can only say to you, thank you.

Thank you for the great gift of serving God along side of you in this place and at this time and what a time it has been! Thank you for your prayers, for your kindness, for your friendship. Thank you for being demanding and even, at times, ornery. Thank you for forgiving me when I have disappointed or hurt you. Thank you for making me a better priest and more importantly thank you for making me a better Christian because of my time here with you. But most of all, thank you for loving God and for trying week by week together to see what that might look like to a world starving for good news, even when it seems hard naive.

So here is my hope for you and for me as we part ways for now. The words may come from Phillips Brooks but I hope the sentiment belongs to each of us this day.

*"Do not pray for easy lives, but pray to be stronger men (sic). Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers, but pray for power equal to your tasks. Then the accomplishing of your work shall be no miracle, but you shall be a miracle. Every day you shall wonder at yourself and the richness of life which has come to you by the grace of God."*

So I have not yet decided about whether or not to fix my watches or to leave them tucked in a drawer. After all, there are always clocks nearby and someone will always tell me the time if I ask politely, and my own internal clock has become pretty reliable. While I have not decided what to do about the broken watches I do know this. In the morning, at noon time and at the end of day, in Boston or Pueblo and everywhere in between, our greatest

joy as people of faith is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind and our neighbor as our self. And every day may we wonder the richness of life which has come to us all by the grace of God.

Amen.