

“Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is?”

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2 December 2018 + Gaithersburg Presbyterian Church
Jeremiah 33:14-16 + Luke 21:25-28 = will he ever return?

This is a Sunday when we really must ask a question, the question: *“Does anybody really know what time it is?”* Most will recognize the title from the 1970 hit by Chicago. It asks our question, the question, the ultimate question. The central spiritual question of Advent:



“Does anybody really know what time it is? Does anybody really care?”

This is the Sunday when we ask that question: first Sunday in Advent, time out of time, time out of mind. We would seem to be lost in time, since in Advent we begin at the end and end at the beginning.

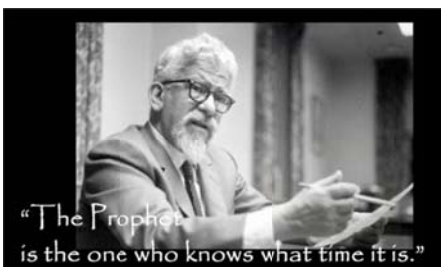


We have a text today on the supposed end, the return of Jesus. We begin at the culmination of history so we may know where history is leaning, to which purpose our lives are bent. So we know this at the very beginning of the salvation story of God woven throughout history but centered for us in Jesus' birth.

We begin at the end. I have a beautiful piece of batik art of a nativity scene that I commissioned from a Javanese artist. The nativity is depicted in gorgeous shades of indigo and earth. Right above the manger behind Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus, superimposed over the stable is the cross. The manger bends to the cross. The one leads inextricably but inevitably to the other. The Javanese artist knows life is a spiral: we are always traveling from the end to the beginning.



Abraham Herschel's definition of 'prophet' offers us another answer to our question: “Does anybody really know what time it is?” Herschel famously stated that a prophet is the one who knows what time it is.¹ A prophet is so in touch with God, with God's timing and purpose that she or he is often the only one



who really knows what time it is; often the only one who really cares.

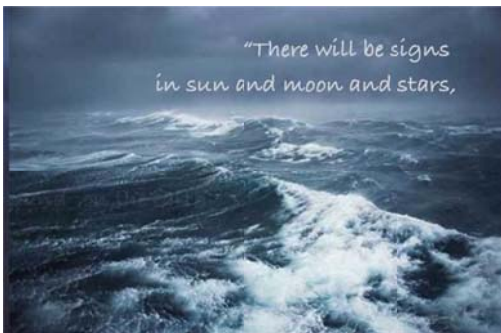


By that standard, Jeremiah and Jesus are both among the prophets. Jeremiah stood in Jerusalem and pronounced its coming destruction because of the sins of the nation. Even the positive reforms of the young king Josiah were not enough to erase the egregious moral failures of 5 generations of the Kings of Judah, oppression of the poor and sacrificing to false gods.

Jeremiah knew what time it was. A long, dark night of destruction, death and exile was coming. It was late evening, time for Jerusalem's inhabitants to relinquish their hold on illusory hopes.



Nevertheless, in God's long term view there was hope. Jeremiah foresaw that after a terrible, long night of being refugees, a brilliant morning would dawn. A generation of God's people would wake up in safety in a Jerusalem renamed **"Yahweh Tzedeknu," "God is our righteousness."**



Jesus stood on the very same streets of Jerusalem as Jeremiah had six centuries before, and Jesus knew the time as well. Another long, dark night of destruction was impending, persecution, death and exile, but just like Jeremiah's vision there would come after it a brilliant dawn beyond the terror.

Jesus' words are for all his followers in all times and places: whatever troubles you have in your life, whatever devastation you face is neither permanent nor ultimate. Believe it: **"your redemption is drawing near."**²

Malinda Elizabeth Berry in a commentary on our text says this:³



- “Luke [foresaw] the day when the Chosen One will arrive on a cloud, full of power and glory in a time when people are dying of fright because the world ~ or at least life as they know it ~ is on the verge of coming to an end.”

Malinda Elizabeth Berry

Don't you feel it too? We also are living in times when life as we know it is coming to an end ~ at a personal level, at a societal level, at a cultural level, at the national political level.

William Lamar also has written commentary on our text:⁴



- “Apocalyptic language is the poetic speech of the oppressed and bruised straining toward hope. It declares God’s cosmic victory in the face of the evidence of God’s defeat. Luke is writing after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by bloodthirsty Rome. The people of God were straining toward hope. They needed to believe in the hidden victory of God.”

William H. Lamar IV

We too need to believe in the hidden victory of God as our world is coming to an end.

There is a way out. Barbara Rossing, NT professor at the Lutheran School in Chicago, points out the translations in the book of Revelation of “the end of the world” are worse than mistranslations, they are just wrong. What is commonly mistranslated “the end of the world” should be understood and interpreted as “the end of the *empire*,” the Roman Empire, the persecutors of the Christians, the ones who actually wrongly condemned and crucified Jesus.



As for time, the “hour of trial” in Rev 3:10 is actually the putting on trial of the worldly powers of empire ~ the judge Jesus, the lamb that was slain.



Rev 11:18 which talks of “destroying the destroyer of the earth” actually states that God’s plan is to destroy, not the earth itself, but God’s plan is to destroy those destroying the earth, a warning both ecological and spiritual in its meaning. Rossing again:

“What will be ending today is our unsustainable way of life, but not the earth itself.”⁵

Our way of life is unsustainable in all its dimensions ~ ecologically, politically, societally, spiritually.

The empire is dying, not the earth itself. Looking from the 21st Century backwards, the ancient empires are all passed just as foretold. Jeremiah’s Babylonian empire long ago reduced to ashes and sand ~ the Roman Empire of Jesus’ day now long dead.



Jump ahead to the present, just as much as we would put our confidence in our own American empire, and just as much as we don’t think we have an empire, we do. The empire we inhabit is dying as well, and for precisely the same reason that all the great empires have passed into oblivion: oppression and worshipping false gods. In the case of our own empire, these sins translate into our exploitation of the weak, the vulnerable and the

environment, and our chasing after the false idols of power and unsustainable growth.

We have an economy based on exploitation no matter the consequences: exploitation of persons, exploitation of the earth, exploitation of other nations to meet our needs not theirs. We have trampled our mother Earth beyond her limits, eliminating thousands of species and polluting the atmosphere to the point of real and dire consequences.

What goes around comes around, and the consequences have come to fruition. Just as foreseen in Rev 11:18 the righteous judge is coming to wipeout our empire for being the “destroyers of the earth.”

“Does anybody really know what time it is?”
Does anybody really care?” The prophet is the one who does both know the time and cares about time. The follower of Jesus also does know the *kairos*, the appointed time, the propitious time, the time of God’s own choosing, the coming of Christ’s kingdom time.



Jesus sings the powerful song of Advent most certainly for us at this beginning end of time: whatever troubles you have in your life, whatever devastation you face, don’t despair. None of this is permanent or ultimate. Know for certain: **“your redemption is drawing near.”**

Our call is to know at all times what time it is, to know where we are in God’s story time and to know with real clarity what our purpose is in God’s plan.

¹ Leonard Beechy, *Christian Century* Nov. 12, 2009, p. 21

² *Ibid*

³ *Sojourners* December 2006, p. 48

⁴ William H. Lamar , *Christian Century* Nov. 7, 2018, p. 20

⁵ Barbara Rossing, *Christian Century* Nov. 14, 2006, pp. 22-23