

# Telling Time

Jeremiah 33:14-16; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Last week, H el ene showed the kids a diagram of the Christian year. I had a front row seat, but I'm guessing many of you couldn't see it.

So I thought I would throw it up on the screen this morning as a way into talking about how we tell time.

A few years ago, Brian Zahnd wrote an article called "Secular or Sacred Time?" In it, he says,

What is time? Time is the measurement of motion through space.

A day is the revolution of the earth.

A month is the revolution of the moon around the earth.

A year is the revolution of the earth around the sun.

But time as such is without any apparent meaning. Just a spinning planet with an orbiting moon orbiting a star...

**To give time meaning we need a story.** Without a story time is pointless and nihilism beckons.

For almost two thousand years the church has had the wisdom and creativity to mark time by the gospel story of Jesus.

This is time made sacred. Thus the church calendar.

**Advent** anticipates the coming of Messiah.

**Christmas** celebrates the birth of Jesus.

**Epiphany** remembers the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles.

**Lent** is the solemn journey to the cross.

**Easter** is the celebration of the resurrection.

**Pentecost** marks the birth of the church.

**Ordinary Time** leads us through the year and back to Advent.

**How we tell time determines who we are.**<sup>1</sup>

I like the way Brian Zahnd puts it. *To give time meaning we need a story. How we tell time determines who we are.*

And I find the expression “tell time” to be an intriguing and instructive one.

We do, indeed, *tell* time. We give time a structure, a shape, we narrate it to give our lives structure and meaning.

If the story we tell about time leans heavily on words like “Black Friday” or “Boxing Day” or “Valentine’s Day” or any of the other days that are driven by the calendar of consumerism, then this says something about who we are and what we value.

If the story we tell about time uses a lot of phrases like “long weekend” or “TGIF” or “I need a vacation”—if how we understand and speak about time seems mainly oriented around work and when we get to stop doing it—well, then this, too, says something about who we are and what we value.

Telling time according to the story of Jesus and the story of the people of God helps us to arrange and understand our lives not by the dictates of a marketing culture oriented around consumption, recreation, and entertainment, but on the story of God and God’s action in the world.

So, today is the first day of a new year of sacred time.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://brianzahnd.com/2015/11/secular-or-sacred-time/>

So, what does this time of Advent invite us into?

How will we tell this time—this time of the beginning of Advent, 2018 here at Lethbridge Mennonite Church?

There are at least three things that characterize how we ought to tell this time.

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### **Advent is a Waiting Time**

Not many of us like waiting, particularly in a cultural context where we are conditioned to expect everything to happen at light speed.

“On demand” is a phrase that has cemented itself in our lexicon. We have come to expect everything to happen on our terms according to our timing.

Communication across the globe is instant. A few clicks on Amazon and a brown box arrives on our front door a few days later. A meal appears in our drivers’ side window a few minutes after placing our order. The examples could be multiplied indefinitely.

It is a truism to say that we live in a culture of immediacy. We do not like to wait, are not accustomed to waiting.

And, increasingly, don’t know *how* to wait and can’t imagine that there could be any value in waiting.

Advent is one of God’s times for teaching us the value of waiting. It’s an opportunity to be reminded of the simple truth that we don’t control all the variables.

We can control *some* things. We can figure out fast food and fast entertainment and fast communication. But we can’t control the things that matter most.

Jeremiah’s audience knew this very well. Jeremiah is speaking to exiles, people who have been wrenched out of their homes, and dragged off to a foreign land.

The verses that precede our passage this morning speak of what the city of God was like when these words were first spoken. It is described as a desolate place, a place bereft of people and livestock, a place where a grim silence has replaced the sounds of singing and laughter.

It is a place where God seems utterly absent.

The people of Israel knew that God alone could restore their fortunes. They could not control a variable as mighty as the Babylonians.

They could not hasten the arrival of the day of the Lord when the promises of God would be fulfilled. They could not make righteousness and justice spring up in the land (even though they could enact it in their own community).

They had to wait.

Waiting means learning the crucial discipline of abiding with God, even in desolate places.

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### **Advent is an Anticipatory Time**

But Christian waiting is not imprecise. It's not as though we're just kind of vaguely hoping for a "better day" to come.

We anticipate a very specific king and a very specific coming.

Jeremiah speaks of a "Righteous Branch from David's line." One who will bring health, healing, peace, and security to his people.

One who will "do what is just and right in the land."

Jeremiah's prophecy anchors us in the story of a particular people, a particular God, and a particular hope.

It points to the actions of the creator God who loves his people and his creation too much to abandon it.

It points to the God who will be fully revealed in Jesus of Nazareth who will embody the righteousness and justice of God, who will show the world what love looks like, who will open and expand the boundaries of "the people of God," welcoming in the outsider, the healing, forgiving, liberating, and setting his people on the path to freedom.

Advent is a time to be alert, watchful, anticipating the inbreaking of the kingdom of God.

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### **Advent is a Time for Restoration and Realignment**

Our second reading comes from 1 Thessalonians. Paul is writing what many to be his first letter to any of the churches he founded. He speaks of his longing to see them:

Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

That's an intriguing line. *To restore whatever is lacking in your faith.* What might that "lack" have been?

For the church in Thessalonica, the answer probably had something to do with some confusion around why Jesus hadn't returned yet, or with what happened to their departed loved ones. Or how to live faithfully in Greek society. Or about how to endure persecution.

Our time and place is different, as are the challenges we face. I wonder, what is lacking in our faith?

Maybe we struggle to believe in the supernatural in an age of science. Maybe the challenge of pluralism has a destabilizing effect on our faith.

Maybe we lack hope in the face of grief and suffering.

Maybe it's unanswered prayer. Maybe God just doesn't *feel* real.

Maybe we are discouraged by the state of the church in Canada.

Perhaps we are struggling to shed the shackles of an inherited faith that was rigid and lifeless. Perhaps we are struggling to give shape and texture to a faith that has grown fuzzy and imprecise.

What is lacking in our faith? As individuals? As a church (LMC)? Mennonite Church Alberta? Mennonite Church Canada?

Advent is a good time to ask this question.

Advent is also a very good time to say, "I don't know. But however small my faith has become, whatever it lacks, I want restoration!"

Debie Thomas puts it beautifully in an essay she wrote this week:

Advent is the season when longing makes sense. When it's okay to say we are hungry, thirsty, lonely, empty, unfinished, or unhoused. In Advent, we *want*, and we want fiercely. We sit in darkness, longing for light. We sit in exile, longing for home. We sit with aching, empty arms, waiting to cradle a life that's still unformed, still hidden, still in process. In Advent, our desire for God strains towards God's desire for us. Between the

clinging and the yearning, we are unmade, remade, and unmade again.<sup>2</sup>

Advent is a time for longing to become a people who are fit for God's coming, a people whose lives give evidence of a hunger for God.

It is also a time, like every time in the Christian year, to be trained in love.

The closing lines of our passage from 1 Thessalonians are a benediction:

And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.

And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Those of us who tell time with Jesus, year after year, those of us who order *our* stories by *this* story are called to be a people who are prepared for his coming anew each year in anticipation of his glorious coming again.

How do we prepare?

*We are to increase and abound in love for one another and for all. (3:12).*

Advent-ready people are people who are seeing to increase and abound in love *to all* in response to the God whose very being and identity is love, the God whose movement toward all people is driven by love.

This is what "holy" and "blameless" lives look like (3:13). This is what hearts prepared to receive their king look like.

Advent, like Lent, is a season of preparation—preparation for the coming of God in human flesh, once again.

**It reminds us that God's coming to be with us is meant to lead to us coming, increasingly, to be with God.**

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2018>

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So, how will we tell time this Advent season?

As we take our first steps of this Advent season, my prayer for each one of us is that we would allow this time to be a telling time—that we would tell time as God’s time, and that we would allow God’s time to tell our stories, too.

My prayer is that this Advent would be a time for waiting and longing, for watching and anticipation, for the transformation and realignment of our lives to be ready for God’s coming.

And, perhaps most of all, that this would be a time for embracing, as another commentator puts it, “the call to live lovingly in God’s present, even as we await God’s brilliant someday.”<sup>3</sup>

Amen.



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<sup>3</sup> Allen Hilton, “Exegetical Perspective on 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13,” in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 19.