

What Time Is It?

Matthew 24:36-44; Romans 13:11-14

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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On this First Sunday of Advent, I want to tell three short stories, each related to time. Our time, God's time. Paying attention to time. Recognizing the time.

They are simple stories taken from ordinary interactions and observations in the past week.

All three stories ask, in their own way, the questions that our two texts this morning ask.

What time is it?

And, perhaps even more importantly, "Are we paying attention?"

Are we awake as we inhabit the time that God has given us and as we look forward to the coming of Christ, this Advent and beyond?

First story. On Tuesday morning, I got a phone call.

The caller was a young woman, a member of the much-coveted "millennial" demographic. She had called, ostensibly, to inquire about our worship service, what time it started, what kind of church we were, who was welcome, what to wear, whether or not there were any young adults, etc.

I was initially taken aback. I had been anticipating an exciting morning of responding to emails while a blizzard raged outside.

But wait, what's this? A spiritually sensitive young person calling a *church*, to talk to a *pastor*?! Does that still even happen?

Evidently it does.

It was a conversation punctuated by long, semi-awkward pauses, the kind where you have a sense that the reason the person is calling isn't *really* the reason they called, and where they seem to be wondering if they made a mistake calling in the first place.

I did what I often do in such situations. I asked questions. *Tell me about your life, your story...*

Before long we were talking about rodeos and American Thanksgiving and the inconveniences of being snowed in with no transportation and being grudgingly dragged around to all kinds of churches by her parents as a kid.

This last one caught my attention. "So it sounds like you didn't care much for church in your childhood. Why are you calling a church now?"

I don't know, I guess I kinda just feel like something's missing in my life... you know how people talk about that God-shaped hole or whatever...?

The conversation took on a different feel from that point on, even though there were still a few long silences.

In the end, she didn't sound sure about attending church, but she wants to talk further. I'll be meeting her next week.

Her statement—*I guess I just kinda feel like there's something missing... you know how people talk about that God-shaped hole or whatever...?*—tells me that she's asking big questions.

What's the point of all this?

What time is it? In my life? In my relationship with others? In my relationship to God?

The second story took place a few days later while I was shoveling my sidewalk in the middle of our mid-week blizzard.

I was nearly done. I could hardly feel my fingers anymore and I was looking forward to going inside and having a hot cup of coffee.

I saw my neighbour turn off his snow blower and walk over toward me. I know my neighbour well enough to know that when he's walking over to me, the ensuing conversation will not be short.

I wiggled my frozen fingers around in my gloves, smiled, and said hello.

My neighbour is a Christian. His theology, however, would have some differences from my own.

He talks a lot about angels and demons and spiritual warfare. I don't.

He talks a lot about the government and getting back to Christian values. I don't. Or, at least not in the same way.

So, talking with him about religion presents certain challenges. Perhaps you have people in your life like this, too.

But he wanted to talk about something very important and very personal (he said it was ok if I shared this).

He had been out in Ontario recently to visit his parents. While there, his mom had had some kind of psychotic break and had been found wandering around in the streets, disheveled and disoriented. She required hospitalization

His relationship with his mom (and his dad) had been complicated by distance, alcohol abuse, and other things. But he loved her, of course.

So, he walked into her hospital room and told her, "Mom, you need to accept Jesus into your heart right now."

She looked blankly at him. She didn't respond much for the rest of his visit that day.

But the next day, he came back and he said she seemed like a different person.

She told him, “You know, I’ve been thinking about what you said, and I think you’re right. I need to make a change in my life. I want to get baptized. You know, the “born again” way (she had been baptized as a Roman Catholic as an infant).

My neighbour was elated. And apprehensive. He phoned a few pastors in Ontario to tell them that he needed an impromptu baptism (he was heading back to Alberta in a few days). None of them returned his calls.

He phoned a pastor friend in Edmonton to seek advice. His friend told him, “Well, you gotta baptize her yourself!”

So, he decided that’s what he was going to do. He told his brother (who thought it sounded like a stupid idea—she’s already been baptized!) and his dad (who seemed more apathetic—well, that’s between you and your mom, I guess).

His mom wasn’t physically well enough to do a full immersion, which made my friend nervous. He wasn’t sure it would count if it wasn’t the real deal!

But in the end, he decided that a basin of water and a sprinkling would have to do (he was relieved to hear that Mennonites found this mode acceptable).

He took his young son who held the basin and his mother down to the hospital chapel. And he baptized his mom.

Guess what? Her health has improved. No more psychotic episodes in the last few months. She’s home and phones him regularly to talk about which parts of the bible she’s reading. It’s a miracle, he says.

I have to confess, parts of this story had me squirming. Some of the theological assumptions at work in my neighbour’s decision-making and understanding of the whole situation made me uncomfortable.

But then, perhaps my “comfort” isn’t really the point (imagine that!). Perhaps I, with my more measured and rational approach was the one who wasn’t telling time properly.

My neighbour’s approach certainly seemed to align more closely with Jesus’ dire warnings in Matthew 24 and with Paul’s admonition to “set aside the works of darkness” and “put on the armour of light” than mine.

What struck me was the urgency my neighbour felt for his mom.

He had a sense of what time it was—for him, for his mom, for her relationship with God, for the story of their family.

He wasn't going to wait around for some sluggish pastor to return his phone call. This was about *salvation*! This was about life and death for his mom!

So, he did what the moment required.

The third story is yours. And mine.

What time is it for you on this first day of Advent, two thousand and nineteen (or so) years after Christ's first coming?

In Romans 13, Paul talks about clothing ourselves with Jesus Christ because "we know what time it is."

In Matthew 24, Jesus says, "Be ready, because we *don't* really know what time it is—the Son of Man will come at "an unexpected hour."

These are two different ways of saying, "Wake up! Pay attention! There is a great drama unfolding, and you are a part of it!"

Some of you know that I've been blogging for nearly thirteen years now, which makes me a virtual fossil in the digital world. One of the first bloggers that I came across in those early days whose voice I came to appreciate was a guy named Michael Spencer, known in the blogging world as the Internet Monk.

He wrote a piece called, "There Is Always a Day Before." In it he said:

We all live the days before. We are living them now.

There was a day before 9-11.

There was a day before your child told you she was pregnant.

There was a day before your wife said she'd had enough.

There was a day before your employer said "layoffs."

We are living our days before. We are living them now.

Some of us are doing, for the last time, what we think we will be doing twenty years from now.

Some of us are on the verge of a much shorter life, or a very different life, or a life turned upside down.

Some of us are preaching our last sermon, making love for the last time, saying "I love you" to our children for the last time in our own home. Some of us are spending our last day without the knowledge of eternal judgment and the reality of God. We are promising tomorrow will be different and tomorrow is not going to give us the chance, because God has a different tomorrow *entirely* on our schedule. We just don't know it today.¹

He didn't know it at the time, but when Michael Spencer wrote those words, he had cancer. Within five months, he died. We never know the time or day, either of Jesus' return or of the day when our lives will be forever changed.

Michael Spencer's piece ended with these words:

Live each day as the day that all of the gospel is true. Live this day and be glad in it. Live this day as the day of laying down sin and taking up the glad and good forgiveness of Jesus. Live this day determined to be useful and joyful in Jesus. Live this day in a way that, should all things change tomorrow, you will know that the Lord is your God and this is the day to be satisfied in him.

On this first Sunday of Advent, I think our reminder is a simple one.

¹ <https://internetmonk.com/archive/89473>

Don't sleepwalk through life. Pay attention to what time it is. Pay attention to the God who comes to you at every time of your life.

We don't know how long we will be around... or how long those we love will be around... or what global events might ensue... or when a crisis might arrive... or what our relationships might demand of us.

We don't know when Christ will come in glory.

There is so much we don't know. But if we have decided to follow Jesus, to cast our lot with this king and his kingdom, we *do* know whose comings our hope and our future is defined by.

We know that the one whose comings we rehearse each Advent is full of grace and truth, that he can be trusted with all that we do not know, all of our unexpected hours.

So, live expectantly. Live attentively. Live deliberately and thoughtfully. Live lives of generous love and confident hope.

Christ has come. Christ comes to you now. Christ will come again.

Amen.

