

No Time at All

(Luke 20:27-38)

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost, November 10, 2019

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our creator, our sustainer and our redeemer. Amen.

This morning I want to spend a few minutes talking about ***time***. Now I'll admit that given the content of today's reading from Luke, this was a rather unexpected path for me to start down. Look at what we have here. First, Jesus is approached by members of the Sadducees, a group responsible for the care of the Temple in Jerusalem and who denied the possibility of resurrection and focused solely on the law. Then, we have a question about the law as relates to remarriage when a childless husband dies. Finally, the question – from those who ***deny*** the resurrection – turns to that very topic.

There's a lot to unpack in these verses, both with the question asked of Jesus and the way he responded. But while reading through one commentary, a line jumped out that changed my anticipated approach: "The boundaries of earthly time shape our capacity to make meaning of our experience."¹

The boundaries of earthly time.

Consider the nearly limitless ways that our lives in this world are shaped by time ... what we do and when we do it, and even the decisions we make about activities. What time does it start? How long will it take? What time do we need to be there? How long must we stay? So much of our life is taken up by consideration of time; we are driven by schedules and calendars. Clocks keep us moving, but they also bind us. When time is involved, there doesn't ever seem to truly be freedom.

In returning to today's reading, the Sadducees are asking Jesus a temporal question and looking at things through the lens of a particular time while he is listening with ears and a mind and heart from ***outside of time***. Even as he lived in earthly time, Jesus – the incarnate aspect of the Holy Trinity – was timeless.

It's been my experience that there are moments in life when time is absent. For me, the births of each of our daughters were instances when everything other than what was taking place in front of me seemed to stop moving. During the two services in which I was ordained, first as a deacon and then as a priest, I felt as if things came to a standstill when the bishop laid his hands on my head. Last weekend, when I went home to be with my family and say goodbye to my

¹ John E. Senior, "Luke 20:27-40 – Theological Perspective." *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Vol. 2* (Kindle edition).

grandmother, our time together seemed to be marked less by the hands of the clock and more by stillness and individual breaths ... mine and hers.

I can imagine many events in the Scriptures having a similar feel ... moments when time stood still. Moses seeing the flame in a bush that was not burning. Elijah sensing God in the small stillness while waiting at the mouth of a cave. The sudden appearance of the archangel before Mary. The first cry of the child born in the darkness of the night, and the last breath of the man dying on the cross in the darkness of the day. The women finding a stone rolled away from an empty tomb on the morning of resurrection, and the disciples seeing their Messiah disappear from view at the moment of ascension. In fact, take the Bible and allow it to fall open to just about any page, and I'd wager you'll find at least one passage or scene in which time likely seems to stand still.

So how do put words to something so incredible? What do we say? I turned to some of the early Church Fathers to see what they wrote ... and what I found was beautiful. There are for instance the words of Tertullian, a late-second and early-third century Christian writer from Carthage, who said, "Eternity has no time. It is itself all time."² Then we have the fourth century bishop Gregory of Nazianzus, who wrote, "God always was and always is, and always will be; or rather, God always is."³ And then we have St. Augustine, who wrote, "[I]n eternity there is nothing past as if it had ceased to be, nor future as if it were not yet, but present only, since whatever is eternal, always is"⁴ and "[A]ll, both past and future, is created and issues from that which is always present."⁵

God exists outside of time and knows no time. Jesus stepped out of time into this world and returned at the ascension to a realm of timelessness. For them, as Augustine said, there was no past or future, for all existed in the eternal present. So is it possible for us to live in that way ... live as if all things are in the present?

I believe it is. I believe it is possible for us to live only in the moment ... to look for Jesus or the actions of God not in some future time, but at work ***now***. But in a world driven by time, I'll be the first to say it won't be easy. It takes practice to narrow our view from what is past and what is future into what is present ... what is in the here and now. We do so through the practice of prayer. We do so through the effort of pausing to give thanks. We do so through stopping and simply breathing ... simply being. And we do so by remembering in the words of Augustine that despite all that is happening, all that has happened, and all that will happen, every moment is "always present."

*Then say not man's imperfect, Heav'n in fault;
Say rather, man's as perfect as he ought:*

² Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, Book I, Chapter 8. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/03121.htm>

³ Gregory Nazianzen, *Second Easter Oration*, III. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310245.htm>

⁴ St. Augustine, *Expositions on the Psalms*. https://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/te_d_hildebrandt/otesources/19-psalms/text/books/augustine-psalms/augustine-psalms.pdf

⁵ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XI, Chapter 11. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/110111.htm>

*His knowledge measur'd to his state and place,
His time a moment, and a point his space.*⁶

⁶ Alexander Pope, "An Essay on Man: Epistle I." <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44899/an-essay-on-man-epistle-i>