



A Time for Every Matter • *Patrick D. Miller*

The theme of our time together is a given, a prompter, a cue to get us thinking. If that is so, there are two obvious features about the theme that thrust themselves upon us immediately. One is that the theme is itself a *text*, or part of a famous text, from the Book of Esther. The other is that its central focus is *time*. I confess it is hard for me to ignore a text and just as difficult to skip over its central subject matter. In this lecture I wish to move into our theme via the second of those avenues, that is, some thinking about time, and then in my second lecture to turn more specifically to the text that has engendered our thinking together. I am very aware of the context in which we think about both of these matters, that is, our shared involvement in and concern for a faithful ministry to and among the youth of our time and our churches. It is my hope that some reflection on these two topics will engender or create resonances with the realities of our ministry as well as of the church and the culture to which we belong.

It happens that my writing these remarks occurred around the turn of the year as we moved from 2005 into 2006. Along with our birthdays, the New Year is probably the moment more than any other when we have a sense of time and its passing. The sense of time is not something that occupies our attention constantly, but it never altogether escapes us. To live is to live *in time*, and to experience and to know the mystery and fear of time as well as the joy of the moment when something good and wonderful happens. Much of our existence is a rush to deal with the pressure of time, a painful awareness that time outruns us. We know the anguish of a moment lost, of a day ended that we wanted to last forever, or of a week gone by when there was so much

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to do and so little done. There is something deeply disturbing and threatening to us in the temporality of existence, and it confronts us most in the encounter with our own mortality. The poets plumb those depths to explore the mystery and terror of time, from the Psalmist's comparison of human life to grass and flower that grow up and quickly fade and die (e.g., Psalm 90:5–6) to Wordsworth's melancholy lament:

Turn wheresoe'er I may,
By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more
(“Ode on Intimations of Immortality”)

A couple celebrate their forty-seventh anniversary in recollecting joy, knowing at the same time that it is the mark of time gone and that treasured moments remain in memory but not in time. Or as e.e. cummings, who as much as any contemporary poet has perceived both the generosity and the voracity of time, has written,

now all the fingers of this tree (darling) have
hands, and all the hands have people; and
more each particular person is (my love)
alive than every world can understand.

and now you are and i am now and we're
a mystery which will never happen again,
a miracle which has never happened before—
and shining this our now must come to then

our then shall be some darkness during which
fingers are without hands; and i have no
you: and all trees are (any more than each
leafless) its silent in forevering snow

but never fear (my own, my beautiful
my blossoming) for also then's until¹

More succinctly and straightforwardly, David Bowie articulated the sense of being caught by time but unable to open up its mystery in the repeated refrain of his rock hit of some years ago, “Changes”:

Time may change me,
But I can't trace time.

I think Bowie is right. We can't trace time—but we can talk about it even as we live in it and know both the bitterness and sweetness of its passing. So I would speak with you about some of the things that belong to a perspective on time in the light of Scripture and Christian faith. I want to make several points about time and suggest for each of them that the Christian faith gives us a *symbol*, a pointer, to make concrete and visible the meaning and significance of time. And since the book of Scripture that speaks most about time is Ecclesiastes, I am going to bounce some of my comments off of that Preacher's thinking about time in God's world. To draw you back into that book, let me quote what is probably its most familiar text (Ecclesiastes 3:1–15):

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done

from the beginning to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by.

1. The starting point for Christian thinking about time is the biblical and experiential reality that time has meaning for us when it has purpose in it. When we simply view time in a calendar way, that is, chronological time as an unending extension, or as the *New York Times* put it at the beginning of this year: "as though our days are numbers on a string—week after week, month after month passing in a straight chronological line through our allotted age," then I think we become lost in time and overwhelmed by it. If we think of time purely in terms of the unending sequence of minutes, days, years—clock time and calendar time—then it either does not touch us or it undoes us as we see ourselves caught in a ceaseless, meaningless flow and can do nothing about it.

But where time is perceived and experienced as occasions with purpose, as *moments*, then we can see and know beginnings and endings. It is the difference between time empty and time filled. One can see it in going back over last year's calendar of activities, where there are days with all kinds of things written on them, reminding us of things that happened and that we did, and other days completely empty. Obviously we were there and things went on, but the calendar reminds us that there is a difference. Our time can be filled with occasions of significance so that our sense of time is not time *measured* but *time when*—when I danced, when we loved, when tragedy struck, when someone came home, when a child was born, when a prayer was answered, when a gift was given or received. Time then is not just for us a ceaseless flow at the same pace without beginning or end. There is momentum and slack time, there are beginnings and endings. Maybe that is a better way of putting it than time empty or full. It is often somewhere in between. In the book *The Seed beneath the Snow* by the Italian novelist Ignazio Silone, the hero, Pietro, senses the movement of time:

as if it were the flowing of a river, not in the uniform, artificial, abstract manner of a clock, but in the manner of a living stream,

intermittent and irregular, first slow and then fast, according to the slope of the ground.²

It is this close tie between time and purpose that Ecclesiastes affirms in the opening verse of chapter 3: “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter [or purpose] under heaven.” We should not misread this and the matters that follow. For the Preacher, the season and the time for everything is *given to us by God*, who both gives time its content and purpose and also calls us, in the manner of W.H. Auden, to redeem the “time being” from insignificance as we create possibilities, labor to achieve beauty and goodness, find occasions to care, and embrace, rend, sew, dance, weep, love, plant, harvest, and learn the things that make for peace.³ I am not sure Ecclesiastes is as confident about our capacity to create those possibilities in the time God has given us. After all, he concludes his beautiful poem about the times and seasons with the question: “What gain have the workers from their toil?” (v. 9). But Ecclesiastes does not have the last word about that matter. We hear his realism as a part of a larger collection of voices in Scripture.

For the symbol that God has filled our time with purpose and also set us here to give purpose to all our times is clearly the Incarnation, the Word that was at the beginning of time and became the center of all time and all our times. In the Word made flesh, born of Mary, is the purpose of God that has redeemed all time from insignificance. In Jesus of Nazareth, we learn also as never before the way to give purpose and meaning to all our times.

One must call again upon the poets, in this case T.S. Eliot, to say with power how the Incarnation is the symbol and reality of time given purpose:

Then came, at a predetermined moment, a moment in time and of time,

A moment not out of time, but in time, in what we call history: transecting, bisecting the world of time, a moment in time but not like a moment of time,

A moment in time but time was made through that moment: for without the meaning there is not time, and that moment of time gave the meaning.⁴

That moment stamped neutral time with the mark of love. It took the cruciform shape of much of human existence and gave it resurrection. It meant

that if time does us all in, it does not finally do any of us in. It meant that our time is not time alone but time shared—by one who is with us and whose call in such a time as this and in every time fills our time with meaning and purpose.

2. A second clue about time that comes from the Preacher's poem is that we experience the time God gives us in part as *occasions and experiences that return again and again or times that are expected, because they always come*—some rhythmically, some not—times of good but also bad, of birth but also death, of crying but also laughter, a time to keep things and a time to throw things away, a time to keep silence and a time to speak out. There are patterns to our time and the way we experience it. The patterns of time, the continual turning and returning of time, come to us, of course, as both bad news and good news. It is bad news when it means we experience the things that happen in our time as fixed and always the same. It is possible for a malaise to settle over us in the face of recurring patterns day after day, year after year. Here we go again. The repetition of the seasons and the holidays even reminds us that the more things change the more they remain the same. Christmas always comes to us as a marvelous gift. But it also brings the kind of undoing drain upon our energies, time, and financial resources over and over again that can lead some of us—and maybe part of all of us—to dread the fact that this time is upon us again. The Preacher of Ecclesiastes knew that and shared some of our ennui in the face of the recurring patterns of time.

But there is some very good news in what the Preacher saw. For what time repeated and patterned also means is that there is some regularity and order to our life and to the world as we experience it, the possibility of laughter after crying, of loving as well as hating. We are not faced with chaos and utter uncertainty. The orderly turn of time in nature and in our daily lives, whether it be the cycle of work or the school year, the church year or vacation time, means that we do not face the future never knowing what lies ahead. There is much we know about the time that lies before us. The year comes around again. The present year comes to a close. It is possible, indeed necessary, to close the books on aspects of our life and work and say: "That time is over. It is time to begin again—a new year, a new week, a new day." Or to colloquialize and personalize the words of Ecclesiastes: at last, I can throw some things away. Now is the time to speak out. Look, the snow is here again. Let's stop the war!

The Christian symbol that both symbolizes and achieves the good news that times come to a close and we can start afresh is the sabbath. The purpose of the sabbath is to see that in the onward movement of time we stop, catch our breath, cut ourselves loose, cut others loose, remember our Creator, and then take up time and our purpose anew. The sabbath—whether it was the seventh day, the seventh year, or the fiftieth Jubilee year, all of which were sabbatical times—was given by God to say, in effect, “Yes, you can stop and rest, and you can start afresh, create a new time, change the mourning into dancing. If the passage of time has burdened you with debt, slavery, anxiety, or unbearable toil, then you can count on regular times for release, liberty, rest, and fresh starts.” If that is not what we have heard and experienced and achieved in the sabbath, then we have not received the gift nor learned that the sabbath/Sunday is the most important category of time that Christians know. It is a regular, recurring, temporal experience of the release God gives to humankind. Keep the sabbath, you and your young people. That is the command of God. It is not easy. Yet in doing so, you will discover that in fact it is a gift that can free you from time’s tyranny.

3. To encounter time as returning and repeating and patterned, as the Preacher reminds us we do, is, however, only a partial perspective. The third point I wish to make is this: It is the claim of Christian faith that *time is also history, moving forward, open to the future, never merely repetition of what has been*. There is always a future in time, one that can surprise us with its changes and new opportunities as well as with new demands and challenges. Which means that we can affect and shape our time. If there are times for war and times for peace that are somehow set in the mystery of God’s purpose, those times are never so determined that we cannot affect them. I find a vivid illustration of that in the imaginary “doomsday clock” that has been set by the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, in which the long hand is moved closer to midnight when the scientists believe we are closer to nuclear war. Fifteen years ago it was at fifteen minutes before midnight. Since 2002 it has been sitting at seven minutes to midnight, indicating how close the scientists think we are to creating a catastrophic future. But though we cannot move back the hands of time, we can shape the future and move back the hands of the doomsday clock.

The Christian symbol that portrays for us the always-forward movement of our time is the Way. The Book of Acts tells us several times that the first name of the Christian community was the Way (Acts 9:2, etc.). That is an apt

title, for it speaks of the pilgrimage into the future of a people who know that their time is directed toward the future and purpose that God has set, that each moment in time will present them with new situations to which a responsible answer needs to be given. And “the way” is also one of the primary biblical images for the moral life and for piety. The way we walk will determine in no small matter what happens in the time that lies ahead.

What if we were to retrieve that name within our congregations, maybe even with our youth? “We are the Way.” It is a rather risky move, because it makes claims about ourselves, and we are reluctant these days to make claims. But it would also mean we have to live up to those claims. That might be an interesting countercultural move forcing us to think and act as Christians in a rather daring way. W.H. Auden concludes his Christmas Oratorio, *For the Time Being*, with these words:

He is The Way.

Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness

You will see rare beasts and have unique adventures.⁵

Auden may be on to something here. I’m not sure we ever think about the Christian life as an adventure in time. That might be fun in the fullest sense of the word. How might our youth respond to discovering the Christian life as a risky adventure? It was a long time ago, but I think that, as a teenager, I was looking for something like that.

4. On the way to the future, we live between *memory* and *hope*, between recollection and anticipation. That is the religious as well as the secular meaning of the New Year celebration, an occasion that has little place in the Christian church year but was for ancient Israel the central festival when the people remembered the mighty acts of God who had delivered and protected and guided them, and looked forward to the Lord’s final victory over all evil, hurt, and suffering. So at the New Year we recall the past and hold to the memories that matter. There is a forgetting in the passage of time as well, a choosing of the memories that will guide us. That choice of memories of time past is what we do when we recite the creed and tell the biblical story again. And we look forward in anticipation—and indeed in confidence—to the time that lies ahead. Try that; teach that. Hope is not wondering or wishing. It is trusting that the future belongs to God (and trusting *because* the future

belongs to God). The memories undergird that hope—for we know that in the past we have been kept by the steadfast love of God.

The symbol of time recollected and anticipated is surely the Lord's Supper, where the church gathers at the table to remember our Lord's death until he comes, to remember what matters and forget the rest, to anticipate what will come in the mystery of God's time and God's way.

5. Finally, I come back to the Preacher, Ecclesiastes, for what may be his most important contribution to our understanding of time: the realization that time's gift is joy. In the face of the inscrutability of time, our incapacity to trace time or, as Ecclesiastes puts it, our inability to "find out what God has done from the beginning to the end" (3:11), he has one word of counsel to human beings, a word he repeats several times in the book: "I know that there is nothing better for them than to enjoy themselves and do good as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and enjoy the fruit of their toil" (3:12–13). Elsewhere he puts it: "Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already approved what you do. . . . Enjoy life with the wife whom you love. . ." (9:7, 9). Or as Psalm 118:24 puts it: "This is the day the LORD has made"—the time, the moment the Lord has made—"let us be glad and rejoice in it." The gift of time is God's gift of joy, "the basic pleasures that sustain life: daily bread, meaningful work, rejuvenating rest, and companionship of loved ones."⁶ There is a powerful ethical dimension to this as Princeton Seminary assistant professor of Old Testament Eunny Lee points out in her remarkable new book on Ecclesiastes. It is countercultural, of course, telling us that the gift of time is to be spent, and not for spending. As Lee says,

The dominant culture constantly bombards the public with the message that to be human is to be a consumer. A full life is a life filled with more, and more is always accessible and attainable. Qohelet's ethic of enjoyment opposes precisely these excesses. It issues the warning that this cultural ideology is a tragic deformation of appropriate human longings; it denounces the inflated expectations and inordinate desires that plague and threaten human society. Qohelet's ethic of enjoyment, then, is a recuperation of the norm. Enjoyment is emphatically not about the pursuit of more—not even the pursuit of joy—but the glad appreciation of what is already in one's possession by the gift of God. It means that the human becomes free not to grasp, not to possess, not to know.⁷

So what is the symbol of time's gift of joy? Well, there are two. I would like to confine it to one for the sake of order and structure in my remarks, but I cannot honestly do that because there really are two. One is what you have just been hearing accented in Ecclesiastes, but it is present in many other places. The other is accented in the Psalms and present in many other places. For Ecclesiastes, as Eunny Lee puts it, "the most characteristic metaphor for enjoyment is eating and drinking."⁸ "Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do" (9:7). Again and again, eating and drinking and rejoicing appear together in the Old Testament. The family, the community, regularly gathers at the table and in its eating and drinking together takes pleasure, has a good time, enjoys the time. In Deuteronomy and elsewhere such occasions are always to include those who may not have food and drink unless they are included: widows, strangers, orphans, the poor. In the Book of Esther, after the Jews are saved, a time of regular celebration is created and the people are told "they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor" (9:22). To quote Eunny Lee one more time: "It is in the context of breaking the bread and sharing the cup, giving and caring for the needy, that communities are strengthened and lives are transformed toward greater wholeness." So do not separate the family night dinner and the Sunday evening youth supper from the table in the sanctuary where we gather together in memory and hope but also in joy, remembering our Lord's death until he comes again. All these meals of joy—familial, communal, sacramental—anticipate that feast of rich food the prophet Isaiah describes so well, the gathering of all the peoples on the mountain of the Lord when God shall wipe away the tears from all faces, and the earth is filled with joy.

But I said there are two signs and manifestations of time's gift of joy. And indeed they go together. In Isaiah, when all are gathered together at the Lord's feast to eat and drink in joy, two things return that have disappeared in the time of judgment and suffering: wine and music. Both are signs of joy, but I will take the second one most of all. When time does us in, music lifts us up and brings joy back to our hearts. I have three pictures with which I leave you; two are personal. One is of me as a young boy sitting at the piano, angry because my mother is making me practice, and I find that, despite my best efforts to hold on to it, my anger gradually disappears as I play the music before me. I have never forgotten that experience. The second is of me again, but much more recently, sitting in my study, working, maybe on this lecture,

but getting frustrated and tired—when I begin to hear Mary Ann playing Bach on the piano downstairs, and my soul is calmed and quieted. The last example is a brief note from Anne Morrow Lindbergh’s diaries that Mary Ann read to me a few days ago. Lindbergh writes,

Sneezed all morning. Hay fever. Tired out and apathetic. I give in to it and sit in a window in the sun and listen to the Ninth Symphony. Music is the only thing that really makes me stop fearing death and age and all other things. “There is always this,” I think. It restores everything to you— everything that really matters. A touchstone.¹⁰

Notes

1. e.e. cummings, *100 Selected Poems* (New York: Grove Press, 2005), 118.
2. Ignacio Silone, *The Seed beneath the Snow*, translated by Harvey Fergusson II (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1965), 59.
3. For the exact formulation, see W.H. Auden, *For the Time Being* (London, Faber and Faber, 1953), 124.
4. T.S. Eliot, “The Rock,” *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company), 107.
5. W.H. Auden, *For the Time Being* (London: Faber and Faber, 1945), 124.
6. Eunny P. Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment in Qohelet’s Rhetoric* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, 353; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 127.
7. *Ibid.*, 128.
8. *Ibid.*, 132.
9. *Ibid.*, 133.
10. Anne Morrow Lindbergh, *Locked Rooms and Open Doors: Diaries and Letters of Anne Morrow Lindbergh 1933–1935* (San Diego/New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1974), 275.