

Time

Ecclesiastes 3:9-15

May 25, 2025

North Decatur Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

⁹What do workers gain from their toil? ¹⁰I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. ¹¹God has made everything beautiful in its time. God has also set eternity in the human heart; yet^[a] no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. ¹²I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. ¹³That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God. ¹⁴I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear God.

¹⁵Whatever is has already been,
and what will be has been before;
and God will call the past to account.

This is a season of endings. Maybe I'm feeling this more than some of you. It's the end of the school year for kids and families. It's *almost* the end of the church year—all of our Sunday School teachers have a well-earned rest; we won't be rousing for early service on Sunday until August; the church year technically concludes in two weeks, with our celebration of Pentecost. For me, the most profound ending is my oldest son's graduation from high school—it's the end of a season in our lives that began almost 19 years ago, on the day we learned we were expecting our first child.

Endings are also beginnings. It's the beginning of summer. A decidedly different kind of time. Many of you will take long-anticipated, well-deserved vacations. Perhaps, in summer, you slow down, sitting on porches, sipping cold beverages in the evening. A season of swimming pools. And for those of us with kids graduating, being parent doesn't stop—it begins a new season.

As we begin, I'd like to ask you to think about where you are at the beginning of summer. Will you take a minute and turn to your neighbor and share some of the endings and beginnings in your life right now?

(discussion)

As we talk about beginnings and endings, what we're really talking about is time.

One of our basic experiences is that time moves forward, not backward. This perception of time is shaped by change. Things change over time—we change. James today isn't the tiny creature he was when he came out of the womb in 2007.

(two pictures of James)

Every day, our experience of the world shapes us; our bodies age; perhaps we gain knowledge, even wisdom; we also get sick; and eventually, each one of us will die and go back to the dust. Change tells us that time moves forward.

(show timeline)

In 1765, the English chemist Joseph Priestly was the first person to invent this: the timeline. It's such a powerful image. It's so clear. It conveys this inexorable forward movement of time. Is this what time is? A line? Always divided into past, present, and future?

Our own experience suggests that the timeline is misleading.

For one, time appears, at the very least, like a spiral
(image).

The spirality of time is infused in the natural world in the form of seasons. Because the earth tilts, every year we have this regular progression of unique seasons. The church year also marks time as a spiral. Every year, we come around to each liturgical season: Advent, a season of waiting for the incarnation of God; Lent, a season to be grounded in humility and mortality; Easter, a season of exuberance; Pentecost, the celebration of the arrival of God's Spirit; and what we in the church call "ordinary time," when we journey together as God's people.

Maybe time is a spiral, circling back again and again, but because we change and the world changes, each time we come around again, it's a new experience.

But maybe we can go a step deeper in understanding our relationship to time. I want poke at this idea that time only moves forward. Now, I'm not suggesting we can "turn back time." We can't go back to the day we were born, or to some key moment in history—although the idea makes for a good party game. Even so, the past is not *irretrievable*.

My parents sent a card to James for his graduation. In it was a photograph. It was a photograph of me, surrounded by my family, my grandparents, on the occasion of my high school graduation. I remember taking that photograph. All of a sudden, in my mind, I was there; my own past was as present to me as James' graduation a few days before.

"*The past is never dead*," the author William Faulkner wrote, "It's not even past." The past keeps coming to us. Sometimes this intrusion of the past is welcome—that graduation photograph was a happy memory. These joyful, meaningful moments nourish us in the present. But the past can enter the present to trouble us. Old personal hurts still cause us real pain. America's racist wounds have a present reality. This is all to say that the idea of the progress of time isn't quite right. We don't just move forward. The past isn't past. It's always inserting itself into the now. We have to face the past; to deal with it, to negotiate our relationship to it.

This is what Christians are always doing. Our life together as a people of faith relies on the porousness of time. We believe past events influence the present. The incarnation of God in Jesus is a past event with implications that we propose ripple through every time and place. When God became human, all of humanity, before and after, orients itself around that Christ event.

God, we believe, inhabits all of time. Even as time appears to move “forward,” we don’t get farther away from God’s incarnation in Jesus. God saturates time, in such a way that every generation is as close to the divine revelation as any other. That we, in 2025, have just as much access to the love and power of Jesus as his disciples did! The writer Annie Dillard wrote, **“The absolute is available to everyone in every age. There never was a more holy age than ours, and never a less.”**

If the past is always present, what about the future?

We surely worry about the future. For many of us, anxiety about the future is a constant presence. Even with the comforting regularity of nature’s seasons, and the familiarity of the church’s liturgical repetition, the future often appears to us like a threat.

It turns out that our faith also has way of regarding the future. Christianity, for all of our dependence on the past Christ-event, is very future-oriented. Not perhaps in the way you think—in the sense that we are all headed toward some future apocalypse documented in the Book of Revelation. That’s actually a very modern, very “timeline” way of thinking about the future—and actually not very Biblical.

What is the future? It is a mystery, for sure. Christians are not fortune tellers. What we do believe is that in the same way God saturates the past and the present, the future belongs to God. The Book of Revelation’s beautiful insight is that God is in the future. Chapter 21 offers this extraordinary vision of God being “at home” with God’s people. There are no more tears, no more crying, no more injustice, no more ecological destruction—the earth itself becomes the home for the Beloved Community.

This future, saturated with God—with love and justice—doesn’t just await us at the end of a timeline. This future, Christians believe, God’s future, is always coming toward us. The language we use is language of “breaking in.” God’s future “breaks in” to our present. In the same way that the father runs to welcome the prodigal son home, God’s future runs toward us. When Jesus walked the hills of Galilee, he said, “the Empire of God is at hand.” He’s saying “the future of God is here, now.”

Just like the present is porous to the past, it’s porous to the future. We don’t have to be afraid. The love that rolled away the stone on Easter, hold the future.

What does that mean for you and me? It doesn't mean we sit and eat Twinkies until God comes back to rescue us. It means that because God has revealed Godself to you, you become a harbinger of that future. You and I live "as though" God's future is already here. We love our neighbors, educate our children, organize to oppose injustice, tend to the sick, plant trees, feed the hungry, forgive those who have hurt us, and rest on the sabbath not because by doing so we can make God's future—we do so to bear witness to the future that God brings, a future that is so beautiful, so close, it is already at hand.

The past is present. The future is at hand. Do you see what happens? Time is porous to God. Eternity—that which is good and true and just beautiful—eternity is always entering into time. Sanctifying it. Blessing it. Every moment is sacred. Every moment is an experience of the fullness of time.

One last little nugget. Einstein's theory of relativity did a bunch of radical things. One thing it did was throw open the possibility that time is not an unyielding, regular sequence of moments.

(show picture)

Einstein suggested that time is woven into the fabric of the universe—"space time," he called it. He even went so far as to say that all moments are essentially the same moment. There isn't past, present, future. Just different instantiations of the present. There is only "now." An "eternal now."

What do you think about that?

I'm not sure what your summer holds. But what if you knew that God holds every moment. What if you saw eternity in each unfolding day? What if you knew that time is not running out; what if you knew you had all the time in the world to love?