

**“World Enough And Time”**  
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Here’s a “call-and-response” we haven’t done before in this church. If you ask a fish, “how’s the water,” what will the fish say? Anybody? [congregant responds “WHAT WATER?”] Right! So let’s all try it: if you ask a fish, “how’s the water,” what will the fish say? [all respond, “WHAT WATER?”]

Time is the water we swim in. We have held ourselves as time-bound creatures for so long that it doesn’t seem like a point of view, but rather, like Reality with a capital “R.” So this morning I’m asking you to stay in touch with the wisdom of this little call and response, as I try my best to unmask this reality-that’s-not-actually -Reality.

As we’ve said many times here, everyone worships something. We’ve talked about worship as “worth-shaping.” In today’s world, what shapes – indeed determines – our worth . . . is time. It is the measure of all things. We have made a god of it.

The place to begin finding out why is death. No other creature is aware of death, and no other creature worries about time. Dogs are never late, and to my knowledge they have never planned a funeral.

We see time slipping between our fingers like grains of sand passing from the upper and future chamber of the hourglass called life, through the narrow neck we call the present, and into the lower chamber we call the past. Our consciousness of death makes this a cause of great anxiety; so we try to grasp time more tightly.

We try to put time through a kind of phase change, by producing things; and then by trying to “manage” time so that we can squeeze more and more productivity into whatever immutable period of time we have before we die. Then we tell ourselves that we “have something to show for” our time – that it hasn’t really slipped through our fingers. But this is a distortion designed to ease our anxiety about death. We have been doing this for some centuries now.

When I say productivity, by the way, I’m speaking very broadly. Whether we’re producing knowledge, semiconductor chips, or even what we classify as leisure pursuits, we are imposing the relentless accountancy of time. When we talk about “having” more “time,” we’re really talking about cramming more doingness into the same span of time. In our secular religion, we consider it a terrible trespass when someone “wastes our time.”

Now, no one actually believes that productivity will save him from death. How many tombstones have you seen with the epitaph, “If only I had spent more time at the office!”? But many of us sure do live as if productivity is the end-all and be-all, don’t we?

Our grasping at productivity as a palliative for mortality reflects a consciousness that is confined to the material world. The amorous suitor in today’s poetry reading is totally in the thrall of this confined consciousness, with his ardent inventory of adored body parts. We are not so different from him as we might think. In our frantic efforts to stop time from slipping through our fingers, we are, in countless ways, trying to make love and look at our watches at the same time.

Along with our sense of mortality, we are also the only creature with a capacity for choice, which naturally includes a sense of responsibility for choosing wisely. But if our gaze is fixed exclusively on the material world of time and productivity, then our choices will be all about one material option versus another. Unless, of course, we happen to pass a sign on the road of life that reads, IS THIS REALLY ALL THERE IS?

The surfacing of this infernal question should cause us to challenge whatever authority keeps us so confined to the material world -- including the authority of time. As James Carse observes in his remarkable new book, The Religious Case Against Belief, “authority does not precede its use, but is created by it. . . . Contrary to the popular notion, authority does not come from the top down but from the bottom up.” We are ruled by time only because we grant authority to it. We do that in order to deal with our anxiety about death. We are always free, though, to unchoose what we chose. We need only ask whether we might find a different way of relating to time by getting in touch with the part of our lives that is not confined to the material world.

The first step toward that different way is to recognize that time is an illusion. Now, don’t worry too much about all the philosophical implications of time being an illusion rather than real. As Einstein said, it’s a stubbornly persistent illusion, so we’re not going to do away with it regardless of whether we deem it real or unreal. We might even come to see that it’s an illusion of critical importance for our spiritual lives. To see that, though, we have to understand that it is an illusion.

It wasn’t Einstein who figured this out. It wasn’t even a physicist. It was St. Augustine, patiently stepping through the reasoning over a millennium ago. He began with a humble confession: “What, then, is time? I know well enough what it is, [pause] provided that nobody asks me.” Very briefly summarized, he worked his way out of this puzzlement by reasoning as follows. Time is an expression of duration. That sounds right, doesn’t it? The past and the future have duration, but the present doesn’t. Hans showed us that this morning, right? Time therefore can only exist in the past and the future. Kind of follows from the first two statements, right? The past and the future are not real – not physically present to our senses -- because they are either not yet here or already gone. That’s just stating the obvious. So time is not real either, because it exists only in conditions we just said were not real. So, if time isn’t real, what is it? Augustine concluded that what we call time is simply a memory of the past and the use of such memory to make projections into the future. “It is in my own mind, then,” Augustine said, “that

I measure time. “I must not allow my mind to insist that time is something objective. . . . A long future is simply a long expectation of the future . . . and a long past is [simply] a long remembrance of the past.”

Once we realize that we have the humanly conceived illusion called time, time can no longer have us – can no longer confine our consciousness to the material world. Now we can think about time in a very different way. We can see the durationless present as outside of time and thus outside the constraints of the material world. And by focusing our consciousness on the present, instead of obsessing on the future and the past, we can open ourselves to an experience of the holy.

As we have discussed many times, “the holy” is not easy to talk about. But we can say this much: it is a sense of wholeness, of being a part of, rather than apart from, all with which we belong; and one aspect of that “belonging with” reaches beyond time and space to a ground of being that has constancy, stillness and goodness. We know it is good because when we connect with it, we know ourselves to be good.

This is what it means to have a spiritual life. Chopping up our lives into pieces that fit the yardstick of time – an hour’s worth of this, a day’s worth of that-- precludes the possibility of having experiences that transcend time – which is to say, experiences of the holy. Abandoning this way of relating to time is essential for the transformative journey toward wholeness.

Having a spiritual life, of course, doesn’t mean just being spiritual. Wholeness means integrating not only being but also doing. What we are here to do is express the holy into the world of time and space. [pause] Now THERE’S a sweeping theological statement. What does it mean to do this? It means to bring into our lives the goodness we sense in connecting with the holy; to share with others the goodness we sense in ourselves when we have made that connection; to reflect this appreciation for holiness in all we do.

And what makes me so sure that this is what we are here to do? Because now and then I do this, and when I do, a voice in my head says with unshakable confidence, “this is why you are here.” And I know others who have had the same experience – some of them sitting here this morning.

Humans express the holy by exercising their unique capacity for making heroic choices. This would be impossible in a timeless world. Someone once said that time is God’s way of keeping everything from happening at once. Maybe where God lives, everything does happen at once. And maybe that works fine for God. But our noble role in the universe is to choose and act heroically in the face of great uncertainty. The idea of choice is meaningless without the idea of a future. The purpose of the persistently stubborn illusion called time is to make this noble role possible, because it represents our opportunity to move ourselves and the universe toward reunion and wholeness. Time is an essential part of the stage on which we act out the human drama of expressing the holy into the world.

Now, whatever our relationship with time, we’re going to act in the world. The only question is whether we will act as if we were mere machines made of meat, or instead as the

cross between animal and deity that we really are. When we choose to express the holy into the world, we are embracing a transformative shift in perspective. From the new perspective, we are still inside time, but now we have the capacity to see through time to timelessness, to the eternal, awe-inspiring ultimates: beauty, truth, love, and wholeness. We are acting not only IN the present but also FROM the present, as the ground of being and consciousness. All this, with just a change in point of view.

When we do this, even to a modest degree, a strange thing happens: time, which we have anxiously and helplessly watched speeding past us, starts to slow down. The psychologist Abraham Maslow observed this long ago, in working with people having what he called “peak experiences” -- including athletes. It has been documented in studies published in sports psychology journals. The tennis ball floats across the net, and the athlete has an experience of there being all the time in the world to get to it and swing the racket skillfully. The perspective of the peak experience is one that blends, or integrates, the high-speed tennis game called life in the modern material world and the timeless stillness of true presence. This slowing down of time is an experience of grace.

This is the experience toward which the soldier-turned-warrior named Arjuna was striving in the Bhagavad-Gita, as we saw last Sunday. When Krishna, the ultimate representation of God in Hinduism, began to counsel Arjuna, a battle was erupting. But that was going on in the world of time and space. Krishna and Arjuna were having their 700-verse dialogue at a different “time” – the timeless time called the present; the only “time” at which Arjuna could have the experience of the holy that would enable him to answer his life’s calling. Acting in and from the present is what enables the warrior in us to contain conflict; what enables the poet in us to create universal poetry; what allows the authentic self to be given full expression, with all distortions removed.

The same valuing of presence is evident in Buddhism. When Gautama first showed up and created such a sensation, people named him, “The Awakened One,” or, in Sanskrit, “Buddha.” For him, to be awake was to act in and from the present.

Likewise with the life and ministry of Jesus. As Stephen Mitchell has observed, Jesus taught that “if only we stop looking forward and backward . . . we will be able to devote ourselves to seeing the kingdom of God, which is right beneath our feet, right under our noses.” This “kingdom” is simply an archaic way of talking about pure presence. As Nietzsche said, what Jesus called the kingdom of God “isn’t something that one waits for; it has no yesterday and no tomorrow, it doesn’t come in ‘a thousand years’ – it is an experience that takes place inside the heart; it is everywhere, it is nowhere.”

Descending from the lofty plane of Krishna, Buddha, and Jesus, we can see the same yearning for presence in Henry David Thoreau. His Walden experience was an effort to find transcendence in the presence of unspoiled nature, which knows time not. [pause]

You don’t have to be Krishna or Buddha or Jesus or even Henry David Thoreau to gain this new perspective on time. Even the time-fixated suitor in Andrew Marvel’s poem could have done this if someone had called it forth in him. Reading the poem, I wondered whether the lady

he is beseeching might have done so. If allowed to speak, I think she might have said something like this:

You speak, good sir, of time, and yet,  
Twas not in time that our hearts met.  
True love is not the fool of time,  
For timelessness makes love sublime.

Our souls live not in time and space,  
But rather in a placeless place.  
A bed's a fine and private spot,  
But heaven here on earth it's not.

So lest our love be lost in lust,  
In deeper truths confide your trust.  
Bring all of me within your gaze,  
And set my soul – and yours -- ablaze.

No one lacks the capacity for this transformation. Not even me. For most of my life I was completely caught up in time and productivity. When I entered the ministry, this imprisonment of my attention didn't just disappear. It IS different for me now, but the illusion Einstein called persistently stubborn remains a habit that is hard to break. Still, my visits to the present grow more frequent. A voice in my head, previously still and small, grows louder in its insistence that maybe my most important gift to the world is not productivity but presence. I find myself asking, what would it be like to have a life ordered entirely by the value of being present?

I've been talking about this shift to a new perspective on time as a potential rather than an immediate reality. But what about right here, in this morning's service, in which we have had a wonderful celebration of the experience of NOW? Where are we, and when are we, each of us, right now? Worrying about what needs to get done after church? Stuck in a yesterday in which an encounter with someone didn't go too well? Can we turn toward the realization that there is all the time in the world to sing the closing hymn; to collect the offering; to extinguish the chalice; to join hands and wish each other well as we say goodbye until we meet again? Can we turn toward the world enough and time that are already ours for the asking?

AMEN.