

Where Does the Time Go?
Matthew 25:31-46; Psalm 100
Christ the King Sunday

Psalm 100

¹Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.

²Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing.

³Know that the LORD is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

⁴Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name.

⁵For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

Matthew 25:31-46

[Jesus said,] ³¹“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’

³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’

⁴⁰And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’

⁴⁴Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

The Sermon

We looked at his face, his eyes, his hair; the wrinkles on his forehead, the calluses on his feet, the laugh lines, the weathered hands.

He wasn’t very old. But he had been traveling and teaching and preaching and had met practically everyone, everywhere we went.

And those of us who had been with him almost every step of the way could hardly remember if it was one year or three yearsⁱ or a lifetime or an eternity.

And we wondered: Where did the time go?

After he was baptized by his cousin, John, he had disappeared into the wilderness, and when he came out, he was ready to begin his ministry.

He called his first disciples, and he began ministering to crowds of people at a time.

He taught the beatitudes—blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed are the poor, or the poor in spirit...ⁱⁱ

He healed a leper. He healed a centurion's servant who had been paralyzed. He touched Peter's mother-in-law's hand and she was cured, so we brought a great many more sick people to her house, and he healed every one of them.

We were out in a boat one night, and a storm came up, and we were afraid, so we woke him up. He rebuked us, for being so afraid even though he was with us; and then he rebuked the wind, which immediately ceased, and there was a dead calm. And we said, "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?"

Everywhere he went, he left people's lives tangibly better than they had been.

He taught us in parables, and we heard many things—about faith the size of a mustard seed; about a treasure buried in a field.

He fed people who were hungry: five thousand families with five loaves and two fish; four thousand with seven loaves and a few small fish.

And we kept moving, and he kept teaching, and he kept healing, always moving in a slow circle toward Jerusalem.

And when we finally came into the city for the last time, a huge crowd was there to greet him, and people spread their cloaks on the ground, and some cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road, and he came into the city like a king.

And still he kept teaching: a parable about a wedding banquet, where the people who were invited blew off the invitation so other people were welcomed, and the invitees were left out;

wise and foolish bridesmaids, some of whom weren't ready when the bridegroom arrived;

the master who entrusted his servants with talents while he was away for a while.

And then, one last, long discourse.

He said, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, he'll say to those at his right hand, 'Come, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

And the righteous will say, 'When was that?'

And the king will say, 'Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

"Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'

And they will answer, 'When did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and didn't take care of you?'

And he'll answer them, 'Just as you didn't do it for one of the least of these, you didn't do it for me.'"

When he finished saying that, he looked at us all, and said, “You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.”

We looked at his face, his eyes, his hair; the wrinkles on his forehead, the laugh lines, the calluses, the weathered hands. And we thought to ourselves: Where did the time go?

On November 18 in Western North Carolina, the sun set at 5:20 P.M. and it was dark at 5:47. It started to get light almost exactly 13 hours later at about 6:43 A.M., and the sun rose at 7:10 A.M.ⁱⁱⁱ

The schedule is a bit different in an American town called (UUT-kee-AH-vik) Utqiagvik, the northernmost city in the United States, north even of the Arctic Circle.

When the sun set on November 18 in Utqiagvik, it began a stretch of 66 days in which it will not reappear, an effect called Polar Night. The sun will brush the horizon around January 23rd and will rise again on the 27th or 28th.

It takes emotional fortitude and mental dexterity to live and thrive in an environment like that, which is witnessed by the reserves of emotional fortitude and mental dexterity that have been called on in all of us since the pandemic interrupted the flow of our lives as we had known them.

Said another way, there’s an online satirical newsletter—funny fake news, essentially—that recently featured a year-end summary article titled, “Looking Back On [our] First 15,000 Years Of Coronavirus Coverage.”^{iv}

One of the strains of this crisis is the way one day flows into the next, and it’s hard to remember what time of year it is—I can’t believe next week is Advent—let alone what day of the week or what time it is.

Extraverts have been faced with the significant, ongoing crisis of being denied the crucial energy source of being around other people;

while introverts, paradoxically, have found that staying at home hasn't panned out the way they might have hoped—Zoom, social media and the daily news absorb astonishing amounts of energy that don't leave nearly enough space for the refreshment of quiet solitude.

Meanwhile, many of those who had too much to do before still have too much to do now; while many who used to wish they had more to do have only got it worse now. For everyone, it's a disorienting jumble of days and weeks and seasons.

Even in non-pandemic times, it takes so much energy just to keep up with mundane things—

to be where you're supposed to be,

to take care of home, work, and family obligations;

then you factor in church involvement, civic involvement, and maybe looking after aging parents, or growing children, or friends and relatives for whom you really want and need to be there.

So when the preacher says, "take time to be holy," sometimes you just want to say, "You have no idea."

When the day comes that King Jesus asks me about the people in the world who went hungry on my watch; the victims of genocides whose plight I rationalized as just the unfortunate geopolitical realities; the unseen, forgotten and sequestered away people; the people whose daily lives I now understand are very different from mine and made much harder by the fact that when the subject comes up, my first instinct is to defend myself and my integrity; and the ones that I don't even *try* to love as he loved us, the neighbors about whom, far from loving as much as I love me, I could hardly have cared less;

When King Jesus asks me about that, I'll want to say,

But didn't you see how busy I was? Didn't you understand how much I had to do, and how little reward there was in the rare moments of downtime?

Didn't you feel how one day rolled into the next, and time just kept flowing faster than I could keep track of it?

Didn't you know how enormously epic the problems were, how hopeless it seemed, how little and pathetic I felt most of the time—how insignificant, and small?

And all the time I'm laying out that argument, I'll be thinking to myself: Yeah, but seriously: where *did* the time go?

Today, on the last Sunday of the church calendar year, we give him his crown. I want to say, "Well, God gives Jesus the crown," which is true. But we either give him the crown or we don't.

Next Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent, we start all over; but today, for this culminating week of watching him, listening to him, following him, we celebrate Christ the King.

And we pray that, with God's strength, with Christ's love, with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, we might each find our own ways to be ever more faithful subjects next year than we were the year before.

We know what we are supposed to do.

And in breathtaking ways, we see inspiring examples all over the place.

Anybody can make the case that the world is brutal, callous, and cruel—the examples are everywhere.

But life is complex, and people are complicated. And you don't have to look too far or too hard before you find people putting themselves on the line to protect the brutalized from the bullying of systems, governments, abusers and thugs.

It won't take you long to find people who choose to be caring and compassionate, to work hard to provide respite and bring about real change—people who are listening; who are actively opening themselves up to the vulnerability of being in real relationship with other people who are not nearly as fortunate—and who have some things to say that may upset our delicate social and political sensibilities, be they left, right, or center.

You don't have to look far to see people who stand up and speak out against the cruelties of the world, offering love in the form of prayers and contributions and hard work and personal engagement.

Start a list some time of all of the examples you can see of people actively working to interfere with the world's cold, callous brutality, and replacing it with love, light, self-sacrifice, honest listening and the provision of access to food and safety and hope. If you start writing down examples of goodness visible in the world around you, you will get writer's cramp in minutes.

Among the spectacular images in the Book of Revelation is the one in Chapter 2, where the voice from within the seven golden lampstands, one like the Son of Man whose voice was like the sound of many waters, said:

“I know your works, your toil
and your patient endurance.
I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers;
you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not,
and have found them to be false.
I also know that you are enduring patiently

and bearing up for the sake of my name,
and that you have not grown weary.
But I have this against you,
that you have abandoned the love you had at first.
Remember then from what you have fallen;
repent, and do the works you did at first.”^v

Where does the time go?

It doesn't vanish. Everything that happens, every moment we are part of, is within God's realm, and remains in God's loving keep.

No love is erased; no tears are in vain; no one's life ever becomes obscure and disappears. God remembers and eternally loves all God's creation.

In the fourteenth century, Julian of Norwich wrote, as a result of revelations that came to her as she lay on what had seemed to be her deathbed: “I saw that God is our true peace, who watches over us when we can find no rest, and works continually to bring us to peace that shall never end.

“We are his crown, and this crown is the joy of the Father, the glory of the Son, and the happiness of the Holy Spirit, and the endless wondering delight of those who are in heaven.”

May it be so for us and for our maker and redeemer, our Lord, our friend, our sovereign, our savior. Amen.

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ⁱ Matthew, Mark and Luke's gospels could each fit the narrative chronology into one year; John's suggests three.

ⁱⁱ Luke's telling vs. Matthew's

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://sunrise-sunset.org/us/montreat-nc>

^{iv} www.theonion.com, 11/12/20 7:06AM

^v Rev. 2:1-7 (and see end of ch. 1 for the set-up of this paragraph)