

November 30, 2014

Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church

Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Mark 13:24-37

How Much Time?

The timing seems off in the gospel today. It's the first Sunday of Advent, the church season that is a four week of count down to Christmas, a time when we get ourselves ready for Jesus coming as a baby—and in week one the gospel has a grown up Jesus, a grown up Jesus talking about end times, no less. It seems off. All this talk about “after great suffering, when the sun will be darkened, and the stars begin to fall.” And no one knows just how long we have to wait until then, until Jesus' second coming—not even Jesus. The timing seems off, and, quite frankly, so does Jesus. He doesn't even know how much time until then?

How much time do we have? It's a question I hear from my kids, when we've got something coming up that they've got to be ready for. I'll remind them, “We've got that thing tonight, have you done your homework, practiced piano, looked after the dog?” They say, “How much time do we have?” It's a question you hear from high school students who have a big assignment, or maybe college applications coming due, “How much time do we have?” It's a question that I ask myself, when I'm looking ahead, when there's something big that I'm trying to be ready for, “How much time do I have?”

You have to know how much time, so you can plan accordingly, figure out what needs to get done when, break a large expanse of time down into smaller units: four weeks of Advent. Twenty four more shopping days until Christmas. Two more Sundays 'til the Christmas Play. You have to know how much time. And so we find ways to carve up time and count it down, to numerate.

I think there's a certain amount of attack and overcome in this, a conquering element to our enumeration—which can also be enjoyable, bringing with it intimations of approaching victory. What a delight to open, day by day, the Advent calendar—preferably one with chocolate. How satisfying to look at a paper calendar and make a diagonal strike through the day. Done. I myself switched to a digital calendar this year, after a long holdout of using a little paper pocket date book. I suppose that what I have now is better in some ways, but I so miss that physical slash with a pen or pencil, when the day has arrived, when you've accomplished something. It feels good, and it's good to do that, to look ahead at a final due date. As efficiency experts, and guidance counselors, and your mother will tell you, knowing what's coming when will serve you well.

And yet, the gospel says, you can't know. For all that we lit one Advent candle today, the Advent gospel today says: You can't know. “About that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” We don't know how much time, till Jesus comes again.

How much time do we have? When we stop, and ask again, ask it without looking at a calendar but while looking at our lives, the question haunts us. How much time do we have? How much time do we have left, to be that successful person? How much time do we have left to nurture that relationship—or, how much time do we have to rescue that relationship? How much time do we have to do something about this mess we find ourselves in? Like Isaiah, we lament our condition, what we have done, which has brought on this state. Like the psalmist, we cry, how long? How long will this world suffer, and we along with it, we along in it? How long can

this earth take our climactic abuse? How long will being a young black man be a risk factor for early and violent death?

We don't know how long. We only know it's too short, the time we have, for what we are, and for what we can do with it. For when it comes to what it is to be human, to what life is about, we don't know how much time we have—we only know it is brief and precious.

We had a few days of snow earlier this week, on Monday how it blew! It messed with schedules, it tied up traffic, it brought with it the undeniable announcement that there will be much more to come in the months ahead. In all of that, it was breathtaking, too, the snow, as it laced the branches and blades of grass. As I stood outside, taking the puppy out to pee, as the wet seeped into my flimsy shoes and I thought, "I should have put on boots," as I stood and waited, it was a wonder, too, to see her first experience of snow, as she took curious steps and licks and had to overcome uncertainty to empty her bladder.

The weather was a bother—and beautiful, too. At times it blew so hard it was a wash of white. And yet it was a wonder, too, to see all those swirling flakes, and know there was not a one alike. And then it all melted.

We don't know how much time we have—how then can we know what we should be doing with it? What *should* we be doing, until Jesus comes again? You've heard of the plaque that hangs in some pastor's offices, the plaque that says, "Jesus is coming back. Look busy."

Sometimes our calendars, and plans, and accomplishments can start to resemble so much busy-ness. I think if that's what Jesus was interested in he would have given us a due date. But he didn't. And, to be perfectly honest, we mostly made up the due date for his birth. December 25th is at best a rough guess. You can eat a couple days' worth of Advent calendar chocolates all at once and not be sacrilegious.

Jesus didn't give us a due date for when this world would stop with the ultimate wonder of God with us. Jesus said, "I don't know the day, but be ready." Jesus said, "It's going to be really big, but I can't say when."

I don't think Jesus is being coy, or that someone in the Trinity is not talking to someone else; I don't think we should get all worked up about inter-Trinitarian relations. I think the Word of God, the Word for us, here, today, is saying "Quit trying to numerate the innumerable." Jesus says to us today, "Start living like the victory is already won, now." Because it is. Christmas is coming but Christ has already come. The Word became flesh. Heaven and earth may pass away, but his word will not. We have it, for all time. And that changes how we live, in time, and with time.

How much time do you have? Jesus says: "You have exactly enough time—starting right now." Jesus says, "You have exactly enough time to love your neighbor—starting right now." Jesus says, "You have exactly enough time to care for the world I so love—starting right now." Starting right now, we can be the human beings for whom Christ has come, for whom the victory has been won. Perhaps that means we take time to listen to, or to spend time with, someone whom life, as Isaiah puts it, is a bowl of tears. Perhaps that means a ceaseless commitment to justice, an ever standing firm amidst unjust ways. Maybe it means addressing that relationship that's gotten rough, that could and should be an unending source of meaning in your life. Likely it changes how we use resources which are not renewable.

The end times gospel is all about now; it's about living with the fierce urgency, and the final confidence, that Christ has come, and that Christ will come—and, wonder of it all—come for us.