

Turn! Turn! Turn!

An Invitation to New Year's Communion

Text: Ecclesiastes 3: 1-9

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I once knew a guy in seminary with an uncanny ability to tell time without ever glancing toward a clock. He didn't wear a watch either, in fact, I'm not quite sure that he even owned one. And yet, he was spot-on accurate nearly 100% of the time.

We all know that people are gifted in different ways, and for him, an awareness of time was just an intuitive kind of thing. It was a felt-sense, bone-deep, an inner sort of knowing he had come to trust, and a capacity that he could neither fully understand nor explain.

Now and again - and all in fun - we'd test him: "Hey Tom, what time is it?" He would respond instantly: "seven after three." If any of us corrected him saying something like, "You're four minutes ahead, it's only three after three" he would trump us up one, "No, you are four minutes behind." And then he would sweeten the fun with advice, "You need to get your watches checked!"

He was so consistently correct that some of us began to refer to him affectionately as "Greenwich Mean" not because he was mean by any stretch, but because he became our standard-bearer. Other times we called him "Big Ben."

But Tom was his real name and he was a master at what the early Greek thinkers called *chronos*. Chronos is the kind of time that we can measure and mark and to which apply other terms like late, early, soon, linear, sequential, and quantitative.

It's the tick-tock granular kind of time we track in seconds, minutes and hours – and eventually days and weeks, months and years. It's where chronicles are begun and chronologies form; and where we impose other devices like calendars, hourglasses, sundials, schedules and deadlines.

But the Greek philosophers were aware of another dimension of time, too. This is the kind of time called *kairos*. Rather than the more granular chronos, kairos is time at 30,000 feet. It refers not to the sequence of time, but much deeper, to a having a sensitivity and consciousness for the right moment for a certain thought or action.

Kairos is more spiritual; more luminous; more suggestive of the deeper dimension of eternity and purpose. It is not measurable. It is ontological. It's has a qualitative character that asks not "what time is it?" but "what is this moment in your life and what does it mean?"

Madeline L'Engle once wrote about rocking her granddaughter to sleep. As she took the child and sat down, she distracted by pure chronos and the monkey-mind-chatter of her tasks and appointments - as we all carry. But the moment turned to kairos as she fell into the eternal delight of cuddling her sweet one to the kind of rest that only babies seem to remember how to do.¹

So we have chronos represented by tick-tock and alarm clocks; and kairos as we find the deep moments of life beyond any and all measure of time.

So let's hold these dimensions of time on one side of our minds as we muse deeper. Because I want to introduce you to another friend. This one is a literary companion of mine and of the ages. He is known as Qoheleth - a name that is a hybrid of Quester, Questioner, Gatherer and Teacher. Time also remembers him as Ecclesiastes.

And Ecclesiastes asks, in both poetry and prose, about where we are in our own life and along our own journey. His is a far deeper wondering about time. And he does so by holding up the oscillations that all of us come to experience in the passing of our years.

"To everything there is a season," he writes, "and a time for every purpose under heaven." You may remember this from a song that Pete Seeger made famous called "Turn, Turn, Turn." Made yet more famous yet by the Byrds (Can I get an "amen" for sixties music?!)

Then he goes on goes on juxtapose 28 contrasting moments along life's way. He names them for us on the upside, which I suspect we most prefer to ponder: birth and healing, laughing and dancing and loving and peace. But also more shadowed: dying and weeping, mourning and throwing away, war and hate.

Qoheleth is trying to sort and make sense of this mystery of time in all of its shadows and light, in all of its circles and cycles and turnings and stops and starts. And ultimately, he affirms what we most need to know. That time – whether yours, mine or ours - is a sacred mystery offered and held under the eternal care and providence of God.

So here's where it lands for today, this first Sunday in a brand new year. I'm told that the crystal ball dropped in Time Square again on Monday night – though I was tucked in and well asleep long before.

And the number changed on the calendar again. I've already made a few mistakes in writing checks. And get this: we are now 19% of the way through the 21st century.

But what about your life and mine? What time is it for you and what time for me? Please: not the clock time, the *chronos* time. That's easy and quantifiable as my friend Tom could tell so amazingly well.

But what of the deeper call of your life's time? What of the *kairos*, the gift we measure not in minutes but in moments? Are you living as you would want to be? Am I? Even more: are we spending this irreplaceable gift of our lives in pleasing ways for God?

These are good and plenty thoughts to hold in our hearts and minds as we journey again to the table of our Lord Jesus. Amen.

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¹ Madeline L'Engle. The Crosswicks Journal: A Circle of Quiet. Harper Books, 1972, p. 244-45.