

Date: December 2, 2007

SUNDAY: Advent 1

SERMON: **Playing the Clock**

Text(s): Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

© 2007 L. R. Kalajainen

How many of you watched the Patriots-Eagles game last week? It was one of the more interesting Pats games all season to watch. One of the most important players in that game was not someone on either side of the line of scrimmage, but the clock. The game was so tight, and the lead see-sawed back and forth so much, that at the end, it was really a matter of who was going to score or prevent the other team from scoring before time ran out.

In a real sense, the clock is a player in the game, as it is in certain other sports as well. Unlike tennis or baseball games which can go on and on, football or basketball or soccer must be played within a fixed amount of time. The game clock provides the framework for the game, and exerts a kind of pressure on coaches to make decisions about what plays to call, pressure on the players to execute the plays perfectly in the short time remaining, and it also creates pressure on the spectators. If we're watching a game on television, we don't usually stay at a high pitch of excitement during the whole game. I usually can get a fair amount of reading done during most games; it's only when it gets down to the last few moments and the score is close and the outcome hangs in the balance, we find ourselves riveted to the screen. We find ourselves gripping the arms of our chair, we sit on the edge of our seat. We squirm and fidget and cheer our side on. The clock is running out, so we feel the urgency of the moment. Time is the real opponent at that moment.

In some ways, the artificial time-bound framework of the sports world is simply a metaphor for life itself. We are all playing the clock, whether we always think about it or not. Students in school suddenly feel the pressure of that clock on the night before the big exam or the day before a big paper is due. Suddenly one

becomes aware of time squandered at parties or playing video games or chatting in online chat rooms, and now the pressure is on. No sleep tonight. We'll be trying to cram too much learning into our brains in too little time.

The phenomenon we call the mid-life crisis is another well-known example of the invisible, but real, presence of the clock. We wake up one morning and realize our life is half over. What have we accomplished? What happened to our youthful dreams and ambitions? What adjustments to those dreams is life now demanding of us? When we look in our bathroom mirrors in the morning, we either want to laugh or cry; we're confronted with an image that reminds us, sometimes in ridiculous ways that we're not the immortals we once imagined we were. And after retirement, we become more aware of the ticking of the clock of life than ever, don't we?

Probably most of us take that mid-life experience in stride, and it never becomes a crisis. We realize the game is half over, but we also see that we have another half to play, and resolve to give it our best effort in the second half as well. For others, it does precipitate a crisis. Some respond by getting depressed, some try to recapture lost youth by having an extramarital affair, some change careers to "find their bliss."

When I hit that stage in life, Carol gave me notice that it was OK with her if I decided to have a mid-life crisis, but she was limiting me to exactly ten minutes in which to have it. After that, I had better be back to normal. I can't remember exactly, but I think it may have been during that ten minutes that we made the decision to accept the call to go to Paris for the next decade.

Advent is the season of the church year in which we deliberately pay attention to this experience of the urgency and pressure of time. Advent not only prepares us for the backward look of remembrance of Christ's coming as the baby of Bethlehem, which we celebrate at Christmas; it also turns our eyes to the future end

of all things, to the final chapter in the human story from God's perspective. It reminds us that there is an end coming, not only in the chronological sense, but in the sense of the reaching a goal. Our lessons for this first Sunday in Advent have that future dimension in view. All sound notes of expectation, promise, and warning, and in each of them, something important is said about how we live in this time leading to the End.

Our gospel lesson is a collection of sayings attributed to Jesus about the coming of the Son of Man, language and expressions taken over from the Book of Daniel. It sounds a strong call to vigilance in view of the imminent fulfillment of time. Our conviction that the Messiah has been raised from death and given lordship over all things in heaven and earth, as we emphasized last week of the Feast of the Reign of Christ, points us ahead to the day when that sovereignty will be fully and universally realized. As one of our beloved Christmas carols puts it, to the day "*when peace shall over all the world, her ancient splendors fling.*" Such conviction demands vigilance, alertness, and faithfulness to our calling to be witnesses to the resurrection. The Day of the Lord is not of the nature that it can be marked on a calendar or predicted with the chronological precision of, say, the next appearance of Halley's comet. Jesus even says that he himself does not know the day or the hour, but only God knows. But it will come, and it will come suddenly and at an hour we do not expect, and in a manner we do not expect. In fact, St. Matthew's account of this anticipated climactic closure event emphasizes, not its spectacular or apocalyptic nature, but its very ordinariness. Marrying and giving in marriage, grinding flour, working in a field—these are all the most ordinary of human activities, and right in the midst of them, runs the dividing plumb line of God's salvation.

The image of a burglar breaking into a home in the dead of night while the family is

sleeping intensifies the sense of suddenness, of unexpectedness. We cannot know or predict when it will be; but we know what it means—the summing up, the consummation of all God's creative and redemptive purposes for the world. Like the two-minute warning in a football game, this passage calls us to change our ways of living *in* time so that we are ready for the fulfillment *of* time.

Most of us are probably not accustomed to thinking much about God's ends for the world. We have trouble imagining what next week is going to look like for us. Since we have no way of imagining what such an event or fulfillment could look like, it's easy simply to dismiss it as the beliefs of a pre-scientific culture. Yet, unless we are prepared to adopt a completely nihilistic view of human life and history, believing that there is no larger meaning or purpose to anything, then the alternative is that history is moving toward some goal, toward a consummation of some larger purpose. The goal of the two-minute warning is to get the team to the locker-room to celebrate a victory. So the goal of the game of life is to get us all through to that day when the fullness of God's reign of peace, the fullness of God's justice, the fullness of God's reconciling love will be realized. And since many of us are oblivious to the meaning of the time in which we live, we need this two-minute warning from Matthew. Pay attention! Wake up! Keep your wits about you! Live intentionally.

St. Paul helps us see the matter in more concrete and practical terms. "*You know what time it is,*" he says, "*you know that it's full time to awake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. So let us put away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light, conducting ourselves in a manner appropriate for the day.*" He then goes on to give examples of what he calls the works of darkness, and the examples he names—drunkenness, quarreling, jealousy— all have to

do with our relationships with other people as well as our relationship to God. All these behaviors arise from within the human heart and are nurtured there, and from there manifest themselves in the horrors that human beings perpetrate on one another. All are behaviors that destroy not only individuals, but destroy community as well. We don't have to look far to see the works of darkness in operation do we; certainly not further than our newspapers, and most times not much further than our mirrors.

The counterpart to the works of darkness, Paul refers to as "*putting on the Lord Jesus Christ.*" That metaphor is a summary for his instructions, "*Owe no one anything except to love on another. . . the whole law of God is summed up in this one sentence, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" That's what it means to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ." It means relating to others in the same way that Christ related to us, in self-giving love. There's nothing abstract or mythical or apocalyptic about that. It's very concrete. The problem for us, is not that we can't understand it, but that we understand it all too well, and are not willing to accept the cost to our convenience, our self-love, our self-interest and greed.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement in 18th century England had three simple rules of life for his early Methodist societies. The first was "Do no harm." It's hard to get much simpler than that, isn't it? The second was the same as the first except stated positively, "As much as lies in your power, do good to everyone." And the third was the key to the ability to do the first two: "Attend to all the ordinances of God," and by that, Wesley specifically listed what he understood those ordinances to be. Reading and meditation on the scriptures, regular times of prayer, regular gathering with other believers for public worship, frequent reception of the sacrament of Holy Communion, and what he called "Christian conferencing," but which we might call the

practice of intentional Christian community where we hold one another in loving mutuality and accountability.

The simplicity is breathtaking. The power of such a life is incredible! What threat could the pressure of the clock pose to anyone who lived such a simple life of love and devotion? And yet how frequently we miss it. We are the ones who complicate things. We're the ones who complicate things, who get our lives into tangled up messes. We're the ones who sin against our relationships, who become enslaved to our compulsions and driven by our anxieties. We are the ones who are obsessed by running out of time, rather than being concerned with making the most of time. It is our own failures and our own choices which often make the ticking of the clock sound like the herald of doom rather than of salvation.

So the Day of the Lord, whenever it comes, and whatever the manner of its coming will be, appears to us either as threat or as promise depending on how we are living. If we are oblivious to the clock, ignoring the weightiness and the significance of this time of our lives because we are too busily engaged in our selfish interests to bother about the larger questions of eternity, or if we are doing the works of darkness, living only for ourselves, living only for the moment, living in ways that are destructive of ourselves and of human community, then the Day of the Lord looms as the Day of Judgment. For us, time is running out. But if we are "*putting on the Lord Jesus Christ,*" if we are living in love, if we are striving to make the most of the time God has given us, doing the things that build community, that make for peace, that work justice, then for us, that Day appears not as a foreboding day of reckoning, but as the long-awaited fulfillment of all the deepest hopes and dreams of humanity. It will not be the end of time, but the fullness of time. It will not be the world's final hour, but the long-awaited sunrise of the new creation.

