



SERMONS THAT WORK

Easter 5 (C)

Time

[RCL] Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

Our services for the Easter Season this year feature readings from the Revelation to John, the last book of the Bible and perhaps the most mysterious. Much of the drama in Revelation is centered around the throne of God and the Lamb, or as it is called later in the book, a great white throne.

Numerous voices are heard in the course of the narrative; one song after another is sung. However, it is only in today's passage, taken from the next to last chapter of Revelation, that the one seated on the throne, the Holy One, finally speaks. And what do we hear? This is the first sentence: "See, I am making all things new."

"See, I am making all things new." This indicates that God is not disengaged from our world, but is active in it. This indicates that God is not content with the old order that we know, but labors to transform it into something different.

How God does this must involve the things of time and the way that time happens. There are at least three ways in which humans experience time. God is involved in each of them. God is at work in the world of time that humans inhabit. Considering these ways in which time happens allows humans to travel in the direction of divine purpose, to journey into uncreated light, rather than be sidelined to where life and meaning are absent.

The first of these ways in which time happens and God is involved is *cyclical time*, time that moves in a circle that repeats itself. Cyclical time appears in natural processes, among them the changes in seasons, the rotation of heavenly bodies, and the succession of human generations. God the Creator is at work, making all things new through these cycles that humans observe and in which humans sometimes participate. But humans are oblivious to these cycles of time when we do not pause to notice them. In the case of organic and environmental cycles, we may prove unwise stewards of the earth, so that natural patterns are disrupted and natural forces must struggle to regain balance. When humans do not notice these cycles or we interfere with them, we become blind to how God is at work in time, laboring to make all things new. Yet our sight can be restored. We can appreciate these cycles afresh, recognizing them not as accidents, but

for what they are: examples of divine initiative that merit some measure of appreciation and respect from humans, who are among the timebound creatures of God.

Time also happens in a *linear* fashion, traveling a line from beginning to end. Events occur that are unprecedented, that bring with them not repetition, but real change. Here we have the biblical notion of history where God acts in mercy and judgment. We also have here more recent models of what history is about. The Exodus is the great liberation event of the Old Testament, while Easter is the great liberation event of the New Testament. These events were unprecedented, transformative. And the effects of the Exodus, the effects of Easter are not yet over; they are still unfolding, even now. From these great acts of God has come the belief that change can happen, that the future can be more than a recurrence of the past.

But sometimes linear time as a drama of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation is overlooked because recognizing it demands sorting through an immensity of litter to find the hidden treasure. That the slaughtered and resurrected Lamb of God reveals the meaning of human history can seem incredible. History can be taken as a nighttime clash of ignorant armies, a tale told by an idiot, without significance, when in reality it is a golden narrative with the Holy One as both playwright and protagonist. History is finally divine drama. By participating in this drama, and including humanity in it as well, the One seated on the throne is making all things new. The conclusion of the drama has not yet come. That conclusion must not be disallowed. Nor must it be described in ways without validity. Instead, this conclusion must be awaited with patience and hope. Cyclical time is cosmic, connecting humanity with God and all of creation. Linear time, history, is the human story as directed by God and situated in creation.

The third way in which time happens may appear less substantial than cycles of nature or even directions of human history. The cycles are circular, and history is linear; this third form is something markedly different. It is a *point*, without dimension, but still of infinite significance. Humans are caught in cycles of nature and lines of history, but also by a moment, this point in time, which is forever changing. Every moment of time dies in favor of the next one. The past can be recalled, the future can be anticipated. However, humans dwell in this tiny point of time which is the ever-changing present. But that is enough.

The present moment is all that is available and all that is necessary for us to enter eternity through that way which is sometimes called contemplation. This contemplation is a way of knowing without holding, without controlling. An entire picture is glimpsed but we may barely recognize that this is happening. Contemplation is so simple that it eludes conventional understanding.

The everyday mind seems to recognize contemplation only when it is over, when it is something that may have happened at the moment before this one. Yet contemplation leaves its mark, for while remaining in time, the one who experiences it discovers a connection with eternity. The point without dimension belongs in fact to both worlds.

The Holy One seated on the throne is making all things new at every possible opportunity. God acts through cyclical nature and linear history, but also through the moment, this moment, every moment. Contemplation bears witness to God present everywhere and in all things. The Holy One never plays hard to get. It is always a matter of humans not paying sufficient attention, snubbing the Sovereign of heaven and earth, who is the most patient of lovers.

Does life sometimes seem to you old and getting older? Allow yourself a change of heart. The One seated on the throne is making all things new and does this through the ways that humans experience time. Look then, at cyclical time, and see not only death but the persistence of rebirth, the miracle of resurrection, death surrendering to life. Look at historical time, which is more than an accumulation of tragedy and folly, but a story that will shine in the light of its conclusion which illuminates the world even now. And dare also to look through every moment and discover the eternity it contains. For God refuses to be absent from any place, any moment, but waits for us in every place, and in each passing moment.

May we learn and learn again that the disappearing second is a sacrament of eternity in which the Holy One is making all things new, even human lives.

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