

St. David's Presbyterian Church, St. John's Newfoundland

First Sunday after Christmas (Year B), January 1, 2006

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Psalm 148

Galatians 4:4-7

Luke 2:21-40

Sermon: "The Fullness of Time"

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**"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son . . ."
[Galatians 4:4]**

Today we stand at the threshold of a New Year. In our culture, we attach great importance to this, which is, when all is said and done, an arbitrary human decision to call the moment when the earth reaches a certain point in its annual journey around the sun, the beginning of a new year.

Last night, though you might not have noticed it, there was an extra second tucked into the moment of transition from 2005 to 2006. It turns out that the rotation of the earth around its own axis is a bit more uncertain than the frequency of vibration of certain atoms which the official keepers of the world's time use to set the pace of all our clocks, so once in a while we need a "leap second" to bring our clocks into "sync" with our wobbly earth again.

But we are pretty accurate about the length of the year, ever since Pope Gregory brought about a reform in the Julian calendar, which was the first widely-used calendar to abandon the moon as its marker and synchronize the year with the sun. The Julian Calendar, named after Julius Caesar, who started it, decreed an extra day be inserted every four years to correspond with a solar year of 365.25 days. That was pretty close to being accurate, but not quite. In fact the solar year is closer to 365.242 days, and the difference of 11 1/4 minutes a year adds up to about seven days in a thousand years. By the sixteenth century the Julian calendar was out of sync with the solar year by 10 days. Pope Gregory decided on a little correction to the old Roman scheme: from now on, only the "turn of century" years that could be divided by 400 would be leap years. So 1600 would be a leap year, but the following three "turn of century"

years would not. To make up for the retroactive error in the Julian calendar since the first century A.D., Gregory decided that in the month of October 1582, the day after October 4th would be October 15th. If you were being paid by the month that year, you might have been pleased, but if you were paying your rent by the month, you might have found October was over before the money was there for November's rent! Because these changes were announced by the Pope, the Orthodox Christians in Eastern Europe didn't accept them on principle, and that has a lot to do with the fact that Ukrainians still celebrate their Christmas 12 days later than we do. Protestants, too, were a tad stubborn about accepting something the Pope had thought up, so England, for example, didn't make the change for a couple more centuries, when the correction needed had already crept up to 11 days, so the calendar "slid" from September 2 to September 14th in 1752. There were riots in the streets of London to demand the 11 days back, but the changes have stuck.

All this is to say that for all the fuss we make about it, the New Year is just a human construct. It has to do with chronology, with clocks and calendars for the measuring of time.

But the Bible says very little about the *measurement* of time, or the making of clocks and calendars. In the Bible, what is important about time is not its length, but rather what *fills* it. So the preacher in the book of Ecclesiastes, in his reflection on time, speaks about

a time to be born, and a time to die . . .
a time to mourn, and a time to dance . . .
a time to keep, and a time to throw away . . .
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak . . .
a time for war, and a time for peace. [Ecclesiastes 3:1-8]

The perspective of the Bible is that whether we are dealing with the times of nature's cycles, like day and night, seed-time and harvest, or with the times of events

on the stage of history, what fills our time comes from God. A Psalmist, who is distressed in what seem to be bad times for him, comes to the realization:

“. . . I trust in you, O Lord;
I say, 'you are my God.'
My times are in your hand . . .
Let your face shine upon your servant;
save me in your steadfast love.” [Psalm 31:14-16]

Jeremiah links the reliability of the rhythm of day and night to the reliability of God's promise that there would be a time for the realization of his promises concerning the throne of David:

“Thus says the Lord: If any of you could break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night would not come at their appointed time, only then could my covenant with my servant David be broken . . .”

[Jeremiah 33:20-21]

The rhythms of nature are God's gifts to us. So in the perspective of the Bible, we should recognize and receive every morning as God's gracious gift. A writer who is witnessing the devastation of his city under a cruel enemy siege nevertheless is able to insert in the midst of his description of its horrors, this tremendously encouraging word:

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
“The Lord is my portion,” says my soul,
“therefore I will hope in him.”

The Lord is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul that seeks him.

It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the Lord. [Lamentations 3:22-26]

If we should greet every morning as a sign of God's goodness, so also we realize that the rhythm of the seasons rests on the promise of God. We read in Genesis 8 that God says to Noah,

"As long as the earth endures,
seedtime and harvest, cold and heat,
summer and winter, day and night,
shall not cease." [Genesis 8: 22]

So it is good to greet each season for the special opportunities it brings. In winter, to enjoy the warmth of a fire in the stove inside, or the exercise of skiing or sledding. In spring, to welcome the greening grass, and the opportunity to make flowers grow in the garden. In summer, to swim in lakes, and to walk coastal trails. In fall, to take pleasure in the changing colours of the leaves, and the crunch of fallen leaves under foot. The pleasures of each season come to us as new gift, as something for which to give God thanks.

The words read from Isaiah 61 point especially to what is wondrous about the season when new life bursts forth from the bare earth:

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
. . . for as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up
So the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations. [Isaiah 61:10, 11]

We celebrate the wonders of spring for their own sake, but also as potent signs of how God acts in human life.

God acts in history, and there are times in history which from the Biblical perspective are especially full. One of these times, to which prophets and Psalmists often looked back with thanksgiving, was the time of Exodus. In that time, God called his people out of slavery into freedom as they passed through the sea; God gave his people commandments as they gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai; God taught and corrected his people as they journeyed in the wilderness on their way to the land of promise. In those years they came to know themselves as the sons and daughters of the living God, as God's own people. Those years were very full of God's presence, God's calling, and God's blessing. And there is a mystery of faith here. Even people who lived many generations after the Exodus and those years in the wilderness looked back to those years and identified themselves with what God had done in that time. Somehow that time became their own time, as we read in Deuteronomy:

When your children ask you in time to come, "What is the meaning of [everything] the Lord your God has commanded you?" Then you will say to your children, "*We* were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought *us* out of Egypt with a mighty hand. The Lord displayed before *our* eyes great and awesome signs and wonders."

[Deuteronomy 6:21-22]

When children ask, "Were you there?" their parents reply, by faith, "We were." We were there and we are part of what God did in that very full time to make of us his own people.

As we read the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures, we realize that God's people did not only look back to what once had been, to a special time that was ripe for God's people to be set free from slavery in Egypt, to receive the commandments, and to be tempered by years in the wilderness.

Over the centuries, invaders came and went through their land. Some tribes were carried off to foreign lands. There came times when their homeland was almost empty of people. The temples and the city walls were in ruins; and in the countryside, fences were broken down and fields had become overgrown. But the prophets kept before their people the promises God had made, to Abraham, to Moses, and especially to David, and people began to look forward to a special time that was not yet, when God's would send "great David's greater Son", the Messiah, whose coming would be signal of another special time, a time of recovery, and renewal, the gathering together of God's scattered people, a time when God's reign would break in decisively, and God's grace would overflow with blessing for everyone who puts trust in him.

People like the "poor ones" we meet in the opening chapters of the Gospel of Luke waited longingly for that time. When John the Baptist was born, his father Zechariah said,

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them . . .
. . . he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant . . . [Luke 1:68-72]

When Mary came to know that she would give birth to one who would be called "holy . . . the Son of God", she understood that God was acting

"in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever." [Luke 1:54-55]

For her the birth of this Son was sign of all that God was about to do to turn everything right-side up:

"He has . . . lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things . . . ” [Luke 1:52-53]

What is striking in the words of these “poor ones”, including Simeon, is how what they had longed for as a dream for the future seems to have become something already realized. The dawning of a new day was already present.

So Simeon says, not that he is waiting, but that his waiting is over. Let me go, he says,

“for my eyes *have seen* your salvation . . .
which you have prepared in the *presence* of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel.” [Luke 2:30-32]

There was a conviction among the “poor ones”, that they had entered, a new kind of time, the fullness of time.

Jesus, as we read the story of the beginnings of his ministry in the Gospel of Mark, proclaimed,

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near;
repent, and believe in the good news.” [Mark 1:15]

The essence of Jesus’ message is about the *present-ness* of God’s promise. What others had longed for as future is right here, and right now.

Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, writes that

“. . . when the *fullness* of time had come,
God sent his Son,
born of a woman . . . ”

What that meant for his readers, Paul says, is that they are living in that fullness of time, and that the fullness of what God wants to do in their lives is available to us, by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, here and now. It means for us that we have been like heirs who, while we were minors, had no access to our inheritance, but now that we are of age, the time is ripe, we can enjoy it all. It means that through Jesus, the Son whom God sent in the fullness of time, we can live in the freedom of the children of the living God, and be bold to say “Abba! Father!” as we come into God’s presence. In the fullness of time, God has made us who were different from one another—Jews, Greeks, slave, free, male, and female—into one new family in Christ [Galatians 3:28]. God has made us into sons and daughters of Abraham, the father of faith, so that all God’s promises to Abraham’s children are ours as well. Here, and now, everything that God has to offer is available to us, not in part, but in full. I want to share with you something of the treasures of that fullness as I read some of the scriptures that have that wonderful word in them:

You show me the path of life.

In your presence there is *fullness* of joy.

At your right hand our pleasures forevermore. [Psalm 16:11]

And the Word became flesh and lived among us,
and we have seen his glory,
the glory as of a father’s only son,
full of grace and truth. . . .

From his *fullness* we have all received, grace upon grace. [John 1:14-16]

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory,
he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being
through his Spirit,
and that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith,
as you are being rooted and grounded in love.
I pray that you may have the power to comprehend,

with all the saints,
what is the breadth and length and height and depth,
and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,
so that you may be filled with all the *fullness* of God.

[Ephesians 3:16-19]

The early church, like the "poor ones" there at Jesus' birth, was convinced that it was God who sent Jesus, so that we might have fullness of life through Him. The shepherds came to the child in the manger, and they glorified and praised God, because they had seen the glory of God, received from the fullness of God, grace upon grace. Simeon was content when he met Jesus with his parents in the temple, because he too saw glory, experienced God's promise as now present and no longer just future. Anna met the family too, and began to praise God and speak about the child to all who were looking for a city set free, and a people who knew themselves as the sons and daughters of the living God.

So today I announce to you not merely a new calendar year. I announce to you in Jesus name a new time, the fullness of time, a time that invites you and me to respond in faith, claim its privileges, and live its possibilities for making a difference in the world.

NOW, to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. AMEN. [Ephesians 3:20-21]