

You see, one of our greatest human temptations is the temptation to be our own God – but that is a terrible way to live – it results in anxiety, discouragement, and hopelessness. Because eventually we figure out that whatever we do will soon be forgotten and it will never be enough to make a real difference. But in light of God – your little contribution is more than enough, and it has eternal implications.

Time is not flowing by to the pointless past and time is not pulling us into an uncertain future. Time is God's gift to make us into the people who will one day inhabit heaven. And the limitations time puts on us, to only be present in only one place and time at a time and to accomplish only so much is part of God's gift to us. It means only God can be God.

But this brings me to the second piece of good news. Ecclesiastes writes, "He has set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end." That's why we live as if we will live forever. Because in our hearts we believe that we can – even though the evidence all says it ends with death after a relatively short life. God has put into us a sense of the eternal – a sense that I am forever – even though we all know, on some level, that we will die.

So now what? How do these two reality checks (I'm going to die and I'm not a big deal) and these two truths (I matter to God and God has put eternity into my heart) make a difference in how I live today?

JR. Tolkien once said, "All we have to do is decide what to do with the time that is given to us." But remember, you're not in this on your own. God already knows how this story ends, and he already knows what you're going to do next. He is not limited by time – he created it – it's a gift for you and for me. Time limits us but it does not limit him. All we have to do is decide what to do next.

But here's the thing. Living with yourself at the centre of your life will lead you to a small and uninteresting life. It will be a life soon forgotten and with no eternal impact. But live with God at the centre and it releases you from trying to manage all things and maximize all things with little affect. God opens up time for you – so you

can live wastefully in love.

Here's the secret: time is the great limiter. But live as if you have no shortage of time (because actually you don't) and your life will get interesting. Because when we live as people with only 80 or 90 years, and we get miserly with it.

But in light of eternity, time is not your biggest problem. You have time to do things others won't do. You have time to invest in others. You have time to make amends. You have time to rest and relax. You have time to read and to pray and to sing. You have so much time. But time for what?

Ecclesiastes concludes, "I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all their toil – this is the gift of God." You have so much time. What do you do with it? Time is best spent worshipping – keeping God at the centre. Serving – wasting your time on others. And loving – pouring yourself into someone else. Remember, life lived at the centre will be dull and boring with little eternal impact. But keep God at the centre and your life can be given away wastefully – because you have so much of it!

The apostle Paul told us that only three things last forever. What lasts forever? Paul says, "And now these three remain: faith (our relationship with God), hope (our faith in God's future he will one day make) and love (our reflecting of God's love into the world). But the greatest of these is love."

Everything else will pass away. Everything else is here and then it's gone. But if you want your life to matter then it comes down to three things – faith, hope and love. That's what God is keeping you around for.

And the secret to the problem of time is to live as if time is no obstacle. The secret is to know that you will die and that you are not the main character in the play. But also to know that you matter and God is writing you into his eternal play and so you have nothing but time to give.

"There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under the heavens." And in its time God will make it all beautiful you just wait and see.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

## ***"Right on Time: The Problem & Possibility of God's Time"***

*January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023 — Selby United Church — Scripture: Ecclesiastes 3:1-14*

*By Rev. Mike Putnam*

**G**od is timeless, spaceless and immaterial. Those are three theological truths about the God that we worship that can open up your faith in profound ways.

For me, those three words about the nature of God (timeless, spaceless and immaterial) answered a lot of my own objections about faith as a young person trying to wrap my head around the big questions about God.

"How can God..." The answer is God is timeless, spaceless and immaterial. "Why does God..." The answer is God is God is timeless, spaceless and immaterial. "Why hasn't God yet..." The answer is God is timeless, spaceless and immaterial.

And today we're beginning a brand-new sermon series all about the first of those theological truths. God is timeless.

God is timeless but time is part of God's good creation – a creation that God exists outside of. But for us, time is very real. In fact, time so often seems to be our biggest problem. We don't seem to have enough of it and at times we have too much of it. We don't know quite what to do with it and we're constantly waging war on the problem of time in our everyday lives.

So, on this first Sunday of the New Year – 2024 – we're going to spend some time thinking about our God given time. And as we do, we hope to open up the possibilities of how to live each day more fully and faithfully in order to find true contentment in each season of life.

But first we need to come to terms with the reality that time is a part of God's good creation. Time does not exist in the same way everywhere. Time is a function of the speed with which the earth moves around the sun to create the length of a day. But what if

the earth travelled a little faster or slower? What if a day had 72 hours rather than 24? What if a day was just a few hours long? ...But it isn't. A day is a day.

"It's been a day" we say, and what we're referring to is all the stuff that happened between the time we got up in the morning and the time we will go to bed in the evening. We all have the same amount of time to work with each day. The question is how will you use your time? And then below that surface level question is what motivates you to use time? What inspires you? And how do you understand your time?

And that's what we're going to be thinking about over the next few weeks. Because as Christians we believe time is a gift from God. God chose the length of a day in his infinite wisdom for the purpose of blessing us with time. But the question is what will you do with it? How will you spend your time?

You know, I've noticed that in my work as your minister time is my biggest challenge. I have good ideas. Lots of good ideas, actually. I have so many good ideas that it would make your head spin. And people regularly come to me and say, "I have a good idea!" But ideas are cheap. What I don't have is very much time...there is very little margin in my ministry these days.

Last year this church generously added secretarial support and a program director to support our growing ministry work – thank heavens! Because as our church has rapidly grown over the last two years the workload has too. But even with that additional support I still somehow lay in bed most nights thinking "where did the time go?" and "how am I going to fit it all in tomorrow." I still have to leave so many things undone each day because of my problem of time. Maybe you can relate in your own context?

So what do we do about it? Well mostly we attempt to add time by being more efficient. What if meal prep was faster and simpler? Remember how we thought the microwave would give us so much more time...and it did. Now it's those meals that come in a box already to be chopped, mixed, baked and broiled. We tried it in our house, but that didn't seem to make much of a difference. Meal prep was still a problem of time.

And so, here we are in 2024 and we are not yet faced with the problem of too much leisure – with all the technology and all the gadgets at our disposal we still struggle with the problem of time. In fact, most of us feel overwhelmed with our time problem. Most of us, living in the most technologically advanced age in history battle to fit it all in and get it all done. For many the problem of time is perhaps our biggest daily challenge.

And that's why I'm going to take the next few weeks to think a bit about time. Because no matter whether you feel like you have too little time or too much of it, as Christians – as followers of Jesus – we should look at time differently. Because we interact with it in a way that will seem frivolous and nonsensical to those who understand the world differently from us.

How does your problem of time make you feel? Sad? Or determined? Hopeless? Or inspired? Well as believers we can see time as something God has given us – but not simply as our burden that's all up to us to figure out. As the author of Ecclesiastes writes, "What do workers gain from their toil? I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race."

In other words, try to fill your days, make your own meaning, pursue your own dreams, and get it all done and it will be a burden. Time will be something you dread because it's all up to you and there's not enough of it and there never will be.

Or you might look at time as a gift –

but it's a gift you now need to make something out of. The pressure is on you. But no, Christians most rightly see time as a gift God has given you so He can make something out of you.

The psalmist writes, "But I trust in you, Lord; I say "You are my God." My times are in your hands..." Time is God's tool for doing what God wants to do in you and in the world. Time is one of God's most effective tools for transforming us into the people he wants us to be.

So take a deep breath. This is not a sermon series about using your time more effectively. It's not about getting your schedule a little tighter, or maximizing your efficiency or making something of yourself. No this is a gospel centered series where we simply acknowledge that God is at work in time to accomplish something in you – "my times are truly in your hands."

But here's two reality checks that people of faith must always keep front and centre. Here's two things we're not afraid to know. First, death happens, and it is going to happen to you. Now, I know that doesn't seem like great news. But stick with me I'm going somewhere with this.

Everyone who lives without a robust gospel faith is earnestly trying to make themselves eternal. Death is something to fear. You've got to beat the clock - build your own legacy, make yourself live longer, and ensure you will be remembered. But Christians know we don't have to do that. That's not our race. Yes, we're going to die – but death is not the end of the story – in fact it's actually scarcely the beginning of the story.

Writer Anne Lamott has famously said, "100 years from now? All new people." Sure, you will probably be remembered fondly and deeply by your children and closest friends. Your grandchildren will also remember you to a degree. But your great grandchildren?

Can you name your great

grandfather? How about your great -great grandmother? See, death claims us all and death means you will be forgotten – no matter how hard we try to make ourselves memorable.

Is that bad news? Well, maybe. But it's not a problem for those who believe in resurrection.

Okay, reality check number two. You are not that big of a deal in the grand sweep of history. Your life's impact will not likely be a hinge in history. Your life's impact will probably be small. Even if you manage to do something big and wonderful in this life – overall your impact isn't going to be that much or long lasting.

Okay, so that sounds depressing, doesn't it? I mean, we're all trying to live good impactful lives in some sense. But death means our impact will always be cut short.

But here's the other side of that coin. Here's two things that people of faith also know – and because we know this we live and act differently.

First, God says you matter. But you're not the central character of the story. It's not all about you, it's about Him. Your enduring impact is not because of what you will do but because of what he will do through you. Because God has placed you in just the right time and place to prepare you for who you will one day be. God has a plan for you that is way bigger than anything you will ever come up with on your own.

You know, so often I've seen people who think they were going to die, and then they don't die they have a kind of crisis of purpose. "Why is God keeping me around?" they wonder. What am I supposed to accomplish now? And that's a good question. But remember the purpose of your life isn't always to do something. God isn't just keeping you around to run errands. Sometimes God keeps you around to do something in you.

Think about that. Maybe he's keeping you around to work on your patience, or your

kindness, or your gentleness, or your self-control – He's developing the fruits of the spirit in you.

And so, God reigns over all of time for this purpose. God is the conductor of the symphony of time for the purpose of creating sweet music through us. And his purpose for time is to draw together his family and to prepare us for the creation that is to come. So life's times and season, trials and joys are often God's way of preparing you for what comes next.

And here's the little theological nugget I want you to take away from today's scripture. After listing all of the times and seasons of life – a time for this and a time for that – a seemingly random list of things we do with our time – the scripture says, "He has made everything beautiful in its time."

This is our counternarrative to humanity's problem of time. This is our good news: God will make everything beautiful in its time. God will take your greatest mistakes and your greatest achievements, and he will make it all beautiful – in its time. God has a future plan for your present reality – no matter what it is.

What does this mean in a practical sense? It means we can fully acknowledge that we are finite and needy beings. We can acknowledge that it's not all up to us. We can see that the times that seem wasted or hopeless or painful are actually not at all. It means you don't have to be the best at everything. You can know your own limits. You can leave some things undone. You can be imperfect and sometimes a real hot mess.

But won't that make us lazy? Won't we be less productive, less ambitious, less driven because it's all up to God anyway? No, because what we do in this life is not only about this life but it's about preparing us for what is to come. We still want to produce and earn and do something great – but we do it with a different motivation – we do it for the kingdom that is being birthed in us.