“The Mystery of Time”

Isaiah 64:1-9  Mark 13:24-37

December 3, 2017

When Stephen Hawkins’, *A Brief History of Time*, was first published in 1988, I rushed out to get it. (In those days you actually had to leave home to purchase a book!) As you know, Stephen Hawkins is the British physicist who has continued to think and write about the universe in spite of his horrific struggle with ALS. When I read the book, I understood every “word” I read. It was just when he put those understandable words in sentences that I found myself utterly lost and scratching my head in bafflement.

In following the theories of Einstein and others, Hawkins put before us ideas about the mystery of time. We grow up thinking that time is a constant – one second ticking to the next – 60 minutes to the hour – the clock chimes – 24 hours to the day. The days flow into the year, the years flow into the decades of a life. A familiar hymn describes our ordinary experience of time: “Time like an ever flowing stream soon bears us all away.”

When Hawkins and others begin to speak of bending time, of time slowing down and speeding up, or of time as another dimension, we find ourselves humbled before the mystery of time. Is time simply an “ever flowing stream” that can be measured by the ticking of a clock? Or, is time something else?

The Bible is acutely aware of our experience of time as creatures whose lives seem captive to time. The Psalmist writes, “Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (Ps. 90:12). Yet, the Bible also speaks of God’s time. We hear in Galatians, “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman” (4:4).

In Advent we take the time to contemplate the mystery of time. Advent awakens us to the unfolding mystery of God’s creative and redemptive work in time from the beginning of time at the creation to the announcement by the angel Gabriel to Mary, from Mary’s song of praise to God to the birth of her child Jesus, from the birth of the Savior to his death, and from the resurrection to his coming again in glory at the end of time.

You might say we live in two times: the ticking of the clock and God’s time in which all times are one. So often we wrongly think of eternity as endless time because we try to measure it by our human experience of time – one hour flowing into the next. Eternity or God’s time is not so much endless time, but the fullness of time when past, present and future are all one in God. The theologian Paul Tillich has said that God’s time is *the eternal now*. Tillich writes: “If we were totally within time, we would not be able to elevate ourselves in thought to the eternal...But as [human beings] we are aware of the eternal to which we belong and from which we are estranged by the bondage of time” (p.48, *The Eternal Now*).

Advent is the cry that goes up to God to liberate us from the bondage to time. The Israelites in exile in Babylon feel that they have been abandoned by God. Their cities lie in ruins; the temple is destroyed; they live as strangers in a foreign land; they are captives of time. They cry out to God for deliverance from captivity: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.” (Isaiah 64:1)

In the face of the brokenness of the times in which we live, we sing, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, and Ransom Captive Israel.” Advent is about the ways in which God’s time invades and transforms our time. In our Advent call to worship, we speak of God coming as a baby in Bethlehem, the Holy Spirit coming on Pentecost, and Jesus coming again at the end of time. It is the many ways in which God’s time breaks into our time that keeps our lives from being defined by the ticking of the clock.

A friend in the church told me recently about a perfect time. He was sitting on the beach on his honeymoon. The waves were lapping the shore, the sky was blue above him and he sand soft beneath him. For a moment, if only a moment, time seemed to stand still. A feeling of peace washed over him that set him free from the bondage of time. All of us have experienced such moments at one time or another.

Every funeral service in the church is a celebration that we are more than creatures of time. When we die, we enter into God’s time. We speak of new life beginning not just of an old life ending. In the prayers we offer, we speak of the day when we shall all be together again in glory. For those who live,
that day may seem a long way off; for those who die, that
day is already here. Remember how Jesus said to the thief
on the cross, “Today, you will be with me in paradise.

Bunny and I were married in her home church in
Charlotte; her grandmother had died several weeks before
our wedding. Her family agreed that continuing with
the wedding plans and date was the right thing to do.
Her ancient grandfather, who was a retired Presbyterian
minister, gave the final prayer and blessing. In his clerical
robes, he rose from his seat on the front row and with the
help of his cane struggled to the front of the church. In
his prayer, he added words about our loved ones who look
down from the ramparts of heaven and join us in this
moment. In my mind, I saw the ceiling of the nave open
and felt the presence of those who had gone before us.

When we gather around this table, we see the mystery
of time unfold before our eyes. Jesus, who lived among us
and shared his time on earth with the disciples, is with us
still. Calvin said that through the Holy Spirit, we are in this
meal lifted into heaven and there commune with our Risen
Lord. It is not only here at this table that we are set free
from our bondage to time, it is everywhere and every time
we experience the presence of the Lord – when a disease is
healed, when a child is born, when the hungry are fed, when
a marriage is reconciled, when a wrong is forgiveness. All of
these are signs of God among us that shatter our illusions
about the fixed nature of time and point us to anticipate
the final coming of Jesus in glory. In such moments in time,
we experience the eternal now of God’s time. In all these
moments we watch, we wait and we see how God comes to
invade our world and free us from our captivity to time and
unite us with eternity.

We don’t know when that day of liberation will be.
All Jesus asks us to do is to watch and wait in faithful
expectation. We are witnesses to the moments that shatter
time. While we wait, we keep our eyes open. We train our
eyes to see the unexpected. While we wait in the midst of
time, we pray, “Come Lord Jesus.”