

Pastor Gregory Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Matthew 24:37-44
Cherishing Our Time¹

My text is from our Gospel Lesson, from St. Matthew Chapter 24. Our Lord Jesus says this:

⁴²Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. (Matthew 24:42, RSV)

This is a sermon about time -- about how limited our time is, how urgent it is that we wake from sleep, and how reassuring it is that our times are in the hands of Jesus. Three points there: (1) Our time is limited. (2) Precisely because our time is limited, it is good to cherish our time and stop frittering it away. If there is some goodness toward which you have not yet turned, some confession you have not yet given, some repentance you have not yet commenced, some reconciliation you have not yet sought, some growing up you have not yet tried, *now* is the time. Do not delay any longer. And (3) our time is blessed by Jesus. It is not simply some random sequence of years, but a sacred season protected by Jesus and entrusted by him to us for us to make something good of it.

So, my first point: Our time is limited. We do not have endless days stretching ahead of us. For each of us, we are marching headlong toward our threescore and ten years. And who knows? Maybe even before then, Jesus will come again. That would be great!

A few years ago, I heard Billy Graham preach at one of his Crusades, over in Queens. It was a moving thing when that dear preacher spoke of his advancing years. He is ninety-two now, maybe ninety when I heard him back then. He spoke of his colleague George Beverly Shea, the great baritone who sang "How Great Thou Art" and other gospel songs at the Crusades over the years. Shea is even older than Billy Graham. If Wikipedia has it right, Shea was born in 1909², which means he is one hundred and one years old now. In any event, Billy Graham was preaching about how life's little day passes on with such determined steps. He put his point with all simplicity and with all faith: "Ere long Brother George and I will be passing on to Jesus."

Ere long each of us will be passing on to Jesus!

¹ This sermon is based on a sermon I preached here at Immanuel back in 1992. I've looked at some of those old sermons. I think they are pretty good, though I would probably restructure them and preach them differently nowadays. That is what I have done to this sermon. I have rewritten much of it.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Beverly_Shea#Notable_songs

And for all we know, before we even reach that fullness of years, Jesus Christ will come again and then our ordinary days of struggle, triumph, and defeat will come to an end and it will be time to give an account of ourselves.

Overtop the desk in my pastor's study, I have affixed to the bookshelf a saying from St. John Chrysostom. It urges me onwards. It cautions me not to waste this little stretch of time entrusted to me:

For God will say also to us, "I gave you *time* to learn this art of piety, wherefore have ye foolishly and uselessly wasted that time?"³

From today's Bible readings, we can learn that time is coming to an end, at least the kind of time we have known so far. But we do not know *when* time is coming to an end, and therefore each day remaining to us is worthy of being lived as if it is the day of Christ's return.

In today's Epistle Reading, St. Paul grabs hold of us and gives us a shake, as if we were Sleeping Beauty or something:

... you know what hour it is [says the Apostle], how it is full time *now* for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is *at hand*. (Romans 13:11-12, RSV)

The Apostle believes that something is happening, something is afoot, something or rather Someone is "at hand." Right there on the horizon, looms Jesus! And in light of this, the Apostle can only cry out "Wake up!"

Who knows how long we have before Jesus comes again? Maybe he will come this afternoon! Maybe he will come a thousand years from now, or even longer. But one thing is sure, at least judging by the Apostle Paul: One day, perhaps soon, we are going to have to give an account to Jesus for how we are using *these days*, here and now, these days entrusted to us. The resurrected Jesus is the One with whom we have to do. And for us to pretend that we do not have to do with Him is either to deny the Christian faith, or it is to sleep our lives away, like a multitude of Rip van Winkles.

Time is passing. *Our* time is passing. It is passing even as we are speaking.⁴ If Jesus remains there on the horizon, not yet bursting into the midst of our world with all his glory and splendor, we can only conceive that delay as a deed of his love for us. He waits with love and hope, that we might have a chance to accomplish something... indeed that we might have a chance to accomplish many things with which we might greet him when he comes.

The logic of our Gospel reading is perfectly clear. If the householder had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, then he could have been

³ Chrysostom, *Homilies on St. John*, NPNF, Vol. 14, page 211.

⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III, 4, page 579.

prepared at that hour. If the ten bridesmaids had known what hour the bridegroom was coming, then they could have been ready at that hour. And if the servant had known when his master was returning, then he could have been ready at that hour. Yes, and the whole lot of them could have been relaxed and unprepared during all the other hours. But in fact, they *do not* know when the Master is coming. Therefore, to be dutiful servants, they must be ready at all times.

So, that is our first point: Our time is limited. For each of us, we die err long, or better still, Jesus comes and this whole age of piety and temptation comes to an end. My second point is that because our time is limited, it is precious.

I had a professor back in Seminary days who was learned and gracious. But he was not really very productive when it came to scholarly writing. He explained to me that it was a temperamental matter mostly. He said that conditions had to be just right for him, else it was hard for him to sit down and get to work. He wanted to be tucked away, for example, in his own study, sitting at his own desk, with his own particular paper and pens, with peace and quiet surrounding him.

He told me once that he was amazed by one of his colleagues -- how productive that colleague was. This other professor, he said, seemed not to need any special conditions at all in order to write. This man would grab any stub of a pencil and back of an envelope and start writing away no matter what distractions surrounded him.

I shared the first professor's admiration for the second professor's productivity, and so I trotted off to ask him how he did it and whether it was easy!

He said that it had dawned on him long ago that if he waited for the conditions to be right, he would never get much done, because the conditions are hardly ever just right. So, he had taught himself to cherish his time, as if each quarter hour were worthy of care. He had learned to concentrate his thoughts quickly when he had a chance for some work. When the coffee was brewing in the morning, for example, he would sit at the breakfast table and write another paragraph or two. When he was at a conference, and the speaker was bad, he would grab a pencil and start writing on the back of the program. Onlookers might have thought he was dutifully taking notes on the lecture, when in fact he was straining to cherish the time -- to not let time slip away unnoticed and unloved.

Martin Luther was like that. His relationship to the time granted to him by God was much more intense than most of us can manage. In his sixty-three years, he probably compressed three or four lives, compared to the lives most of us know.

I had to smile when I happened to read Luther's preface to his treatise *Against Latomus*. Latomus was a member of the theological faculty at the University of Louvain in Belgium. Even before Luther's excommunication by Pope Leo X, Louvain had condemned Luther's writings. Luther had published a disdainful answer to the theologians of Louvain, and Latomus had rushed to defend the honor of his colleagues by publishing a comprehensive defense of the original condemnation.

Now, when you do that to Luther, you are likely to get a book tossed back in your face! And that's what Luther did. He wrote his treatise *Against Latomus*,

which, scholars say, happens to contain some of Luther's clearest explanations of his central ideas. (LW 32, page 136)

The problem is, the whole affair was a waste of precious time, as far as Luther was concerned. He resented taking time from a task he considered much more important: his translation of the New Testament into German. Luther wrote his answer to Latomus during his stay at the Wartburg Castle. He interrupted his translation work in order to dash off his book against Latomus, but it is clear from his preface that he is not too happy to have to do it. Here is a bit of what he had to say in his preface, which was dedicated to his friend Justus Jonas:

Truly it won't be easy for you to believe how unwillingly I have torn myself away from the peace-giving words of Christ, with which I have been occupied on this my Patmos, in order to waste my time reading the nonsense of this prickly and thorny sophist. Indeed, the man is sophistic from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head... he writes with such confidence that he considers both industry and discernment unnecessary. He is content to babble whatever he has read or swallowed. It is a great bother to reply to him, for in doing so you can neither exercise skill nor increase your learning, and yet you are forced to waste precious hours.(LW 32:138)

There is a saying about youth -- how "Youth is wasted on the young." It is a saying that troubles me a bit, because I was young once, and my sons are young and I sympathize with young people. But maybe we can give a helpful sense to this saying. You young folks out there: you are blessed with strength of mind and body that many of us older folks no longer have. We wish we did, but we do not. And we think to ourselves that if somehow we could suddenly be infused again with the strength of youth, that we would really make some hay this time. Maybe we are deluding ourselves. Still, we older folk think to ourselves that the march of time has forced us to learn some disciplines and some skills we did not have back when we were young, and oh! It would be great if we could have both the strength of youth and the disciplines of age. We know now that youth slips away, along with youth's strength of mind and body, and we like to think that if we could do it all over again, we would try to treasure the days of youth.

Perhaps the better way to put this is that *each* stage of life carries its own kind of strength and opportunities with it, and we should count that stage of life as precious.

Our time, whether we be young or old, is lent us to us with the responsibility to use it profitably. That way, we will not be so ashamed on the great day of accountability, when we all must render an account of our days. And if we would carry on as if the quarter hours do not matter, that some of them really are unconnected with Jesus, then the Apostle Paul seems to ask us to wake up and focus our thoughts:

You know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep.

My third point is that these days are not godless! They are blessed by Jesus. These days rest, each one, in the everlasting arms of our God. Our times have not be abandoned by God, nor thrown to the devil to do whatever mischief he wants. Rather, these days are protected by God. They are days of earnest work by the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who is well able to use these days as building blocks for his Kingdom.

The days in which we live are *our* days.⁵ They might be modest, without giants like Luther, Michelangelo, or Beethoven, but they are our own days to enjoy, by the mercy of Christ.

And the people who grace our lives are our own people -- husbands and wives, sons and daughters, colleagues and shopkeepers and friends -- all trusted over to us for our care and our joy.

The earth is fruitful, the sun by day and the moon by night shine for us, and the stars without number hold their course for us.⁶

And more than all these things, the Holy Child born in a stable, is born for us, that we might have a saviour and live forever with him in His kingdom.

The Second Bible Reading for Thanksgiving Day, just a couple days ago, is a lovely passage from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians. As I read aloud these familiar words, notice the peacefulness the apostle recommends. He knows that Jesus is near and *therefore* he encourages us to relax and enjoy these days:

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:4-9, NRSV)

When the sad news was brought to Macbeth, how Lady Macbeth had died, the king spoke these solemn words:

Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (Macbeth, Five V)

⁵ Karl Barth, III, 4, page 579.

⁶ Ibid., page 573.

But Christmas and Easter mean that there is much more to life than a “brief candle, a walking shadow, a tale told by an idiot.” For the Holy Child of Christmas is no “idiot” but a loving Brother who waits to throw his arms around us when our hour on this stage is done. Therefore let us wake from sleep, get up on that stage, and defiantly strut and strive for goodness during this our little hour. “The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything.”

The Apostle is right: Salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone, the day is at hand. May this day, this week, this year be a time of wakefulness for us, a time that tingles with excitement at the approach of Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.