

In The Meantime
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
December 27, 2020 Worship Service
Reverend Stan Mast
Psalm 126, Galatians 4:3,4

Does anybody really know what time it is? Does anybody really care? Yes, those words come from the rock group, Chicago. But they are my question to you. Does anybody really know what time it is? Does anybody really care? Well, I do, and I want to help you think about time. When I asked if anybody knows what time it is, some of you glanced at your watch or phone. But I'm talking about something much deeper and more important.

Dickens wrote, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." So which is it? Is it the spring of hope or the winter of despair or the summer of unbearable heat? If you are in teenage times, is this a time of joyfully anticipating greater freedom or a time of fearing the future? If you are in the middle time of life caught up in career and family, are you excited by the opportunities or exhausted by the challenges? And if you are in your senior years like me, are these your golden years or are you wrestling with the loss of contact with family and friends? What time is it in your life?

And for that matter, what time is it in the world? A recent article in Time magazine talked about these times like this: "Unprecedented political polarization, deep and accelerating inequality, vitriolic public discourse, public and private self-centeredness-Americans today seem to agree on only one thing: this is the worst of times." Do you agree?

This morning I want to suggest to you that no matter how you identify this time in your life, you are living in the meantime. God's meantime. Understanding that makes all the difference in how you experience the times of your life. We are all living in the meantime. What does that mean?

Well, let me take you into this poignant prayer for the meantime in Psalm 126. This Psalm has two stanzas, 1-3 and 4-6, and each begins with the same idea of restoration. The NIV translates verse 1, "When the Lord brought back the captives to Zion." But other versions are also correct in translating it, "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion." That second translation enables us to see the parallel with verse 4. "Restore our fortunes, O Lord." "The Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, and restore our fortunes, O Lord."

What in the world is going on there? Israel is in the meantime, sandwiched between their restoration to the Promised Land from captivity in Babylon and the complete restoration of their fortunes in the Promised Land. God has done great things for them and they are filled with joy. But their land is still in ruins: their homes destroyed, their fields gone to weeds, their families still scattered, their neighbors hostile, their temple a burned-out ruin, their beloved Jerusalem a pile of rubble, and their wonderful God was still a mystery. They are filled with joy sometimes and they shed tears of frustration and sorrow at other times. They aren't in hell anymore, but life isn't exactly heaven either. They were living in the meantime, between the great things God had already done for them and the great things they begged God to finish.

Do you know the meantime? Of course, you do. As a nation we're glad that there is a COVID vaccine that can finally return us to normal, but there are many issues with production and distribution and resistance to the vaccines. So, it will be a while. We're in the meantime. On a more personal level, maybe you are a teenage girl who is happy to be back with your boyfriend after you broke up last spring, but there are many issues that need to be resolved before it will be

heavenly again, and there's no guarantee it will work. You're delighted that the stock market has recovered from its 2008 lows, but the uncertainty produced by the pandemic and the political transition has you worried that your fortunes might drop again like a rock. It feels good to be in church again after the shutdown, but this might last only until the next surge. You are thankful for a long and happy life, but you also know that "Growing old is not for sissies." Overarching all of those mean times is this one. You are so grateful for salvation; God has done great things for you. But you still wrestle with certain sins and you don't have the peace that passes understanding and you don't have the joy of the Lord all the time. We can all say, "The Lord has restored my fortunes and restore my fortunes, O Lord."

That's why I want to leave the meantime prayer of Psalm 126 and take you to God's answer to that prayer in Galatians 4, where we are introduced to the "fullness of time." "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons." Jesus came into our meantimes when the time had fully come. That means that overarching and undergirding all our times, there is God's time. And at the heart of God's time is Jesus Christ, and that makes all the difference. Understanding that and living in the fullness of God's time is the secret to joy and peace in all the times of life.

Let me explain. Galatians 4:5 says that Jesus came to redeem those under the law. That means God's law, the law that is both a blessing and a burden, that is designed to give us a great life, but actually fills us with guilt and despair sometimes. But Paul was also thinking there of what he calls "the basic principles of the world" in verse 3. He is talking about all the rules by which we try to navigate the chaotic times of our lives.

Dr. Jordan B. Petersen is one of the leading public intellectuals of our time. In his bestselling book, Twelve Rules for Living, he lays out twelve rules that are, in his words, an "antidote to chaos." Here are a few: stand up straight with your shoulders back, make friends with people who want the best for you, set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world. That sounds simple and helpful, but his explanations are, in fact, philosophically complicated and theologically shaky.

Much more accessible and uncomplicated are the rules explained in Robert Fulghum's delightful classic, Everything I Need to Know, I Learned in Kindergarten. "Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess." There are 16 rules in all, all of them helpful and true. We all have rules like that, rules for the meantimes of life, rules that help manage the chaos and become successful.

But as helpful and true as "the basic principles of the world" may be, God has more for us. There is a more liberating, more satisfying, more joyful and peaceful way to live in the chaos of the meantime. And that is to center your life on what happened in the fullness of time, or better, on him who is at the center of time. God invites us to center ourselves on God's Son who came to redeem us from all the rules and give us the full rights of the children of God.

That's not easy to do. How can we keep our lives centered on Christ? Let me take you back to that song by Chicago. Does anybody really know what time it is? How do we know what time it is? We can look at our watches or phones. But in the church, we have a different way of telling what time it is. We look to Christ, who is the center of our calendar. The world used to acknowledge the fullness of time in Christ by talking about BC and AD, before Christ and in the year of our Lord. But Christ has been removed from the calendar. Now it's BCE and CE, before the common era and the common era.

Around the world, the church helps us keep our time telling focused on Christ with the church year; Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, in which we celebrate the wonderful things God has done for us in Christ. And then there is Ordinary Time from Pentecost to Advent, when we focus on how we must live our commitment to what God has done in Christ. That church calendar reminds us that the most important time in life is God's time. What matters most is not the seasons of the year or the sports seasons, not the electoral cycle or the calendar of the United Nations, not the market's rise and fall or the agonies and ecstasies of our little lives, but what God has done, is doing and will do in Jesus Christ.

When you think of it that way, you'll realize that we are living in the meantime of God's great plan for time and space, like Israel back in Psalm 126. God has done great things for us in Jesus death and resurrection, but he's not done redeeming us or this world. God will do even greater things when Jesus comes back from his throne in heaven. Then he will restore us and the world completely: all of God's wandering children will be brought back home, justice and peace will embrace, those who have gone out weeping carrying seeds to sow will return with songs of joy carrying sheaves with them, and there will be a brave new world, the new heaven and earth, the new Jerusalem where there will be no more weeping and sighing or mourning and dying. And we will be, as Paul says in Galatians 4, completely free and heirs to all the riches of God's own Son. That's our destination when the time has fully come.

So, we can live in the meantime, not by a myriad of rules, but by faith in Christ by whom we measure and manage our time. If we focus on Christ and what God is doing in him, it will change the way we live in our meantimes—not simply mourning what is wrong, but hoping for the day God puts it all right, not merely wringing our hands in despair, but working to bring peace and justice and love to this beautiful but ruined world.

If we remember that we are living in the meantime, we won't get sucked into living as though this is all there is. In her wonderful little book, Liturgy of the Ordinary, Tish Warren, gives us a marvelous analogy to help us think about our lives. I just talked about our ultimate destination of the new heaven and earth. Well, what if we forgot our destination? Let's make that up close and personal. What if, on our way to our destination, say LaGrave this morning, what if we had gotten confused and lost and forgot my destination here at LaGrave and somehow wandered onto US 131 under the Wealthy Street bridge.

What if we all forsook our destination, our commitment to get to LaGrave, and came to believe that US 131 in downtown Grand Rapids was all there is? What if we left our cars and set up cots on that dingy stretch of highway? Someone pulls a grill out of a truck bed and starts a barbecue. Maybe we set up a poker game. We aren't going anywhere.

Eventually we say, "There's nowhere to go," and simply make ourselves as comfortable as we can. People begin to hoard food. Fights break out. Gangs form for mutual protection—the southbounders and the northbounders. People siphon gas and squabble over jumper cables to charge batteries. We each stake out our own territory and try to eke out an existence on the highway, believing that these gasoline fumes and concrete pillars are all there is; this is the way the world always has been and always will be.

Preposterous? Ridiculous? Of course, but that's exactly what happens when we focus on the meantime and forget we are living in the fulness of time on the way to our ultimate destination. Does anybody really know what time it is? Does anybody really care? Yes, God does, and he cared so much that he sent his Son into the chaos of our times. So whether it is the best of times or the worst of times, it is always Christ's time. And he will fully restore your life when God's time has fully come.

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