"The Timeliness of the Gift"

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Time is a big deal for us. It's not for God.

Isaiah 9:1-7; Romans 5:1-8
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Love Language

Perhaps more than any other culture and time, we are watch watchers and calendar gazers. Some of us are worse than others. I was complaining recently in staff meeting that the clock on the wall was wrong. Someone said, "You have a computer, iPad, phone, and watch." I'm time-conscious all day every day from when I wake up until I go to bed.

What makes you time-conscious? Perhaps sporting events? Is there time left for a comeback? It's not just hours in the day. How many days until Christmas? At church we reinforce this question and frame it in a religious context. We call this season "Advent." How many days until "the coming"?

We can't undo all this. It's part of who and where we are. But we can ask ourselves when is our focus on time out of proportion? How does God's Word speak to us? How does "the timeliness of the gift" speak to me as I count the years, days, hours, and minutes?

Isaiah – The Gift "To us a son is given" (Isaiah 9:6).

Isaiah prophesied more than seven centuries before the time of Christ. It was a time of great crisis, because the world's first superpower, Assyria, was gobbling up smaller kingdoms and lands without mercy. They used innovative military strategies and intimidation through cruelty to vanquish and control in the name of their god Ashur. To be sure, there had always been conflicts among various peoples, but the Assyrians were the first intent on expansion and domination throughout the Middle

East. Israel and Judah, two relatively tiny nations, were like CVCC trying to stop Georgia on its march toward a championship.

Isaiah's role was two-fold: First, he was to warn God's people against worshiping false gods – the deities of their neighbors or the gods of alliance and power. They were to trust only in the Creator, the one who had called them out of Egypt and given them their land. Second, knowing prophetically that they were doomed, he was to give them hope that their destruction would not be the end of their story. Chapter 9 is about hope.

The verses we read at the beginning of this worship story first give the history and geography, then the poem of hope.

Verse 1 is easy to overlook, but important not to – even more so from our New Testament perspective. The situation is "gloom" and "distress" in "the land of Zebulon and the land of Naphtali." What does that have to do with Christmas?" That's where Jesus spent about 90% of his time on earth. Nazareth, where the angel Gabriel first appeared to Mary and then to Joseph, is in ancient Zebulon, and Capernaum and most of Jesus' public ministry were within Naphtali. So when Isaiah prophecies, "In the future (God) will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan…." He's talking about the coming of Jesus.

The poem that follows has some of the most well-known verses in the Bible, along with some of the most obscure. The poem starts with declaring the future as if it's already happened. Darkness has turned to light (2). God has expanded their borders and increased their joy (3). Remember, this is not their current situation. Right now they're under the threat of domination, torture, and extinction. But God sees the future as if it's already happened.

Why are they so happy? In the most literal translations, the word "For" is repeated in verses 4, 5, and 6. It means "Because." Why do the people rejoice?

Because God has shattered the yoke of their oppressor (4).

Because their enemies' uniforms have been thrown into the fire (5).

Because a child is born and a son is given (6).

If you'll pardon a trivial analogy, this season of the Carolina Panthers shall not be the last! We shall rise again! In the future we shall say, "The Philadelphia Eagles no longer soar. The Panthers have a new quarterback! And all God's Carolina fans said, "Amen!"

The most familiar words of our text are in verse 6, but most English translations obscure the poetic emphasis in Hebrew. There are four key nouns. These four Messianic descriptions read literally,

- *Wonder* of counsel (the awe he evokes)
- *God* of power (who he is)
- *Father* of eternity (how he relates to us)
- *Chief* of peace (what he will accomplish)

That's what he will be named. His government will never end (7), because he will reign on David's throne forever, and will establish his kingdom the way every kingdom should be established – with justice and righteousness. Everyone will be treated fairly and the government will do what is right. How can that happen? "The passion of Adonai Tva'ot" – the LORD of hosts, the God of Angel Armies.

So what's the key line here? For today, I'm going with "A son is given." Given. He is "The Gift." You know this Hebrew word, but more as a proper name. "Nathan" is the word. Do you remember Nathan the prophet, who confronted David about his affair with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah? He was God's gift to David. Sometimes the gift comes in the form of confrontation or even bad news. Do you remember David's best friend, Saul's son, Jo-nathan? His name means "Yahweh has given."

Here's something I bet you didn't know. At least I didn't. This verb, "given" appears more than 2000 times in the Old Testament. You thought "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son" was just a New Testament idea. No, "The Gift" is right here in Isaiah 9. A world of gloom and distress, of darkness and threat, is not the end of the story. Human, visible power cannot stand against the LORD of heaven's armies. A child is born; a son is given. The Gift changes everything.

But why does it take so long?

Romans – The Time "At just the right time" (Romans 5:6)

Each week in Advent we'll spend some time in Romans 5. I love this chapter, maybe one of my favorites. I don't know that I've ever preached on it during Advent.

Once again, just a little context. Paul is outlining what he calls "my gospel" as he writes to the church at Rome. He's never been there, but he does know enough of the church leaders to have a personal connection. He's more systematic and thorough about the gospels than he is anywhere else; more than anyone is anywhere else in the New Testament. The Gospel writers tell us the story of Jesus' life, but they only hint at the meaning of that story.

Paul says almost nothing about the events we associate with Christmas – not in Romans, and not elsewhere. He starts with a world that has gone far astray, that deserves the wrath of God. He first gets us thinking about "them" – all those sinners out there who do such God-awful things. Then he says, "By judging them, you're condemning yourself," because self-righteousness and condescension are just as evil. All have sinned and are falling short of God's glory.

But there is good news, that God through Jesus Christ has provided a way for us to be declared righteous by faith instead of by trying harder to keep God's laws. That's a very short summary that brings us to Romans 5, where Paul will outline "The Gift."

The Gift changes everything. Verse 1 says we have peace with God (through the Prince of Peace). Through Jesus we have access to The Gift, God's grace (2). We not only boast in our future hope, but we boast in our current suffering, because God is pouring his love into us through the Holy Spirit (3-5).

In verse 6, Paul comes to the verse that is the reason we chose this verse for today's sermon. "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly." Why was it "just the right time"?

Before I tell you what I think Paul means, let's finish the paragraph and the thought. It's rare to voluntarily take another's place in death, even if for a good person (7). But God's kind of love goes as far as dying in our place "while we were still sinners." He doesn't wait for us to clean up our act before he'll sacrifice himself for us. This is the awe of the Gospel. He's a wonder of a Savior.

But what does he mean by "just the right time"? In his letter to the Galatians, Paul uses a similar phrase: "But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law." That's about as close as Paul comes to what we call "the Christmas story."

Back to the question of time, the timeliness of the gift. Why was Jesus' coming "just the right time"?

Let me give you first the answer I've often heard – and even taught. I say this not to criticize or dismiss it. It's a good answer.

Jesus came at the right time because everything was in place for the spread of the Gospel. The Jews had been longing for a Messiah because of their realization that keeping the Law was hopeless – personally or collectively. The Greeks had prepared the way by Hellenizing the ancient world – giving everyone a shared culture and language. The Romans had made it possible for Paul and the Apostles to spread the Gospel through the Pax Romana – world peace – and the infrastructure.

The Romans were also not threatened by Jewish faith or trying to dislodge it, as the Greeks had done. So as long as the Christians were a subsect of Judaism they were relatively safe. By the time that changed in the latter part of the first century, the gospel had spread to Asia, Europe, and Africa. Thus the coming of Jesus was at the right time.

It's a great point but maybe more related to Galatians 4, where Paul uses the Greek word *chronos*, as in chronological. The world's stage truly was set for Jesus.

The kairos of Jesus

I want to leave you with a different thought from Romans 5, because Paul uses a different word for time. He uses the Greek word *kairos*, which has less to do with time and more to do with this moment, with now. Sometimes these two words are used interchangeably, but it's notable that the Greek version of the Old Testament uses *kairos* about three times as often as *chrono*s, and in the New Testament it's about 2:1. In New Testament language, we are living in the *kairos* of Jesus, in the age of Jesus, in the time when Jesus has changed everything by his life, death, and resurrection.

When Paul says Christ died "at just the right time" in Romans 5:6, it's literally "according to *kairos*." Paul says now is "just the right time" because now is when we are powerless, ungodly, sinners. But when is that ever not the case? Never.

I think it's why Paul is less interested in the sequence and calendar of Jesus' life – that he was born in 4 BC and died in AD 29 or whatever year it was – and even less interested in what we call the Christmas story. It's the whole thing – that Jesus came into our world and changed time itself – that matters to Paul. It's that he came into a world of what Isaiah called "distress and gloom" and "darkness" and met us in the midst of the mess we collectively had made of it – Jew, Greek, Roman, whoever. And when you and I realize that we are those who are powerless, ungodly, sinners who need the peace and hope and joy only Jesus can bring, that is our *kairos,* "just the right time."

Here's the thing about time we easily forget. Time is a big deal for us. It's not for God. He doesn't own a watch. There's no calendar on the wall of heaven. God needs no alarms or reminders. He's not worried about being late. He knows we are governed by time, and he understands it because he became one of us. I think maybe God is a little amused by our arguing about whether culture is going downhill because scholars use "BCE" instead of "BC." The Gregorian calendar is not in the Bible.

God is outside of and beyond time. He is right now as present with you as he is with Adam, Moses, David, Jesus, and Paul, with Augustine and Luther and Wesley and your Grandma. He knows what time means to you, but he's not anxiously tracking the chronos. You live in that world, but you are secure in his *kairos*, his eternal now.

I live by the watch on my wrist and my phone, the calendar on my wall, the schedule I keep. I do know it's an hour until kickoff, 28 days until Christmas, and six months, give or take a few until I retire. My moments of anxiety over time are about getting the next sermon written or fitting in my task list.

Francesca Battestelli released a song in 2020 that makes the point better than I could. She had planned to release the song in Christmas of 2019, but it didn't work out. By the time Christmas of 2020 came around, though, it was perfect for the pandemic. The song begins with lyrics that describe a family's first holiday without their loved one, and an unemployed man wondering what he's going to do.

In the struggles of life, we're wondering what will happen next in the *chronos*, but God wants to meet us in the *kairos*. So this is how "Behold Him" expresses that –

In your silent night
When you're not alright
Lift your eyes and behold him
Feel the thrill of hope
You are not alone
In this moment, behold him (behold him)

King forevermore
Come let us adore
Christ our savior, behold him
Feel the thrill of hope
We are not alone (not alone)
In this moment, behold him

Amen.