



Sermon of November 14, 1999



Rev. Mark Trotter

First United Methodist Church of San Diego

(619) 297-4366

Fax (619) 297-2933

"WHAT TIME IS IT?"

I Thessalonians 5:1-11

Matthew 25:14-30

As the year wears down, the days become shorter, the nights longer and darker. All people, both in our time and in ancient time, turn to questions of human mortality and the future of the earth.

When I was in Mexico at the end of October, I saw the preparation for El Dia de los Muertos, "The Day of the Dead." Shrines were being erected in anticipation of November 2. The picture of the deceased loved one will be placed in the middle of the shrine, the frame of the shrine will be decked with beautiful yellow flowers.

The custom is to place food offerings for the dead in front of the shrine, their favorite menu. One of our team members was walking around the town in which we were staying. Some of the

shrines had already been set up. He came back and said that the food offering at one shrine he saw was a bottle of Tequila and a box of cigars.

I also visited the archaeological museum in Puebla, the beautiful Amparo Museum. We came to an exhibit of pre-Columbian Indian artifacts. There was a picture, as part of the display, showing the Indians offering food to their ancestors. Our host turned to me, and said, "The traditions are rooted deep."

Indeed they are. For as the year turns and we move into the fall, nature conspires to remind us of the transitoriness of life, that all peoples, both present and past, have turned their thoughts to questions of our mortality. That is why All Saints' Day, and All Souls' Day, and El Dia de los Muertos, and Halloween, are all congested at the beginning of the fall. These traditions that deal with death are rooted deep in the cultures that were before us in Europe, and on this continent as well. They are tied to the fall, when the days get shorter and the nights lengthen, and we are reminded of our mortality.

It is perhaps significant then that the lectionary of the Church during these same days turns to those passages dealing with the end of history, and the second coming of our Lord.

We will hear that theme from now on, for the next few Sundays, into the first weeks of Advent. Which I remind you, now, is but two weeks away.

I have tried to avoid these passages, I'll confess that. They are disturbing passages. But more so I have tried to avoid them because they have become the private possession of those who work on the fringes of Christianity, and who use these passage to construct elaborate scenarios of doom. You can hear those preachers on the radio. It seems that the radio is their medium of choice, although you can also find them on the nether channels of cable television. And you can find their books, especially in the so-called Christian bookstores, these books of prophesy that try to link the symbols of prophesy in the Bible to current events in our time.

The popularity of this stuff is just amazing. Especially as we approach the millennium. The books that I am talking about are not on the *New York Times* best seller list. They don't put those kinds of books on that list. But these books outsell the books on the *New York Times* best seller list by the millions.

The scenarios are based on biblical texts. But more importantly they are based on an interpretation of those texts by a man named Darby, who was the founder of the Plymouth Brethren sect in England, 150 years ago. Darby worked out an elaborate scheme of "dispensations" that predicted when the world would end.

He was wrong. And anyone who has tried to do that has been wrong as well. He based his predictions on a selection of texts, mainly from the Book of Daniel and the Book of the Revelation to John. But he had a follower, a disciple named Scofield, who published a Bible with Darby's notations in the margins. That Bible has come to be known as "Scofield's Reference Bible." It, more than any other source, has been the dispenser of apocalyptic expectations among Christians in our time.

Mainline churches tended to stay away from this stuff. That's a mistake. There is an important message here, a message of hope. I want us to look at it, using the epistle lesson read to us this morning from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians.

This is the earliest of Paul's letters. It reveals to us that the early Church was expecting the imminent return of Jesus. We suspect that it was wide-spread among the Church in the first century, because Paul addresses it elsewhere in his letters, and the four gospels deal with it. In fact you could say that the return of the Lord, the end of history, the coming of the Kingdom, are among the major themes of the New Testament.

The church at Thessalonica had two questions. One, "What happens to those who die before the Lord returns?" Second, "When will he return?"

Paul answers the first question in the fourth chapter with these beautiful words: "We would not have you ignorant concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as those who have no hope."

What a wonderful passage. It recognizes that human grief belongs to all of us. Christian faith does not immunize you from the tragedies of life, or from the feelings that accompany those tragedies. What the Christian faith does is give you a great hope, that because Christ has been resurrected from the dead, so also will we.

His particular answer to the church at Thessalonica is that when Christ returns, those who are asleep will be awakened by a trumpet, and they will be carried into heaven with Christ on a cloud.

You noticed that the choir this morning sang, "Steal Away to Jesus," one of the many spirituals that came out of slavery in this country. But have you noticed especially the line, "The trumpet sounds within-a my soul: I ain't got long to stay here"?

Like most spirituals, this one has two levels of meaning. The trumpet sounding, crossing over Jordan, can be seen as metaphors for dying and going to heaven. But it was also interpreted to mean, crossing over the Ohio River, and stealing away on the underground railway into freedom.

In both dimensions it is a word of hope. It is an accurate and faithful interpretation of the scripture, because the scripture tells us that God is in charge of this world, and therefore our hopes and expectations someday will be fulfilled. "The trumpet sounds within-a my soul." What a wonderful symbol of hope, the trumpet being the symbol of God's final victory in this world. We have not heard that trumpet yet. But that trumpet sounds "within-a my soul." We do not grieve as those who are without hope.

Then Paul turns to the second question about the return of Christ, "When will he return?" That is our text for this morning in the fifth chapter of this letter.

But as to the times and the seasons, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief

in the night.

That means, we don't know when it will come. That is the same message that Jesus proclaimed, "No one know the hour of the day, not even the Son. Only the Father." So Jesus is saying, Don't ask me. I don't know either. I'm not in charge. God is in charge."

So why all these speculations then, these date setters, these sign watchers? They won't even listen to Jesus, or to Paul. They just keep on prophesying. But both Paul and Jesus say, don't worry about it. You don't know when it will come. Nobody knows when it will come.

That answers the question for those who asked the question, but I suspect that there are a lot of us here this morning who do not even ask the question. So I want to suggest why it is important to ask the question.

You don't ask it probably because you are thoroughly modern. That means that you have been shaped by that movement called, "The Enlightenment." It began 300 years ago, a movement of reason and science that desacralized the world. That is to say, it took the mystery out of the world. Which means, it took God out of the world. God, they said, was no longer necessary to explain how the world got here and how it runs. We have found other ways of explaining it.

With God out of the picture, that meant that human beings were now in the center of the picture, to explain things now with the tools that are available to them, the tools of reason and science and technology. They concluded, if we cannot explain these things with our tools, then they don't exist. That's called the secular understanding of the world. It means, a world explained without God.

A religious understanding of the world says that God is the Creator, and God is at the center of the world. The reason that the Bible is such a strange and alien world to many people in our time is because the essential assumption of the Bible is that God created the world and all that is in it, and God is guiding the world, his creation, to its fulfillment. The means with which God does that is "time."¹

That is so difficult for us to grasp because we have been taught that time belongs to us, time is neutral, time is something we can shape to our own use. We are taught, if you want to be a success, then you make the most of your time. You manage your time. Above all, as your mother told you, do not waste time. We are taught to organize time.

That is why we have clocks, and calendars. We put down what we are supposed to do, when we are supposed to do it, so we can organize time. Time is organized into neat segments so that we can control it. The seriously cool in our time have those pocket computer calendars, so they can organize their time even more efficiently. It is as if time were neutral, a raw material there for us to use. It is there for us to fill. It is there for us to make significant.

But in the Bible, time is already significant, because it belongs to God. Time is the means that God uses to accomplish his will. In the Bible, therefore, the advice to us is not to be up and doing, but to be patient. "O rest in the Lord, wait patiently for him." "Those who wait for the Lord shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and

not faint."

One of the most important phrases in the Bible is, "The fullness of time." That means that when the time is right, God will act. God decides when the time is right, not us. We don't make it happen. It happens when God wills that it will happen.

The closest we come to understanding this biblical understanding of time is when we go to the hospital. You know what they call people in hospitals? "Patients." I call on secularly trained men and women who are patients in the hospital, recuperating there from surgery. I go the day after the surgery. They are mad as hatters, giving hell to the nurses, wanting to go home, conducting business on the phone from their bed.

The next day it hits them. They are sicker. They hurt. They don't want to get out of bed now. The nurses come in for revenge. They say, "I told you so." It is then that they discover that healing is not something that we control. Healing is a gift that is given to us by a power beyond us, and we must wait on it. We must be "patients."

God controls time. That has something to do with the calendar as well. Calendars in the secular world are now all digitalized. Do you know that? You can't use names in calendars anymore, like November, or December, or Monday, or Tuesday. You've got to use numbers. You can't just use single digit numbers. You've got to put a zero in front of a single digit number.

I want to know who ordered all of this? Who's making us do all of this? It just further flattened our days. It was bad enough when they took prefixes away from telephone numbers. I loved those. "KImball 4714," that was my boyhood telephone number. Now you've got to use numbers, numbers.

I perform weddings. That means that I have to fill out marriage certificates. Recently the order came down from the County Recorder to all of us who do this kind of work that when we put dates on licenses now, we cannot write the word, we have to use the number. We can't say, "April 14, 1999." We have to say, "04-14-99." And get this. If you don't do it, you get fined. It costs you \$25 if you use a name. The instructions also say, "Don't white out." If you do, you're going to go to jail. That's not true, but I think they wish it were true there. This year I have paid a whole lot of money to the County Recorder.

Do you see what the secular world does to time? It makes it a thing that can fit into a machine. But in the old world, time was not marked by numbers. Time was marked by holy days, feasts, celebrations, communions, commemorations. Each day had a name, and the months had names. That tied us to our history, to our ancestors in the past, in northern Europe and in Rome and Greece. And every year was "the year of our Lord." Time had significance beyond what you and I can give to it.

And the seasons were there. The Church established the seasons of the year so that you would move through the year with significance, from Advent to Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost, so that you would move through the year discovering treasure after treasure in time. Time is created by God and has meaning. "This is the day the Lord has made." God is in control of time. This means that God uses time to accomplish his will. "This is the day the Lord has

made," so this may be the day that something wonderful happens, because God controls time.

That's what the Thessalonians believed. This may be the time when the Lord returns, because they knew that God was in charge of time. But they were anxious because they had been told that the Lord would return within their lifetime. Now it is twenty years after the Resurrection, and so many people have died. So where is he? When is he coming?

Paul writes that he would come in time, at the right time, in the fullness of time, in God's time. So it is not up to us. It's up to God. So there is nothing we can do, except be patient, and wait. Because if God is the creator of the earth, and time is the means he uses to bring the creation into fulfillment, then the Lord will come.

What is of equal importance in these passages is the instruction of what we are supposed to do while we wait. Paul's advice to the Thessalonians is wrapped in a metaphor. "You are sons and daughters of the day and of the light, not of the night and the darkness."

That same metaphor appears in the first chapter of the Gospel of John, in speaking of Jesus. "The light has come into the darkness of this world, and the darkness has not overcome it."

So he is presenting us with a clear choice. The world is poised, as it were, waiting for the dawn. It is as if at this point in history, we are on a mountain, looking to the east, and the first rays of the new day are beginning to break through the darkness. Behind us is the night. Paul says that those who do not know what is coming live in the darkness. But those who know the Lord, who know the Kingdom is coming, live in the light, in the new day. So he says, live accordingly, live as those who have seen the light. So live with hope. Live as those who know that the Kingdom of God is coming. So live lives that become the Kingdom.

That is the same message that is in the gospel lesson read to us this morning, the famous Parable of the Talents. It comes in the 25th chapter of Matthew. It tells us that while the Master is away, we are to work. While the Lord is delayed, we are to work. We are to invest what he has given to us, the good news of the Kingdom, invest it in this world to make this world a better place.

The Parable of the Talents comes in the 25th chapter, as I mentioned. The 25th chapter consists of three parables. The first parable is the Parable of the Bridesmaids, waiting for the bridegroom, who is delayed. That is there to describe for us our condition. This is a time of waiting in faith.

The second parable is the Parable of the Talents. That is there to tell us what we are supposed to do while we wait.

The third parable is the Parable of the Last Judgment, when the Lord has returned. And he will ask us, "What did you do while you were waiting?"

For if God is the creator of the world, and time is the means that God uses to accomplish his will, then he will come--in God's time.

I I am grateful to William Schweiker's article, "The Fullness of Time," for this insight.

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,
that we might be servants of others,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

[Click here to send your comments via e-mail to Rev. Mark Trotter.](#)

If you find these sermons of benefit, please let us know. Printed or audio tape copies of all sermons are available by subscription. Your e-mail is welcome.

[Click here to send e-mail to the church staff.](#)

Sermon text converted by Dave Watters

[NEWS](#) * [SERMON](#) * [MUSIC](#) * [KIDS](#) * [YOUTH](#) * [COUNSELING](#) * [MAIL](#) * [HOME](#)