

“Does Anybody Really Know What Time it Is?”

Introduction: Back in 1969 the rock group Chicago came out with their debut album, “Chicago Transit Authority.” On that album was the hit song, the first one they ever recorded, “Does Anybody Really Know What Time it Is?” From the opening piano solo by Robert Lamm to the closing trombone riff by James Pankow, the song is a classic. I listened to it again the other day while at my desk and it just made me sit back and smile from beginning to end!

For those of you who are now going way back with me, here are the opening lyrics:

As I was walking down the street one day,
a man came up to me and asked me what the time was that was on my watch, yeah,

And I said: Does anybody really know what time it is, does anybody really care (about time);
If so I can't imagine why (no no) we've all got time enough to cry. . .

[later] We've all got time enough to die.

I learned that the song comes from a time when Lamm, as a high schooler, was walking down the streets of Brooklyn NY where he grew up and passed by a movie theatre. An usher from the theatre was outside taking a cigarette break and Lamm asked him, “Hey man, what time is it?” To which the usher responded, “Man, does anybody really know what time it is?!”

Which gives us a kind of existential sense to these words, and those that follow. The message seems to be that we should just relax, appreciate life, and stop pushing so hard, running from one place to another. Certainly, that's a needed message. But I wonder about Lamm's belief that we should take it easy because we've got all the time in the world. Do we? Certainly, we live in turbulent times; do we really know what tomorrow will bring?

As we heard a few minutes ago in our advent liturgy, the first Sunday in advent is when we celebrate that Jesus has come, and that he has promised to come again. So, in the gospel text appointed for this Sunday, we hear Jesus talking with his disciples about time, in particular, the end of time. “What will be the sign of your coming, and of the end of the age?” they ask (Ma. 24:3). Jesus answers that, indeed, no one really knows what time it (his return) is, no one except the Father, and he's not tellin'! But that doesn't mean we should just sit back and chill and not worry about how we live. “Keep watch,” Jesus says. To which the apostle Paul adds (a few decades later), “wake up.”

So let's think a bit more about what time it really is now, and then consider how it is that we should live, what it means to wake up and keep watch.

I. What time is it now?

A. The apostle Paul actually gives us a kind of existential response of his own: our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed (Rom. 13:11). What he's pointing to, broadly speaking, is that the time we live in now is the time between the ages, the time between the two advents of Jesus. In his first advent, Jesus inaugurated the Kingdom of God. The rule and reign of God broke into this world in his teaching, in his miracles, and in his defeat of sin and death. He came, we could say, to show us what real life is all about, and to suffer and die so that our old, broken, sinful life might be healed. In his second advent, he will come to rule and reign over all things, finishing what he began, in the world, and in us. At that time, there will be a day of reckoning; he will come to judge the heavens and the earth, those who have died and those who are still alive. It will be the time when his will shall be done, on earth as it is in heaven, totally, everywhere, all the time.

B. In many ways, advent helps us live in this in-between time. In advent we declare that God, in the birth and life of Jesus, has decisively intruded into our space and time, and in the death and resurrection of Jesus, has broken time's sovereignty over our life. Therefore, we're living in a different kind of time, one in which we're invited to mark time from Advent to Epiphany to Lent to Easter to Pentecost, rather than from Winter Solstice to New Year's Day to President's Day to July 4th to Labor Day. Today, for instance, is the first day of the church year. It is our new year. It calls us to remember all God has done and has promised to do.

Here, of course, we see the ambiguity of the Christian life. The world is not what it was, but it is also not yet what it will be, and neither are we. How, then, shall we live?

II. How should we then live?

A. Two things are clear about how we should not live. On the one hand, we must be careful not to ignore this day of reckoning. That seemed to be the problem with those living in the days of Noah. They ignored the warnings of God's impending judgment and remained totally self-focused on their earthly concerns. They just went about their business as if nothing else really mattered. Ultimately, they were caught off guard. On the other hand, we must be careful not to obsess over times and dates and signs and try to predict when Jesus will return. If neither the angels, nor Jesus himself knows about that day or hour, then what makes us think we think we can figure it out?

B. However, if the coming of Jesus is certain, yet will be, at the same time, unexpected, there is still a way we can and should live, according to both Jesus and Paul. Simply put, we're called to live faithfully, and if we do, we may be surprised at when he comes, but we will be ready.

Illustration: It's kind of like preparing for winter, for the freezing temperatures and that first snow. We can be constantly checking our weather app and watching the sky to see if we can't predict when all that will begin. But far better to make sure you've remembered where you stashed your snow shovel over the summer and that you've put your windshield scraper in the car. Far better to make sure you know where your boots, hat, and gloves are located. Far better to make sure the leaves have been raked, the gutters cleaned, and the snow blower started. Living in this thoughtful and intentional way you will be prepared, no matter when winter arrives.

C. In this manner, Jesus goes on to share three parables that have to do with being ready by living faithfully. They include being a good steward over all that God has entrusted to you, and caring for others by meeting the needs of the hungry and thirsty, the stranger and the sick, the poor and the imprisoned. Paul puts being ready in terms of clothing yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ. That is a rich and full image. It means, on the one hand having turned to Jesus in repentance and faith so that he will pay the penalty for your sin. That is called being clothed in the righteousness of Christ – on the day of judgment, when the Father looks at you, he will not see your sin, your unrighteousness, but the righteousness of Jesus who has graciously substituted himself for you (cf. Isa. 61:10). But such clothing is not simply mental assent; it involves, writes Paul, putting on a whole new wardrobe, getting rid of all the dark stuff in our life and loving our neighbor as our self. In another letter he talks about clothing ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, and forgiveness (Col. 3:12-14). The point is that if we, with the help of the Spirit, dress this way in increasing measure, we will be more than ready for the second advent of Jesus, regardless of when it comes. This kind of faithful living is the way we are to wake up and keep watch.

Does anybody really know what time it is? It is New Year's Day! So, let's go to the table and begin to sample the great feast that Jesus has in store for us when the time, for his return, is right.