

The World in Its Present Form...
Third Sunday after Epiphany - Year B - 01/27/2021
Psalm Reading: 62:5-12
1st Reading: Jonah 3:1-5, 2nd: 1 Cor. 8:1-13

Our experience leads us to believe that we travel through time. We do this in only one direction, which we interpret as being into the future, and though we can remember the past, we cannot clearly see the future. In fact the future is so unknown to us that we often cannot foresee quite catastrophic events coming around the corner. For example, I don't think many of us saw the Covid-19 pandemic coming, nor could we predict its effects. Because we only remember the past and can't see the future all we can really do is experience the present moment at any given time.

All this might seem obvious because it is how we live our lives every day. It is a given for us, an immutable law, we cannot change it. But like any such phenomena people study it. Some physicists have even tried to figure out just exactly how fast we are moving through the time dimension of what Einstein called "space-time". (You know those four dimensions: up, down, and over, and of course time.) It would probably not surprise you to find out that these physicists, after toying with some Einsteinian equations, have come to the conclusion that the speed of time is equal to the speed of light.¹

Well, It doesn't surprise me. After all, twenty years can seem to go by in the blink of an eye. It is hard to fathom that I have been in Alpena for three years! (That is nearly 150

1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBTez-nTKes> (accessed 01/21/21)

sermons for those of you who are counting.) For most of us it feels as though an entire lifetime goes by in mere moments. As we look back on a long train of events, they are simply a blur in our minds with a few clear memories here and there. When we started out, we may have taken the road less traveled, but when we look back all we can see are trees and an overgrown track.

I get the feeling that the ancient psalmists naturally understood the rapid movement of time because they often remarked on its insubstantial nature for us as mere humans. You can feel the wistfulness in our reading from the Psalms. In verse 9 of Psalm 62 we can read, “Surely the lowborn are but a breath, the highborn buy a lie. If weighed on a balance, they are nothing; together they are only a breath.” Meaning that they are not only insubstantial in time, but also in space. A breath, what is it but a brief exhalation? And what is left of it when it is over? Nothing we can perceive, certainly nothing we even remember. And the psalmist is also telling us that our condition in this life changes nothing in this regard. There really is no difference between the rich and the poor. In fact wealth only gives is a brief illusion of some kind of permanence. The psalmist calls wealth a lie. So, whatever our status in life we are as nothing. [*ruach?*]

I know, I know...it all sounds rather depressing doesn't it? I get a wistful feeling in my chest and somewhere in there is a combined feeling of sadness and wonder. Sadness at the rapidity of time's passing, and at the same time, a wonder in that we ever existed at all, that we ever had the opportunity to experience life, that we could ever communicate, that we could

ever know, know that there is life, and that we are alive, if only for a moment.

This my friends is an existentialist view. The idea that we are offered a fleeting moment, long enough to relish life, long enough to feel its highs and lows, and then to have it all taken away and are then hurried into oblivion.

Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians in Chapter 7, verse 29 (NIV) writes, “What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short.” On first blush you might think he agrees with the existentialists, but Paul is not referring specifically to the speed of time, rather he is writing of the near approach of another time, the time when there will be a new heaven and a new earth. Yet, like the psalmist, he notes the ephemeral nature of the things of this world. Even relationships are ephemeral. He says those who have spouses “should live as if they do not.” “Those who are happy, as if they were not...” and he goes on to speak in the same way of those who spend money, buying things for the pleasure of them or even for necessity.

On the face of it he is saying that whatever you have or think you have, you do not permanently possess it. Now, this sounds even more depressing than the existentialist view! Except Paul is actually taking the long view. He notes these things we are concerned about in the short term because he wants us to realize that as much as we have to deal with them in the here and now, in the grand scheme of things, they are not really such-a-much. And there is good reason for this view because the time we are in now is passing away.

What is it that it is passing into? It is passing into something far greater, something far more extensive,

something far more pleasing, and that is a new kingdom within which we will experience life and perhaps time in a different way.

In the second letter of Peter (3:8) there is a verse that has always intrigued me. Peter writes, “But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.” When we are with the Lord will time seem the same for us? Experiencing every joyous moment in detail while the passage of time brings us no closer to the end of that time?

Even so, it is recognizing the nature of the here and now that Paul is concerned with when he writes, “This world in its present form is passing away.” And I think that we can take this in two senses. First, we are in the midst of constant change. And don’t we know that! Who could have predicted the changes in our lives since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic? The pandemic is something that we did not just read about in the newspaper or see on TV. It is something that has touched each and every one of our lives and has deeply influenced the way we live and how we feel about the world. Where once we were a gregarious bunch, going out and about, shopping, gathering in tight groups in theaters, sharing meals, shaking hands and hugging. Now we wear masks, distance ourselves from one another, shutting ourselves in our homes, afraid to converse face to face, even with some of our nearest relatives.

But this, too, will change. At some point we will act differently, probably we will go to some new normal, not to the old normal we now remember so fondly. And though we obsess

over these things, Paul would have us lower our level of concern. He would have us thinking about higher things. And this is the second thing Paul is telling us when he says that “the world in its present form is passing away,” that we are moving ever closer to God’s Kingdom. Paul understands that what is going on now, what we have, how we act, is nothing compared to what is awaiting us in the future. When we see and come to know God in that ultimate future, when the new heaven and the new earth come together, what happens then will become the new normal. It is then that chaotic change in our lives will cease and the creative/destructive forces of time will no longer have their effect upon us.

So, what is Paul’s advice to us who are presently experiencing time in the fleeting here and now, what we might call these interesting times? I think it would be that we need to take the long view. That there is something better awaiting us after this short time is through. He would tell us to take out the time to remember what God has already done for us through Grace in the course of our tumultuous History in sending Jesus Christ to redeem us through our faith in Him.

Paul would have us concentrate on the things that we can do to bring about God’s kingdom in the here and now. And we can do that by living our lives, in spite of the virus, as faithful Christians. Living prayerfully in the arms of the church following our self-declared mission to **proclaim** God’s Word, to **nurture** God’s people, and **demonstrate** God’s love. Yes, we can do these things in spite of the restrictions imposed upon us, and we have been doing this throughout the last year. But as Paul says, “The world in its present form is passing away.” So this,

too, is going to pass and we must prepare for the time when that change comes, whether it takes a month, a year, or a thousand years.

Yes, we have been going through some trying times in the last year. We don't know what lies ahead. But I think if we hope for the best and prepare for whatever the future might bring that we will succeed. And we should remember that at the end of all time we have waiting for us a home with Jesus Christ.

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