

WHAT TIME IS IT?

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Grace Church in New York
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Jesus said, "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." (Luke 21:28)

Three weeks ago today the world paused to mark the 100th anniversary of the armistice that ended the Great War, otherwise known as World War One. That weekend *The New York Times* ran an article about one particular American soldier named Henry Nicholas Gunther. Gunther was born and grew up in Baltimore. In September of 1917 the army drafted the 22-year old into service and assigned him to an infantry division. By the next July he had shipped to France, and two months later, in September of 1918, he found himself on the western front, fighting against the entrenched German army. The war would rage on for two more months, but even then the German powers knew that their cause was hopeless. They knew it was only a matter of time before the Allies, infused with a seemingly limitless supply of fresh American troops, would break through their lines and overwhelm them. Thus, they entered negotiations to end the war, and finally signed the armistice at 5:00 am on November 11th. All fighting was to cease in six hours. The guns were to go silent at 11:00 am. The deal was done. Peace was at hand. The word quickly began to spread.

Later that morning Private Gunther's unit was on patrol and came to a German roadblock, guarded by a machine gun nest. It's unclear how much Gunther and his fellow soldiers knew of the armistice, but against the orders of his superiors, the eager young private embarked on a one-man charge against the German position. The Germans, fully aware of the armistice, tried to wave him off, to no avail. Gunther stormed ahead, and died in a burst of machine-gun fire. The time was 10:59 am. Henry Nicholas Gunther was the last soldier on either side to be killed in World War One. A case could be made that he died because he did not know what time it was.

What time is it? Today is Advent Sunday, the beginning of the season in which the church bids us urgently to pay attention to what time it is. We know that the days are running short between now and Christmas. As important as Christmas is, we can all agree that having your shopping done and your tree trimmed by the morning of the 25th is not a life-or-death matter. So what else is? If you pay attention to the news, you might wonder what time it is for planet Earth. With every new report about global warming, we seem to be getting closer and closer to the tipping point. You might wonder what time it is for the United States on the world stage. History shows that the sun eventually sets on every empire. Have we reached the limits of our influence? You might wonder what time it is in this mortal life. Just last week, out of the blue, a fellow player from my college baseball team requested to join my LinkedIn network. I hadn't heard from him in over thirty years, so I said, "Sure. How are you?" He wrote, "*How am I? My nest is empty, my joints all ache, and I recently drove down the highway for over an hour with my left blinker on. But I still refuse to join AARP!*"

Can you handle a little gallows humor right now? Last year, after we installed the new columbarium we set out to create a tasteful brochure making it known that niches were available for purchase. James Romanik, then in the business office, suggested that we entitle the brochure, *Because It's Later Than You Think*. (You'll note that James Romanik is no longer in the business office!)

What time is it? Is it later than you think? In today's reading from the Gospel of Luke we've heard how Jesus warned his disciples that it really was a life-or-death matter that they pay attention to the time. The immediate context of the reading is the Jerusalem of Jesus' day. Jesus looked at the social and political climate of the city and preached that it was later than anyone

thought. Jerusalem was occupied by the Romans, and many of the resident Jews made no secret of the fact that they didn't take kindly at all to Gentile invaders and their pagan religions. The Jews were reaching the boiling point, and the long simmering rage of the subjected people was ready to spill over into a messy and disastrous rebellion. Jesus thought that the revolutionary fervor was madness. Taking on Rome would be suicide, but they were hell bent on making the charge. Today's reading is called "apocalyptic," which means disclosing, or revealing. Jesus pulled back the curtain of time, peered into the future, and disclosed the horrors that would come to pass in a rebellion. His urgent message was to repent, to come to their senses and cool off or the current generation would be annihilated. Did they heed his warning? They did not, and just a few decades later, in AD 70, the Roman army sacked the city, destroyed the Temple, and slaughtered the inhabitants of Jerusalem. All of this Jesus saw in advance.

Nevertheless, as Jesus pulled back the curtain of time and peered into the future, he saw also something else that would come to pass. He prophesied mysteriously about his own "second" coming: "*Then they will see the 'Son of Man' coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*" What time is it? When will we see the coming of the Son of Man? If Jesus were really peering into the future, did he mean to connect his second coming only with that particular fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, or could he have been seeing an event much further in the future? We don't know, and sadly, many would-be prophets have made fools of themselves and their followers trying to predict the date. All we can say for sure is that Jesus believed – indeed, Jesus knew – that at the end of time, God reigns supreme. Love and life win. Those who are counted as citizens of the kingdom of God find redemption. It is a promise. The deal is done. The resurrection of Jesus is God's signature. Therefore we can stand up and raise our heads even now and dare to live in the new day that is yet fully to dawn.

Needless to say, many would caution against an overly enthusiastic embrace of the new peace, if indeed we should take it seriously at all. The world is a violent place, full of firebrands with trigger-happy fingers at the ready. During World War One, standing up and raising your head was a sure way of being shot and killed. Sadly, for the six hours that followed the signing of the armistice, some German and Allied units fought on even more furiously than before, trying to gain new ground in case the peace didn't last. Some say that Private Gunther himself, with his futile charge of the roadblock, was merely attempting last minute heroics to regain the rank of sergeant from which he'd been demoted. And so it continues: the rancor, ill-will, and fighting go on generation after generation.

What is more, say the critics, apocalyptic literature is fiction, merely the product of someone's overly active imagination. No one should take it seriously because no one can travel through time. In 2009 the brilliant cosmologist, Stephen Hawking, who died earlier this year, devised a test to see if time travel were possible. His plan was to host a party at his college for authentic time travelers. But he needed a way to make sure that no pretenders crashed the event. Therefore, he only sent out the invitations the day after the party was over. On the day of the party, he sat and waited, but no one came. Hawking reports that he was disappointed, but not surprised!¹ You can't travel through time, so apocalyptic literature is fiction. Hawking would go on to conclude that God himself is fiction. He believed that "the universe was spontaneously created out of nothing, according to the laws of science." Consequently, no such thing as a "kingdom of God" can be established, and no one is upstairs to make and especially not to guarantee any promises about the future. So much for the bold and confident prophesies that we heard in today's Old Testament reading from Jeremiah (33:14-16): *The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel.* Who is to say what the future will bring?

Obviously, I wouldn't do what I do for a living if I found Hawking's arguments persuasive. To be sure, he was an engaging writer and I've always tried to read his works with respect and

¹ Stephen Hawking, Brief Answers to the Big Questions. Bantam Books, 2018, p. 141.

curiosity. As a counter balance I also read the works of other physicists who, through their science, reach exactly the opposite conclusion: that God does indeed exist; that at the heart of reality is One who reigns, and loves, and forgives². John Polkinghorne and Alistair McGrath are two such authors (in case anyone wants to know). Concerning Hawking's thoughts about the spontaneous creation of the universe according to the laws of science, the question I would have is about the laws of science. Who or what created them? What our tradition, or discipline if you like, teaches is that the laws of science reflect the mind of a Creator, the mind of God. So the question of God's relation to time lies behind today's reading. If God is to be God at all, then God must transcend time and stand apart from it as its maker. In one of our Eucharistic prayers we describe God as "dwelling in light inaccessible from before time and forever." Yet God, who stands apart from time, also reserves the right to enter it, and engage with the creation he loves. God is both transcendent and immanent, far off yet here.

And so, the two comings of Jesus that we proclaim in the weeks ahead. At Christmas we will celebrate how God entered the time of this mortal life and came to visit us in great humility, in the person of Jesus: a baby born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod the king. This morning we read apocalyptic Scripture and proclaim that in the last day the same Lord Jesus will come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead. St. Augustine wrote that God, who inhabits eternity, "does not see things piecemeal, turning his gaze from side to side. God sees everything at once." Indeed, God fully dwells in both advents. To God they are neither past nor future, but eternally now. You and I, however, who dwell in time and space, have no choice but to look from side to side. We look back and we look ahead at the comings of Jesus. What time is it now? Obviously, we live between the first and the second comings of Jesus. Perhaps an analogy will help. We can think of the first coming as 5:00 am on November 11, 1918, the moment the armistice was signed to end World War One. The deal was done. Peace was assured. We can think of the second coming as the same day six hours later at 11:00 am, the moment the guns fell silent and the peace was fully inaugurated. For us, all of life is sometime within those six hours, between the beginning and the end. As Winston Churchill would quip about what time it was in a later war, "*Now, this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is perhaps the end of the beginning.*"

The question for us is, how shall we live, bookended as we are by the comings of Jesus? Do we storm one last enemy position, try to take advantage of those who have dropped their guard, concern ourselves with rank and status, and fight on in a war that has been declared over? Or do we take Jesus at his word, and trust that the victory of life is won, and find a way to live by faith that God's kingdom of peace has been established? Do we dare to live in the new day that is yet full to dawn? When St. Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, that's the very question he addressed: How shall we live in this new day in Christ that is only beginning to dawn? He wrote:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in strife and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and love one another. Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. Cast away the works of darkness, so that when he shall come again to judge the quick and the dead, we may without shame or fear rejoice to behold his appearing.

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² John Polkinghorne, The Faith of a Physicist. Fortress Press, 1996, p. 52.