Sunday, December 3, 1995
TRUSTING IN GOD'S TIMING
Matthew 24:36-44

Some people have a wonderful sense of timing. They know when to buy and when to sell, when to wait and when to move forward. They know when to speak and when to keep silent. Perhaps you've heard the old saying, "Sometimes it is better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt."

One of the most difficult skills to learn in public speaking and in preaching is knowing when it's time to conclude. I've heard sermons and speeches — and I'm sure you have as well — where I've thought to myself, that speaker had five good stopping places and didn't use one of them, five exit ramps, but he remained on the road, and now he's running out of gas.

I've always admired the reporter in Presidential press conferences who has the task of saying when the questions have become redundant, "Thank you, Mr. President," to signal that the conference is finished. Every discussion group or committee meeting needs someone with the sensitivity and sense of timing to know when the meeting needs to end because it's already ended in most people's attention span.

Having a good sense of timing can be crucial in our human relationships and decisions. Some inventions have come along at just the right time, and others are ahead of their time. We sometimes say of people, "She was at the right place at the right time." Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in Mainz, Germany, came along at precisely the right time to print the "95 Theses" that Martin Luther had written on reforming the church. The printing press made it possible for them to be widely distributed and discussed, and they became a major contribution to the Reformation of the 16th century. The printing press also came along at just the right time so that Luther's translation of the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into the German language could be widely circulated.

Some inventions are ahead of their time. I read recently that an Italian priest, Giovanni Caselli, developed the first commercial fax system between Paris and Lyons in 1865. He called his mysterious invention the pantelegraph. But nobody got it. Nobody used it. Caselli's invention was too far ahead of its time. So the pantelegraph sat about unused for the next century while it waited for the world to catch up. The researchers at Xerox developed the computer mouse a full 15 years too soon. For a decade and a half, the "mouse" sat on a shelf waiting for a market. Finally, through the tech wizardry of Apple Computers, the mouse concept became a viable, integral part of standard computer desktop operations.

In our everyday lives, we can pay too much attention to time and timing or not enough attention. We can live too much by the clock or pay little or no attention to time at all. The concept of time is in itself mysterious. Einstein theorized that, like everything else in creation, time is relative. When someone asked him to explain, he is reported to have said, "When you are with the person you love, time passes quickly, but when you are with someone you dislike, time moves slowly."

Today we measure time with two different kinds of clocks or watches — digital and those with sweep hands that move around the face of a clock in a circle or "clockwise" from left to right with the hands pointing to numbers. The "sweep hand" clocks symbolize more accurately how

time is measured because they emulate the earth's rotation, which we count as 24 hours per rotation. I still prefer watches or clocks with hands that move in a circle and point to numbers.

The digital watch, on the other hand, divides up time into bits, bytes, or segments, and when you look at a digital watch, you do not see the movement of time in the same way. You do not see time as related to space, but are only able to see what hour or minute of the day it is. It's similar to looking at only one day of a calendar at a time and not seeing it in relation to the month or the year.

Some observers of the human scene have used these two kinds of clocks as metaphors for two different types of personalities. They say, for example, that a digital person is one who is very much concerned with accuracy. What time is it? The digital watch will tell you exactly. "Sweeper" people, on the other hand, tend to consider things in a broader context and are more interested in the overall picture and the relationships rather than the exact details. There's certainly a need for both types of watches and both types of people.

As I said earlier, having a proper sense of timing is important. We need to learn when to pay attention to time and when not to take it too seriously. In some things, knowing the exact time is very important, and in other matters, it is not.

Recently, I read a new book titled Longitude. It's the story of the individual who invented the modern mechanical clock to solve the thorniest scientific dilemma of the day and for centuries before that. Lacking the ability to measure their longitude, sailors throughout the great ages of exploration had been literally lost at sea as soon as they lost sight of land. Thousands of lives had been lost.

Although the pendulum clock had been invented, it did not keep accurate time aboard ships because of the ship's motion. Other mechanical clocks, because of their need for grease and oil to keep them running, kept inaccurate time depending on the temperature.

John Harrison, an Englishman and clockmaker, dared to imagine a mechanical solution — a clock that would keep precise time at sea, something no clock had ever been able to do on land. He was successful. Between 1730 and 1760, Harrison built four revolutionary timekeepers that are the foundation of all mechanical clocks since that time.

It's a fascinating story that I'll go into in more detail in a future sermon. I mention it now only to illustrate that in some of our everyday matters, being able to keep accurate time is very important, as well as having a sense of timing.

Jesus had an unshakable trust in God's timing, and because of this, a remarkable sense of timing in his own life and in his relationships with others. He knew when to reveal certain things and when not to. His disciples did not always understand this and were sometimes very impatient. Jesus said to them at one point in his ministry, "I have yet many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear to hear them now." In other words, "There are some things I still need to tell you, but you are not ready to hear them now because you would not understand what I'm saying. It's not the right time."

Jesus knew when to step forward and lead a crowd, and he knew when it was time to withdraw and slip away unnoticed. He knew there were times to fast and times to feast. He knew there were times when he had to protect and conserve his energies and times when he had to expend even his reserves on the crowds of needy followers surrounding him.

Because of his trust in God's timing, he didn't worry about many of the things others worried about. When people wanted to know about God's timetables and would ask, "When is this going to happen or that going to take place?" He said, "But about that day and hour, no one knows, neither the angels of heaven nor the Son, but only the Father." In other words, trust God, and implied in that trust is being ready for some surprises, for God's ways are not always predictable.

How then can we better develop our own sense of timing, especially as we enter this Christmas season?

The first lesson we can learn from Jesus is to have overall trust in God's timing and the surprises that come and go with that trust. Jesus said on that subject, "Keep awake, be alert. Otherwise, you might miss God in some very common, everyday happenings. Be prepared for the unexpected."

But some people don't like surprises. They want everything to be nailed down, totally predictable.

I once knew a family where the menu for the evening meal was the same one every week. On Monday evening it was meatloaf with peas; on Tuesday, ham and string beans; Wednesday, fish and chips; Thursday, hamburgers and boiled potatoes; Friday, pork chops, and on it went. This family didn't want any surprises.

In their religious life, there are people who don't want or expect any surprises. Such individuals are sure they already know who is going to be with God in the next life and who is not. They know for sure who the bad people are and who the good are. They know those who are doing God's will and those who are not. They know whose prayers God hears and whose prayers God does not hear. Such people would've missed the first Christmas because, like the religious know-it-alls of the first century, they were sure God would not become a human being in a baby in a manger.

Be prepared for surprises in God's timing and in God's revelations. Every Advent and Christmas, the time is ripe for meeting God in a fresh way. Keep awake, be alert for God's presence among us!

Certainly, we all want things in life we can count on, but at the same time, hopefully, we also want and aren't afraid of God's surprises. What we can count on is that God's timing with all of its surprises, in the long run, will be for the best.

The second thing we can learn from the trust Jesus had in God's timing is that when we trust in God's timing, it will help us with our own sense of timing. That's because those who trust in God's timing are those who live from the inside out. They are the people who act from an inner sense of trust in God — therefore, they are not all the time reacting.

They do not let other people decide how they are going to act. They are not easily influenced by every popular fad that comes along. Or as Jesus said, "They are not blown about by every wind of doctrine."

Furthermore, when we trust in God's timing, we do not panic and are not always in a hurry because we know that some of the best things in life take time. We know there's more to life

than instant gratification. It takes time, patience, and commitment to build lasting, loving relationships. It takes time, patience, and commitment for a deep Christian faith to develop, grow, and mature. A person may be born again in an instant, but no one can mature in faith in an instant.

It is my hope for each one of us that during this holy season, we will renew our sense of trust in God's timing, for it is the foundation of our own good sense of timing. At the same time, remember there is always a mysteriousness about God's timing. We cannot hope to always fully understand God's timing. It's a cinch that no human being is likely to get a printed time sheet. That's why, above all, Jesus urged the disciples and us not to worry about God's sense of timing, but to be concerned about our own state of readiness. "Keep watch. Stay awake. Do not worry, stew, or fret about what you cannot control." Amen.