Sunday, December 2, 2001
GOD'S TIME AND OUR TIME
Matthew 24:36-44

There are people I know who have an unusually good sense of timing. They know when to buy and when to sell, when to move forward and when to wait. They know when to sleep and when to be awake, when to work and when to rest, when to remain silent, and when to speak — and when to end a speech.

One of the most difficult skills to acquire in conversation, public speaking, and preaching is a sense of timing, especially knowing when it's time to conclude. I've heard sermons and speeches, as you have, when I've thought to myself, that speaker had five good stopping places and didn't take one of them, five exit ramps but he remained on the road. When I thought he was slowing down to take an exit, instead, he speeded up and kept going. The key to good public speaking or preaching is to have the speaker and the audience finish at the same time.

Having a good sense of timing can be crucial in making the right decisions and in our human relationships. Some inventions have come along at just the right time, and others are before their time. We sometimes say of people, "She was at the right place at the right time." There is some luck involved in our timing. Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in Mainz, Germany, came along at the right time for Martin Luther and the Reformation of the 16th century. The printing press was able to print and distribute Luther's "95 Theses," which made up his platform for reforming the church. The printing press also came along at 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 before 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 wanted it. No one had use for it. It was too far ahead of its time. So the pantelegraph remained unused for the next century while it waited for the world to catch up.

Researchers at Xerox developed the computer "mouse" a full 15 years too soon. For a decade and a half, the "mouse" remained on a shelf waiting for a market. Eventually, through the techno-wizardry of Apple Computers, the mouse concept became a very useful and integral part of standard computer desktop operations.

You've probably noticed that in your everyday life, you can pay too much attention to time and timing or not enough attention. You can worry too much about time and its use, or maybe you don't worry about what time it is at all and therefore miss some very important opportunities.

Jesus was well aware of these human tendencies. Speculation about the "end of time" was a very powerful factor in the early church. Those who became followers of Jesus were thankful for his magnetic power and insightful teachings. But they hoped for more than that. They longed for a time when the Roman occupation of their country would be over and when they could be assured of God's complete victory over evil — a time of total peace and harmony in all of God's creation.

This hope had its origin in the Hebrew scriptures. Prophets like Isaiah looked forward to a time when “nations would beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; when nation would not lift up sword against nation.” Isaiah had a further vision of a creation living in complete harmony: “The wolf shall live with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.”

Following the death and resurrection of Jesus, and especially as Christians began to be persecuted and as they struggled to be faithful in difficult circumstances, they were tempted to be pulled into one or another of two extremes. One extreme was to focus too much on the fact that more than a generation had passed since Jesus’ death and resurrection, and Jesus had not returned to rule all of creation in peace and harmony, as some thought he had promised. This delay caused many to doubt that it would ever take place, and so they returned to old patterns of behavior.

The second extreme was to continually speculate and try to predict exactly when his second coming would take place. These followers were almost totally consumed with trying to discern signs of its happening so that they neglected everything else. This has been too much a preoccupation with some Christians through the centuries and even today.

The writer of the gospel of Matthew, in the passage read earlier, responds to both of these extremes by reminding his readers of the teaching of Jesus in such matters. In summary, the message that Matthew wants us to hear is that God’s power, as experienced in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, has not abandoned us. That holy presence is constantly, even today, entering our world and our personal lives in unexpected and surprising ways.

Therefore, it is impossible and even a waste of time to try and pinpoint the day and the hour that it is taking place or will take place. In fact, many times it is only in looking back that we can know when God has entered your life or mine in a fresh way. It’s also helpful to remember that when Jesus was asked, “When will the end of time be?” he replied, “I have no idea.” He was saying that it is not an important question.

Hopefully, we will have what Jesus had — an unshakable trust in God’s timing, and with it the knowledge that God’s timing does not always match our timing and doesn’t need to do so.

Now, let’s attempt to apply these words of Jesus about God’s time and our time to our everyday life here and now, and especially as we enter this holy season of Advent and Christmas.

The first lesson we can learn from Jesus about God’s time and our time is to have an overall trust in God’s timing even when it does not match our own timing. This means there will be 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.”

But some people do not especially like surprises. They want everything nailed down and totally predictable. I once knew a family where the menu for the evening meal was the same one every week. On Monday, it was meatloaf with peas and potatoes; on Tuesday, ham and string beans; Wednesday, hamburger and boiled potatoes; Thursday, pork chops and corn; Friday, fish and chips. This family didn’t want any surprises.

In their religious life, there are people who don't want 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 people are. They know who is doing God's will and who is 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 enter the world by becoming a human being, a baby in a manger.

According to Jesus, God is always coming into the world and entering our lives. Therefore, get ready; live like it; be open to the unexpected. These words are not so much a prediction that history will have an unexpected and triumphant end. They are instead a warning to us not to get lost in life's trivialities and miss its beautiful unfolding. We are neither to get too caught up in the mundane of eating and drinking and shopping, nor in the hyper-spiritual emphasis of dropping all things having to do with living and cloistering ourselves against the day-by-day realities of life, heading for the hills and awaiting the coming of the Lord.

Neither of these extremes is acceptable. Rather, we are called to throw ourselves more deeply into life on God's behalf, so that in the midst of eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, we can bear witness to the power of God in the world's brokenness.

John Wesley was once asked what he would do if he were to learn that the Lord would return before morning. His response: "I would work on my sermon, have dinner, preach the evening service, say my prayers and go to bed, confident that at his coming, I would be doing what God had called me to do."

The promise of God is not that this world will come to an end, but that creation is on a path that leads to the fulfillment of God's purpose for the good. So during this holy season especially, stay awake to the fact that there is more to life than eating, drinking, and shopping. Stay awake to the fact that there is more to life than making money. Take time to enjoy the simple pleasures in life; spend time with friends and family; be of assistance to those you can help.

The second lesson we can learn from Jesus about God's time and our time is to not panic and always be in a hurry. Some of the best things in life take time. 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 faith and trust in God to grow, develop, and mature. A person might be "born again" in an instant, but no one can mature in his or her faith in an instant.

It's also true that some of the best things in life are "timeless." Love is real because it is timeless. It exists in the warm, intimate spaces of our life. Love is born in an embrace, in a narrowing of distance to the point where self and others lose their meaning. Here, time stands still.

Christmas, although we experience it in time, is also timeless. Christmas will come whether you get ready for it or not. You need to hear that again. Christmas will come whether you get ready for it or not. God is going to continue to enter creation and your life whether you get ready for it or not. How many times have I heard people say, "It can't be Advent already — I haven't even made out my shopping list!" Others say, "Christmas can't come yet. I haven't even brought up my decorations from the basement." Why do some people assume that Christmas can only come if they make all the proper preparations?

The truth is that God's entrance into the world and into our lives occurs at God's initiative and not ours. All we can do is be open to its entrance.

It is my hope for each one of you that during this holy season you will renew your sense of trust in God's timing, for it is the foundation of your own good sense of timing. It's a cinch that no human being is likely to get a printed time sheet from God. That's why, above all, Jesus urged his followers not to worry about God's timing, but to be concerned only about our own state of readiness.

Keep watch. Stay awake. Do not worry, stew, or fret about what you cannot control. Amen.