“Midway Points and Presentations”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Simeon had a job to do, and he had been waiting for it his whole life. He had kept watch, and as for so many others in the stories of Jesus’ birth we shared just weeks ago, Jesus’ identity and purpose is revealed to Simeon, and his job is done. The Spirit moved him to go to the temple, and there he finds the one who will redeem God’s people. Somehow, in the midst of a dangerous, unsettling time of his country’s occupation, Simeon is moved to sing God’s praises even as he prophesizes the difficulties Jesus, his followers, and family will face. Both these things can be true at the same time, can’t they? Exultation, glee, and fear? Wisdom and worry? There is something fulfilling about the way we focus on our worship life while also experiencing life in the secular world . . . something that these lessons can help us to recall on a day we celebrate the sacrament of Communion.

I remember what may have been among what felt like the most radical ideas I learned for the first time in seminary.  Prior to taking a course on the Christian liturgical year, I had not consciously thought of the passage of time through any lens but the western calendar, a passing of seconds, minutes, hours, and then elements of that fixed 365 days broken into weeks, months and years.  Decades passed as measurements of life's passing, in individual or family mortal spans and in wider historical eras.  Among those measurements was the designation of Sunday, a day of Sabbath rest—and pancakes at our house after worship.  Enter the Christian liturgical year.  Learning the distinction between two conceptions of time, between two words, Chronos (from which we get words like chronology) and Kairos; that Christian liturgical year made those two words significant. Existing somehow in our secular, human sense of time, God’s time becomes apparent; in a sense of our existence that is limited by our human understanding, God enters in at just the right time to turn us toward God’s kin-dom. And this happens *at the same time* that we live through all the challenges of our human, earthly life.

Unlike the mysteries of fictional novels or mini-series on TV, what we learn about in these passages of scripture is not an alternative reality, not some kind of parallel life, but a contemporaneous reality. Maybe this is a new word for you . . . It is happening at exactly the same time. The gift of reading scripture and of practicing and nurturing our faith in the context of our religion helps us to turn toward a deeper spiritual truth. Kairos, Chronos, something like parallel or contemporaneous are words, sure, but these are connected to a deeper spiritual truth. All time is God’s time, but we often fail to recognize this when we are caught up in our minutes, days and months. So, today is Sunday, February 2nd, 2025, also known as Groundhog Day, when we wonder how long winter will last. Today is a day on which we know that the war in Ukraine has lasted for almost two years; the war in Gaza, which began in Israel on the 7th of October, 2023 has lasted 1 year, 3 months, 3 weeks and 5 days**.** Todayis also a day on which we remember the presentation of the Lord at the temple of Jerusalem and we remember the Sacrament of Communion, which is both a remembrance of Jesus’ sacrifice and a foretaste of heaven, which we know because of his death and resurrection. In the midst of our lives, in the wonder of *Kairos*, God’s time, these things are true together.

“When Joseph and Mary had done *everything required by the Law of the Lord*, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth.” In remembrance of their history as Jews and their keeping of the law, Mary and Joseph head to the temple eight days after Jesus’ birth. Their rites, including not only Jesus’ circumcision, but also dedication at the temple, with purification rites for Mary (who had just given birth) lift up their devotion to God as the primary determiner of their actions. That is what moves them, even as they also fulfill their civic duties of showing up for the census in Bethlehem, for example.

What are the rituals that we celebrate together that help us keep focused on what happens in God’s time while we also know, sometimes painfully, that what happens in our time feels at odds with God’s desires? This is where religion comes in, and why I was delighted to study the liturgical year and even to bring into my own practice some rituals that Protestant Christians have sometimes set aside in their desire for simplicity or to distinguish themselves from other sects. One ancient holiday, which began in the late 4th century, is what has long been known as Candlemas.

Jared R. Stahler, a pastor of St. Peter’s Evangelical Lutheran Church in NYC, helps make clear the significance of Jesus’ presentation at the temple to the whole of the Christian sense of time: “Candlemas is the hinge point in the liturgical year from the manger to the cross. The gold, frankincense, and myrrh brought by the magi become gold for a king, frankincense for a priest (which we heard about in Hebrews), and myrrh for burial. Accordingly, the task of liturgy is to delve into the mystery of the incarnation: to give depth to Christmas and a greater sense of the profound to Holy Week and Easter” (<https://www.lutheranforum.com/blog/reintroducing-candlemas>).

So, this morning—and I hope I haven’t dizzied you with *contemporaneous* and *Kairos*—things that happen at the same time, in a little different sense than simultaneously, although that’s a synonym—*kairos is God’s time.* Things will happen *at the right* time, thanks be to God, but a lot of our frustrations, a lot of our worries, a lot of our anger and our sorrow are caught up in our being tied to human time. What if, instead of locking ourselves into a march through time that leans heavily on Chronos, we focused instead on how our lives are steered by the movement of the Spirit at different times and in different places? Maybe then, we wouldn’t get tied up so much in worry about what will happen and when, as we wait and look for God’s presence, as our forebears Simeon and Anna did. Maybe then, we wouldn’t feel as though things happen like Shakespeare believes, naming time’s movement as a “petty pace,” which makes us see life as insignificant and somehow without worth. Maybe up to 84 years of God’s time would feel like a gift in which our chief task, like Anna’s, is to know how we may be of service. Jesus has fulfilled the *law*, but there are still elements of *religion* that bring us closer to God. We celebrate Communion this morning, that moment in which we know the outward sign of an invisible grace, pointing toward our unity with God forever, thanks to Jesus. As another of our forebears, the Congregationalist Jonathan Edwards reminds us, we do three things in celebrating Communion: We remember, as a commemoration of Christ’s death; we hope, in an expectation of the heavenly feast, and we partake of a symbol of our present unity with Christ and with one another. Past and future are mingled; redemption reconciles sin; hunger is met with spiritual food. God is with us, now and always. Amen.