

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
December 24, 2024

## **Christmas Time**

Luke 2:1-20

"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree ... (v. 1)." Many of you could take that opening and go on from there, perhaps even reciting more of the text word for word. But let's not be in a hurry to leave that opening behind. It tells us a lot about how God works, and where we can expect to meet him and experience him.

For one thing, it tells us that we don't have to step outside of time and space and history in order to know God. On the contrary, God himself enters time and space and history in order to reveal himself and to act for our salvation. "In those days" is the way Luke puts it. Days. Weeks. Months. Years. This isn't strange territory to us. This is the world that we inhabit. A world of clocks and dates and deadlines. True, people in the ancient world, the world of the Scriptures, didn't necessarily measure and calculate time in exactly the same ways that we do. But they too knew what it was like to live by the calendar.

This time of the year, our own lives have been driven even more intensely by the calendar. The journey toward Christmas is steered by questions, many of which begin with the word "when." *When* is our office holiday party? *When* is the children's program at the church? *When* does that coupon for Hobby Lobby expire? *When* are our relatives supposed to arrive in town? *When* do you want me to meet you at the mall? When, when, when. That's the refrain of the Christmas season.

As Luke narrates the birth of our Savior, when is important. "In those days." Compare this, for instance, to the way John opens his gospel, by tracing the existence of Jesus all the way back into eternity. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning" (vv. 1-2). In these words, we can hear echoes of the creation story. "In the beginning ...." And yet, John transports us back behind the beginning, before the existence of time or space. Even then, this Word existed with God. So "when" certainly matters to John too, but it sounds like a different kind of when.

For Luke, when is about who was in power and what was happening in the world. Augustus was ruling the Roman Empire. Quirinus was governing Syria. A census was underway. The state was collecting its revenue. Luke doesn't open his birth narrative with the miraculous and the spectacular, with signs and wonders in the heavens. That will come soon enough, when an angel shows up to evangelize the shepherds. But for now, Luke reminds us that Jesus showed up in a world where government, taxes, daily work, small towns, and the birth of babies were the stuff of ordinary life. When God wanted to move into action to redeem the world, he didn't view time and space and history as off-limits. No, they were exactly where he arrived in order to accomplish his will.

Through Jesus, the eternal God, who exists without the limits of time and space, comes into this temporal realm we inhabit, to deliver us from sin and death. This doesn't mean we're completely rescued from time and suddenly transported into a zone beyond history. But it does mean that in the birth of this child, heaven and earth meet, and the life of God's reign comes upon us here in this present world. I like the way one preacher has put it: "At the heart of the Christian gospel are two truths: that God, in Jesus, shares our life, and changes

it. In taking human flesh, the eternal Word—the second person of the Trinity—is born as a human being and enters the realm of time and space, with all the limitations that this entails. In doing this, God enters time, inhabits it and sanctifies it—and marks it out as holy.”<sup>1</sup>

Because of what God has done through Christ, time has a holiness about it. This is more than just the sense of excitement and anticipation that accompanies this season of the year. True, this is a sacred season. But its holiness isn’t something that we generate by our jam-packed calendars, our bright decorations, or our elevated spending. The holiness of Christmas comes from the way that eternity has entered history. God, in Christ, has descended to us to inhabit time.

In one of his sermons, St. Augustine says of God:

He so loved us that, for our sake,  
He was made man in time,  
although through him all times were made.  
He was made man, who made man.  
He was created of a mother whom he created.  
He was carried by hands that he formed.  
He cried in the manger in wordless infancy, he the Word,  
without whom all human eloquence is mute.<sup>2</sup>

“He was made man in time, although through him all times were made.” Part of what this means is that God knows our life in this present world from the inside and not just from the outside. The way that God took on human flesh in Jesus shows how he is with us, not in some abstract, theoretical sense, but in the very concrete sense of dwelling in the realm of time and space and history. That’s where we dwell. That’s part of what makes us the kind of beings who are dependent on our maker. As James K. A. Smith has summarized it, “We are mortal, not just because we die but because we are the sorts of creatures whose very being is lived in time.”<sup>3</sup>

In the Greek of the New Testament, there are two ways of talking about time. One is *chronos*. This is the kind of time we experience in one linear moment after the next. We measure it in seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years. *Chronos* is the type of time that we could all hear if we got real quiet and listened to the ticking of the clock at the back of the sanctuary. *Chronos* is right there before my eyes every time I stand here to preach. But the other word is *kairos*. *Kairos* is time in a more qualitative sense. It’s the kind of time associated with eternity, time marked by the presence and action of God. This is the kind of time Paul has in mind when he writes to the Galatians, “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children” (4:4-5, NRSV). *Chronos* is primarily about the sequence of time. *Kairos* is primarily about the right time.

When we gather here for worship, including on this night, there’s some *chronos* and some *kairos*. The clock at the back of the sanctuary is still ticking. Notifications are still coming in on your phones. Some of you still have deadlines to meet tonight. In a few hours it will officially be December 25. But at the same time, we’re here together now in the presence of our eternal God. There is a timelessness about this service. Christ has come. God is with us. The kingdom is already here among us. Though we don’t have it and experience it fully and completely—we await Christ’s coming again—we do already experience a foretaste of it. We believe that the incarnation of God in our midst has changed everything, even while we recognize that so much of the lostness and brokenness in our lives and in the world haven’t changed. But we still live faithfully and expectantly toward that day when

God has promised to make all things new. As one person has summarized it, "We live in the yet, but not yet!"<sup>4</sup>

Part of what this means for us is that we always live and worship in the presence of God, who has come to us in Christ. In that sense, it's always Christmas. One person tells about how they were waiting in a clinic for a doctor's appointment when an older couple arrived. With an infectious enthusiasm, the gentleman greeted the room full of people with "Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!" Most of the patients ignored his outburst. But this particular person decided to return the greeting, "Merry Christmas to you, too!"

Sensing a sympathetic ear, the wife of the well-wisher explained quietly: "It started this past year. For no reason, my husband would begin to get into the Christmas spirit. At first we dismissed it, but then we realized how much joy it brought him. So we started decorating the house, singing carols, having a spur-of-the-moment celebration. You know, after doing this a number of times, we look forward to it. Christmas can come any time, any place. It's always a pleasant surprise."<sup>5</sup>

We followers of Jesus always live in Christmas time, time sanctified by the coming of God. We inhabit time in the knowledge that God is with us in redeeming love and saving power. His reign is upon us, among us, and in us. And this makes all the difference. It determines what we do with the time we inhabit, and how we occupy our space in history. For if, as we believe, history is a vessel in which and through which God works out his eternal purposes, then you and I need to regularly reflect upon the moment in which we live. We need to do what James Smith calls "spiritual timekeeping." That is, you and I need to not only ask ourselves, "Where am I?" You and I need to think about and act upon the question, "When am I?"<sup>6</sup> That means more than just looking at the calendar to see what day it is or checking the clock to see what time it is. It means reflecting on the season of life where you're currently located. What time is it in my life? What season am I in? What's my current location within the bigger picture of events, locally and in the larger world?

During a dark and depressing time in the nineteenth century, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote to a friend, "Everyone is criticizing and belittling the times. Yet I think that our times, like all times, are very good times, if only we know what to do with them."<sup>7</sup> Living faithfully is about knowing what to do with the times in which you live. It's about being aware of and engaging with the past. It's about anticipating the future. But it's especially about living in the present, in the midst of the events, circumstances, opportunities, and challenges of this day and time. Living faithfully is about discerning who God is calling you to be and what God is leading you to do in this moment of your life, within the larger scope of what he's doing in the world.

"In those days," says Luke. Notice how he starts with a setting as wide as the whole empire, and quickly narrows it to a small village where a young expectant couple arrives. And "while they were there, the time came for the baby to be born" (v. 6). There's some *chronos* in that, and a whole lot of *kairos*. Time invaded by eternity. And in light of that event, you and I have to decide what we're going to do with our time. Let's be guided by the words of this prayer, as we close:

O Lord God of time and eternity,  
 who makes us creatures of time,  
 that when time is over, we may attain your blessed eternity:  
 with time, your gift, give us also wisdom to redeem the time,  
 so our day of grace is not lost, for our Lord Jesus' sake.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Time and Eternity." A sermon at Christ Church, Oxford. <https://www.chch.ox.ac.uk/cathedral/worship-music/sermons/sermon-time-and-eternity> (December 17, 2024).

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<sup>2</sup> St. Augustine, Sermon 188.

<sup>3</sup> James K. A. Smith, *How to Inhabit Time: Understanding the Past, Facing the Future, Living Faithfully Now* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2022) 8.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Amy McLaughlin-Sheasby, "Preaching Advent in the Yet, but Not Yet." Preaching Today. <https://www.preachingtoday.com/holidays-events/holidays/christmas/preaching-advent-in-yet-but-not-yet.html> (December 18, 2024).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2000/december/12756.html> (December 18, 2024).

<sup>6</sup> Smith, *How to Inhabit Time*, 3, 16-17.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in a sermon by John N. Gladstone, "The Only Time You Have Is Now." In *The Folly of Preaching: Models and Methods*, ed. Michael P. Knowles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 174.

<sup>8</sup> "Time and Eternity."