

It's about Time

Isaiah 40:1-11

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This is a season in which we are acutely aware of time.

Most of us mark time more intentionally in this season. We may mark the days by opening the little windows of an Advent calendar or mark the weeks by lighting the candles of an Advent wreath. And if we were ever to lose track of where we are in the month, there are the commercials that relentlessly remind us how many shopping days there are until Christmas.

We have different perceptions of the pace of time in this season. When we are young, December seems to stretch beyond all reason, almost to the dimensions of eternity. When we are young, Advent is a marathon. When we are older, it becomes a sprint. So much to do. So little time.

And our sense of the nature of time is shaped by this season. The repeated patterns and rituals associated with Advent and Christmas can make time seem cyclical. We do the same things year after year. This is what we always eat on Christmas Eve. These are the dishes we always use. This is the grace we always say. This is the story we always tell. This is the song we always sing. Each year Mom always gets everyone a new pair of pajamas. We always laugh when Dad starts cursing as he tries to put up the Christmas tree lights. Gramme always has a glass of tawny port when she gets home from Christmas Eve services. Every year the same things are said or sung, heard or done.

In our family, decorating the tree is a yearly ritual that is so firmly ingrained that it has its own liturgy. There are certain things we always do and certain things we always say.

First, with help, I put the Christmas tree in the stand and, as I am doing so, I always complain about the stand. Then my wife, Karen, puts on the lights because she is the only one with enough patience for that task. As she finishes up that job, our children, Alanna and Todd, and I begin to unwrap the ornaments. Many of the ornaments have stories that go along with them, stories we tell every year.

I pull out the ornament I made in kindergarten. It is a Styrofoam ball with toothpicks stuck into it that is spray-painted light blue, topped off with silver glitter. Most of the toothpicks have fallen out by now and much of the glitter is gone, too, but I will invariably comment on the beauty of this ornament. This is also one of the ornaments that has a name. We call it "Sputnik" because it looks something like that first Russian spacecraft which was launched about the time I made this ornament. My children love Sputnik and always insist we put it in the front of the tree where everyone can see it.

Not so with the ornament we have dubbed "Starface." In this ornament the points of the star are made of white fabric, and there is a rosy-cheeked ceramic face in the center. It looks like one of the points of the star is a pointy cap for this cherub. I love Starface. My children, on the other hand, profess a deep hatred of it. Alanna tells me that it used to give her nightmares. Todd's comment is always, "It's just disturbing,

Dad.” Every year he says that.

Another ornament is named “Pinecone Minister” because, well, the face is made of a pinecone, and he is dressed like a minister. We all love Pinecone Minister. He has wire-rimmed glasses and a wise, gentle look. You trust him. You would be willing to listen to his sermons even if they were dull because he is such an endearing person. I am sure that you, never having met Pinecone Minister, may find this hard to picture. But, believe me, were you to meet him you would love him also. The very fact that I use the verb “meet” to describe a Christmas ornament tells you a great deal about how we regard him in our family. Every year we affirm our love for him.

There are ornaments that come complete with stories about the people who gave them to us or the year that one of us made them or how someone who is now gone once loved them or how much we love it and why. And if I forget a part of liturgy, the story behind some ornament, someone in the family will ask, “Don’t you remember?” and then fill in the story. In this way the liturgy is carefully, lovingly preserved. Every year we hang the same ornaments and tell the same stories, as if time itself were cyclical.

A friend of mine likes to tell of a new family in her church whose child had only one year of experience in church school. So when it came time to rehearse the Christmas pageant his second year, the boy was aghast: “Do you mean to tell me that we’re going to do exactly the same story we did last year?” Yes, that’s what we do. Every year. Exactly the same. But not exactly.

Time is not entirely cyclical, is it? Many things may repeat, but something is always different. There’s a new person at the table. Or someone is missing. (Doesn’t it seem like someone is always missing at Christmas?) Or someone is not able to play the role she once did. Or the players may be the same, but the relationships have changed. Or time has simply taken its toll. For, as poet Dylan Thomas once observed, “Time, like a running grave, tracks you down.” Eventually we all get tracked down by time. So it’s never the same. Not exactly. I think that is the biggest reason why we are so drawn to nostalgia in this season. Because things change. As writer Ben Hecht once put it, “Time is a circus, always packing up and moving away.”

I am a fan of the television program *Mad Men*. It is set at an advertising agency on Madison Avenue, beginning in the late 1950s. The Creative Director in that agency is Don Draper, a brilliant, but troubled man who is keeping an enormous secret in his life. In the first season it is made clear that Don drinks too much. And his family life is a mess. After repeated infidelities, his marriage is on the verge of disintegrating. All the while, Don tries to focus on his work. One of his clients is the Kodac Company. They’ve come up with a new slide projector where the slides are not in a straight tray, but in a wheel. It is not a big innovation, so they look to Don to come up with an advertising campaign that will make people want a new slide projector with a wheel.

The clients come into the conference room: “So have you figured how to work the wheel into it?” they ask. Don starts in, “Well technology is a glittering lure. But, uh, there is the rare occasion when the public can be engaged on a level beyond flash, if they have a sentimental bond with the product. My first job I was in-house at a fur company with this old pro copywriter, Greek, named Teddy. Teddy told me that the most important idea in advertising is ‘new.’ It creates an itch. You just put your product in there like Calamine lotion. But he also talked about a deeper bond with

the product. Nostalgia—it's delicate, but potent."

Then Don turns on the slide projector, and as he continues his presentation, he clicks through slides of his family in happier times. In one slide his two children are playing happily in the back yard. In another his son has fallen asleep on his chest. In another Don is putting his ear up to his pregnant wife's belly. In another the two are kissing on New Year's Eve. All the while, he continues with his presentation.

"Teddy told me that in Greek, 'nostalgia' literally means 'the pain from an old wound.' It's a twinge in your heart far more powerful than memory alone." Then, referring to the slide projector, he says, "This device isn't a spaceship; it's a time machine. It goes backwards, and forwards.... It takes us to a place where we ache to go again. It's not called the wheel, it's called the *carousel*. It lets us travel the way a child travels—around and around and back home again, to a place where we know we are loved." And the scene ends with Don silently clicking through more slides of his family from a happier time.

I'll tell you, that's a very powerful scene, fueled by the power of nostalgia. It reminds me of the refrain of the Joni Mitchell song, *The Circle Game*:

And the seasons they go round and round,
And the painted ponies go up and down.
We're captive on the carousel of time.
We can't return we can only look behind
From where we came
And go round and round and round
In the circle game.

My father, who was a minister, always battled melancholy in this season, a melancholy that usually took the form of nostalgia. Although I normally adored spending time with my father, to be honest, at this time of year he was not all that much fun to be with. The bright lights of this season had limited power over the darkness of his moods. Ironically, perhaps, his writing and preaching during Advent and Christmas was always particularly brilliant, probably because he was able to speak to some of the deep longings that we can experience in this season.

Most often, the focus of my father's melancholic nostalgia was on a time when his three children were younger and when his father was still alive. But I wonder, even when we were younger, did Christmas ever feel complete? Was there ever a time when his heart was not traced with longing? You see, there is always someone missing at Christmas. Things are never like they used to be. Not completely. What we long for, I think, is not merely a Christmas from our past, or even some idealized version of it. Instead, I think what we long for is a gathering up of our past, present, and future into a harmony that is not achieved in the days of our lives. What we desire is not merely to be with those we love, but to be united with them in a way that is not possible even when they are present. What we yearn for is not something we have fully seen, not even something we can completely imagine, because what we yearn for is God.

My father was a person of great faith, but nostalgia was his temptation. In one way or another, it is for all of us. I call nostalgia a temptation because, although our scripture enjoins us to remember with gratitude, at every turn it also points us to the

future. When we read Isaiah's improbable picture of the Peaceable Kingdom that is yet to be, where the wolf lives harmoniously with the lamb, and the lion becomes a vegan, we can only conclude that the good old days, as good as they may have been, are nothing compared to what God has in store for us.

The culture at large tries to drench this season in nostalgia. There is no surprise in that. After all, as Don Draper well knew, nostalgia sells things. For us to lean toward the future in this season, with the help of the likes of Isaiah, is a truly counter cultural act. In short, Isaiah and the other prophets, and Jesus himself, declare that time is going somewhere. Time is not an endless circle, as the nature religions—so prevalent in their time—affirmed. The essence of time is not endless repetition of a cycle. We are not “captive on the carousel of time.” Rather, time is leading us somewhere.

And Isaiah wants to make sure we understand that we are not being led back in time to some ideal past that is now gone. Ultimately, nostalgia can be dangerous to the life of faith because time does not lean backward toward the good old days. Time leans forward to something we have yet to experience. There is a story told through time, and we haven't heard it all before, and we have yet to reach the full climax of that story, the climax that Isaiah's prophesy anticipates in the coming of the Messiah and the Peaceable Kingdom he brings. So God beckons us, not to the past, but to the future, God's future.

So where are you being tugged and where do you lean in this Advent season? Are you tugged by memories and lean toward the past? If you are, that's understandable. I think we all are in one way or another. Nostalgia is a temptation for all of us. After all, this is a season in which we are acutely aware of the passage of time. But how about this: Let's not stay there. With part of our beings, and with the help of the likes of Isaiah and Jesus himself, let's lean forward in anticipation of what we have not yet seen and can only begin to imagine. The good old days, as good as they were or as good as we may remember them to be, are nothing compared to what God has in store for us.