

Stopping Time

Welcome & Introduction:

Welcome to this “Longest Night” service. The name of this service comes from the winter solstice – tonight is actually the longest night of the year. But the name, “Longest Night,” also describes the feeling that a number of us experience during this season. In the long, dark winter nights, memories of past experiences and the pain of present absences can become overwhelming. For some, Christmas Day is the most difficult. For others, Christmas Eve, or New Year’s Eve, or the beginning of another lonely year. In this service, we invite you to listen. We invite you to pray. We invite you to sing. We invite you to meditate upon the pain and anguish you may bring – and we invite you to offer your pain to the Christ child. And we trust that you will find hope and comfort in knowing that you are not alone.

Message of Hope:

The text I’ve chosen for this evening is one many of you have heard before. It is not normally associated with the Christmas story, however. It comes from one of the books of wisdom in the Old Testament. Ecclesiastes 3:1-8:

There's a season for everything
and a time for every matter under the heavens:
a time for giving birth and a time for dying,
a time for planting and a time for uprooting what was planted,
a time for killing and a time for healing,
a time for tearing down and a time for building up,
a time for crying and a time for laughing,
a time for mourning and a time for dancing,
a time for throwing stones and a time for gathering stones,
a time for embracing and a time for avoiding embraces,
a time for searching and a time for losing,
a time for keeping and a time for throwing away,
a time for tearing and a time for repairing,
a time for keeping silent and a time for speaking,
a time for loving and a time for hating,
a time for war and a time for peace.

Eccl. 3:1-8 (C.E.B.)

In 1982, I went to sea. I was in the Navy at the time and was serving aboard a submarine.

In 1982, I went to sea and was gone four months. It is somewhat different aboard submarines today, but not much. We could not get any mail, no phone calls, and no Email while we were gone. We had no radio, no television; nor were there any newspapers. We simply left. And when we came home, we learned what we had missed. It was as if we had been in a time warp.

In the time I was out to sea, movies came to the theaters that I never saw. World events took place that I could only read about after the fact. Birthdays and anniversaries and holidays took place; but I wasn’t included in the celebrations.

The world went on without me. When I returned, it was sobering to realize that, but for a few close friends and family members, I was not missed. The world simply went on.

The summer my mother died I realized it was very much like that time at sea. I spent time in a different kind of time warp. I can't tell you what the news events were for several months. I was unaware of the movies that were released. I missed birthdays and anniversary celebrations because my mind was someplace else.

Meanwhile, the world went on.

I have a similar fog about what took place in our world between Christmas a year ago and this past summer. I spent too many of those days in the hospital with our daughter Melissa. And I still find it hard to completely wrap my mind around the fact that she is gone.

And you know exactly what I'm talking about because you've been there, too.

A couple of years ago, I learned of a tradition that spoke to me about that experience. It was while visiting with a family after the death of a loved one. They told me of a family tradition carried forward from generations ago. That tradition is captured here, where a clock has been veiled in black.

You see, in that family, there was a clock, a clock that had been brought over from Germany when the family first migrated to America several generations earlier. Whenever there was a death, the clock was veiled for a season of mourning.

I'm not sure where the tradition began or how widely it is or was celebrated, but I think it makes a great visual expression of what happens when grief visits our lives. It is as if the clock stops. The world may be going on outside, but in our lives, nothing else matters.

The tradition is probably related to W.H. Auden's poem, "Stop all the Clocks."¹

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

¹ Written between 1936 and 1938 when it was first published.

We all know exactly what that feels like because we have been there. We have all spent time in that darkness, the darkness and loneliness of grief, the time when the clock stops.

The scripture I read tells us there is a time for everything (Eccl. 3:1). There is a time for daylight and a time for darkness. There is a time to mourn and weep as well as a time to laugh and dance (Eccl. 3:4). In our time of mourning, we cover the clock as a reminder that the world continues to go on without us.

But I'm not sure when to remove the veil. At some point, we find a way to re-enter society; but there is still a fog. The tears stop coming regularly; but they still appear on occasion. The clock starts ticking again; but we are often startled when it chimes because we forgot that the world continues to turn.

I also know there are other times when the world seems to be oblivious to what is happening in our lives. It's not just grief or our going out to sea that creates a time warp. It also happens in happy times, like weddings and graduations and the birth of a child. Everything else takes a back seat in our minds as our focus changes. I guess I knew that; but it became clear to me when I was re-reading the Christmas story this year. Let's listen in and imagine what it was like for Mary:

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David's house. The virgin's name was Mary. When the angel came to her, he said, "Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!" She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you."

Lk. 1:26-30 (C.E.B.)

God interrupts Mary's life. God sends an angel who changes everything for her. Though still unwed, she will become a mother. And, according to Luke's telling of the story, Mary wonders what that might mean (Lk. 1:29). She will find herself pondering events again when the shepherds arrive after the birth of Jesus, and yet again when the young Jesus is found in the temple (Lk. 2:19, 51).

I'm not sure what her ponderings look like. I'm not sure what words she speaks to herself as she contemplates the disruption this child is going to make in her life. It says here that she is confused; another translation says she is perplexed. But I'm not sure what is so perplexing to her.

In the past I thought her ponderings are about the joy and wonder that Jesus will bring to our world, maybe the sense of awe and humility that come from knowing she is the one chosen for this. At other times, I've thought she is questioning the very greeting the angel uses because she isn't so sure God is with her or honoring her by putting this burden in her life.

When I read it from the perspective of my own grief, however, I begin to imagine it to be very much like having the clock stop, even as the world continues to go on. And the details about what she thinks become less important to me than realizing she stops – she stops to reflect, she stops to ponder, she stops to pray.

Over twenty years ago, I was leading a Bible Study at the church where I was serving. On one day, only three women were there as we read about Mary. That day I became the student as one by one, each told me how important Mary had been to them, how much support they heard in her story. None of them were Catholic, but each identified with Mary because all three of them had buried a son. One died when he was only 12 as the result of a brain aneurism, one was 23 when he died in a car accident, and the other died after a long bout with cancer at the age of 58.

I had only known of one of those deaths before that day. We pondered the events together, looking for clues from Mary about how to live in the face of death. They found comfort in her faithful presence throughout

the story of Jesus, from his birth to his death. They found comfort in knowing she was there when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost (Acts 1:14).

I also found comfort that day. My comfort didn't come from Mary's story, however; it came from these three women, from knowing it was possible to continue living after death, after grief has paid an unexpected visit.

"Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!" (Lk. 1:28). That's what the angel says to Mary. "God is honoring you" (Lk. 1:30). She is perplexed and wonders what that might mean (Lk. 1:29).

That angel still speaks today.

I believe the angel is whispering the very same words Mary heard, speaking into each of our ears tonight. "God is honoring you" (Lk. 1:30). We have been blessed to have known love, to have experienced days of joy and laughter, to have cherished memories. And, the angel says, you are not alone. God is with you.

Like Mary we need to take time to ponder what that means; so, tonight we have offered this time and this space to allow you to reflect and to pray.

The great promise of Christmas is the name Jesus is given: Emmanuel. It's a name that means "God is with us" (Mt. 1:23). And it changes the meaning of time.

Some of us need to keep the veil on the clock a little longer. And that's OK. Some of us are ready to take it off and wind the clock. And that's OK, too. All of us find ourselves in this season filled with activities and events that bring joy and laughter to those around us; and each of us will find ourselves wiping tears from our eyes as we realize who is not present for those celebrations.

My word of hope for you today is a word of encouragement, an invitation to also look at who *is* with us. We are not alone. We have each other. And we know God is with us. This time of darkness is not a lifetime of darkness. It is only a season.

And for that, we can give thanks to God.

Amen.

*Ritual of Remembering:*²

On this night we light candles to remember those whom we have loved and lost.
We remember their faces and their voices.

We remember their names and offer them now in the silent spaces of our hearts.

(Pause)

For these precious lives and the memories we carry we give you thanks, O God.

On this night we light candles to remember the loss of relationship,
the loss of jobs, the loss of health.

We come to gather up the pain from our past and offer it to God,

² Brenneman, # 308.

asking that from God's hands we might receive the gift of peace.

(Pause)

Refresh, restore, and reconcile us, O God; lead us into your future.

On this night we light candles to remember the light bearers
who have stood with us in the disbelief, the anger, the tears, the silences.

We remember their faces, their voices, their touch.

We remember their names, and offer them now in the silence of our hearts.

(Pause)

May your eternal love surround and sustain these Christ-like companions on the way.

O God, as we now bring these candles to flame,
remind us of your light that shines into all the dark places of our lives and the world.

Amen.

*Benediction*³

May the blessing of light be upon you,
Light without and light within,
May the presence of God enfold and comfort you,
as you watch and wait
for the coming of the Dawn. Amen.

Randy L Quinn
Hope Mennonite Church

Selected Bibliography

Brenneman, Diane Zaerr, editor. *Words for Worship 2*. Scottdale: Herald Press, 2009.

Quinn, Randy L. "Time in the Darkness." Sermon preached December 21, 2014 at First UMC in Hiawatha; updated and preached again December 21, 2016 at West Heights UMC in Wichita; based on Ecclesiastes 3:1-8.⁴

_____. "Timeless Treasures." Sermon preached December 2, 2012 at Chapel Oaks Funeral Home in Hiawatha; based on Ecclesiastes 3:1-8.

_____. "Treasures Old and New." Sermon preached December 22, 2006 at McLouth; based on Luke 2:8-20.

³ Brenneman, # 308

⁴ Most of this evening's sermon came from these sermons.