

Lost in time

Last Sunday after Pentecost

November 20, 2022

The Rev. Katherine Bush

Do you ever get lost? I don't mean geographically. Do you ever get lost in time? Sometimes I have trouble knowing what time it is. Daylight savings shifts are a big part of that. (I could almost be a single-issue voter on the question of abolishing the semi-annual clock reset.) And it's always been true that part of living in the South is not knowing what time of year it is; rare is the snowy, white Christmas - more common is the 70-degree Christmas. Of course, that's only getting more true in our days of climate crisis with the erratic weather patterns that swing us from 80-something to 20-something in 36 hours - what season even is it? And my children are flummoxed that sometimes it takes me a minute to recall how old I am. Time is just a little slippery. I can get turned around, feeling lost easily. So, I count on the church to color code the seasons and stay on track as we move around the calendar. We know if anyone will refuse to change or arbitrarily reset something, it's church, right?

And even if it's hard to remember that the church's new year doesn't line up with the secular celebration: it is reliably there - the end and the beginning of something. It's grounding for us to remember that we are always moving through these moments of beginnings and endings. And the reliability of certain moments helps us find mile markers in lives where sometimes it is very hard to see if we're at the starting blocks or the finish line in our day-to-day experiences. Today is the Last Sunday of Pentecost, the end of the longest season, New Year's Eve - in a way, because it's almost time to prepare for the season of preparation, that is Advent, on next Sunday's horizon. New Year's Day - in a sense. But while the colors are in line, and the bulletin clearly says "Last Sunday after Pentecost." In our readings? Chaos. The Passion story of Jesus? They are crucifying him, doing that casting lots business, mocking him, and asking for forgiveness here in November?

For someone, and please tell me I'm not alone, who already struggles identifying where I am in the story, it doesn't seem like church is helping much today. And I do think that I'm not alone. We are collectively bad at recognizing where we are in time, at the end of something or at the beginning of something; it can be hard to know when we're essentially always in the middle of things with very, blurry edges. It seems like someone's been shouting that it's the end of the world as we know it since the days of Noah, and consistently through the ages that pronouncement echoes with surprising regularity. Yet, here we are. And on a smaller scale, I know that all too often I've thought something was dead and over - a relationship, a job, something I wanted to end, something I didn't want to end, only to be surprised that it was actually just a turn. Simultaneously, it seems we want to draw a line and say this, *this* is new and different when it's actually a continuation, the next chapter of a story that is linked with all that came before.

So, here in November, at the end of fall, at the end of the church's year, I'm at first thrown by hearing this story that I think belongs at the eve of Easter, not at the eve of Advent. And yet, this story itself is another one that reminds me how bad we are at seeing the larger arc,

and even worse at marking ourselves in the right place on that arc. It sure does look like the end, right? Dividing up the spoils and mocking the hope that seems to have crashed and burned on that hill? And yet, we know that it's the eve of an entirely new chapter; that it's not the end of the story at all. And as we play this loop of the tape, even in its mismatched timing, we are offered the profound gift of being told once again that we have no idea how the story will go.

And that is a gift, friends. It's a hard, uncomfortable, merciful gift: the mercy of not knowing what will happen next, the mercy of not knowing where we are in the story. This mercy gently taps us on the shoulder and whispers that we might not be in charge of the timeline, and actually that it might not even be much of a time-*line*. I don't like admitting that this is good news, but it certainly is. It's completely daunting to get lost geographically, and all the more so to consider the vastness of the universe through which we're traveling - a universe, which we are learning is bigger than a human brain can fathom. And it's equally daunting when we get lost in time; when we are turned around and confused about what season it is. In that bewilderment, the same enormity, vastness, unpredictability, and looping prevails. Not just that it's dark so early in the afternoon, but that dawns and births can happen any old time. Not just that we can't remember how many candles to light, but that we will laugh in the midst of grief, and are surprised by losses, and wholly unprepared for so many holy moments.

Somehow in the mystery of all that is grander, this Jesus we are looking at dying on the cross is the very same as "the invisible God, and the firstborn of all creation, in whom all things in heaven and on earth were created, before all things, and in whom all things hold together." On occasion, I might be tempted to side with William Butler Yeats who says the center does not hold, and that things fall apart. We may be flummoxed by the twists and turns of our quiet, small lives and by the fluctuations and chaos of the big world around us. Yet, here there is a hard-to-swallow, almost unbelievable promise that all things do hold together, in ways that pass all understanding. That things which fall down will be raised up; that what looks like the end very often is nowhere close.

You can hear the undercurrent of this promise in all kinds of places: woven in the circuitous stories of Scripture, and imbedded in the secular message of the "it gets better" project, offering hope to young ones wondering if their sexuality will isolate them forever, and undergirding the "project semi-colon," nudging us to take pauses instead of full-stops when things seem darkest and bleakest. We will sing/just finished singing this promise, "O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come ... Before the hills in order stood, or earth received her frame, from everlasting thou art God, to endless years the same ... A thousand ages in thy sight are like an evening gone; short as the watch that ends the night before the rising sun."

We are poor judges at the length of the watch. But we practice, nonetheless, ending and beginning things, setting our clocks, changing the color of the hangings in here as the trees change their hangings outside. All the while, recognizing how easy to get lost in time. It's so hard to know where our small steps will lead us, how long this part is, when the thing we are waiting for will come to pass - if ever. So, we notice, and we wonder, and we watch for patterns, remembering that our finite minds will always bump up against infinity. This unnerves and comforts, maybe in equal measure. We might not be able to name the moment, might not be able to grasp the big picture, might struggle to hold things together. That's okay. It's not actually our job to do all that. Mercifully.