

TEXT: Lectionary readings  
THEME: The time is fulfilled  
SUBJECT: Time  
TITLE: What the Times Demand

Third Sunday after Epiphany  
24 January 2021  
Messiah Moravian  
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When I read the lessons appointed for today, I heard the echoing vocal effects and drumming of “Time . . . Time . . . Time . . .” Thanks to the internet I was able to find, “Time Has Come Today” by The Chamber Brothers. The song is over eleven minutes long and begins:

Time has come today young hearts can go  
Their way can't put it off another day

Jonah put it off another day. God instructed him to deliver a message to Nineveh and Jonah ran the other way. After serving a “time out” in solitary confinement, Jonah reconsidered his position. “The word of the Lord came to Jonah *a second time*, saying ‘Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message I tell you.’” (Jonah 3:1-5, 10)

Paul, unlike The Chamber Brothers, wants his audience to put it off another day, another month, another year. In fact Paul wants his hearers to put it off for an indefinite period of time, perhaps for a lifetime. Why? Because the *appointed time* has grown short. The present form of this world is passing away. (1 Corinthians 7:29-31)

John's arrest “triggers” the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The first words Jesus speaks, according to Mark, are “The *time is fulfilled*, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news.” (Mark 1:14-20)

“Time suspends yet rushes” writes Patti Smith in *Devotion*. What child waiting for Christmas doesn't know the suspension of time? What lovers discovering the joys of deep connection, don't know the rush of time? Who, in this pandemic, doesn't know the suspension of time in the daily grind of routines and the rush of time as vaccines are developed at “warp speed.”

Time is measured by the awareness of something else: high school or college graduation, a wedding, a birth, the annual trip to the beach, a 25th reunion, retirement. We judge the past in light of the present, the present in light of our expectations for the future.

Recently, we have heard a lot of talk about the judgment of history. Many commentators are dumbfounded by how little many people appear to care about history's assessment of their actions. When asked about this, one prominent official responded: “Who cares? We will all be dead in a hundred years.”

When Jesus says, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near . . .” he is announcing a new standard by which to measure the present. The old order that glorifies the powerful, the famous, the rich, is challenged by a new order: the commonwealth of God. In the

commonwealth of God, the sources of division—race, gender, nationality, wealth—are transcended by egalitarian standards.

If we care about the future of humanity, then we are bound to care about human equality, godly, essential, true human equality. What inspires such care? Eternity! At least this is what Søren Kierkegaard argued over two hundred years ago.

What the times *demand*—yes, who could ever finish figuring that out, now that worldliness has caught fire by spontaneous combustion . . . What the times in the deepest sense *need* can be totally expressed in one single word—the times need: eternity. The misfortune of our age is precisely that it has become merely *time* by itself, temporality, which impatiently wants to hear nothing about eternity . . . the more we think we are able to harden our hearts to dispense with the eternal, all the more do we stand basically in need of just that.

From the first century to the present, followers of Jesus including the Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Roman Catholic Archbishop Oscar Romero, Russian Orthodox Mother Maria of Paris, and Baptist minister Martin Luther King, Jr., each acutely aware of the power of hate, greed, and fear, nevertheless held on to what King called “a dream,” a vision of justice, a vision of the commonwealth of God, while taking action to realize it here and now. Each one of them knowingly risked death to do so and was killed.

Mother Maria of Paris was born Elizaveta Pilenko in 1891 in the Latvian city of Riga, to Orthodox Christians whose faith helped shape their daughter’s values. At age 14 Liza jettisoned her faith after her father’s death, which struck her as meaningless and unjust. She declared, “If there is no justice, there is no God.”

As an adult she found herself drawn to Christ’s life and work. During Russia’s Civil War she was arrested, jailed, and put on trial. In court, she rose and spoke in her own defense: “My loyalty was not to any imagined government as such, but to those whose need of justice was greatest. I will act for justice and for the relief of suffering. I will love my neighbor.”

Miraculously, she was released and forced into exile. Eventually she, like many other Russians, settled in Paris. In the hard winter of 1926, each person in her family came down with influenza. All recovered except Anastasia, who was diagnosed with meningitis. The Pasteur Institute accepted Nastia as a patient. After a month in the hospital she died.

“The death of someone you love,” Liza wrote, “throws open the gates into eternity, while the whole natural existence has lost its stability and its coherence. Before the dark pit of the grave, everything must be reexamined, measured against falsehood and corruption.”

After her daughter’s burial, Liza became “aware of a new and special, broad and all-embracing motherhood.” She emerged from her mourning with a determination to seek “a more authentic

and purified life.” She felt a call to be a mother for all who need maternal care, assistance, or protection.

Liza joined a religious order in Paris with a focus on hospitality. She maintained an open door policy, caring for the homeless and destitute. Mother Maria (the name she assumed in the order) worked with a priest to provide shelter for Jews after Germany occupied Paris. They set up escape routes to safer destinations in the south of France. It was complex and dangerous work.

On February 10, 1943, upon Maria’s return from a trip south, the Gestapo searched her room. A week later she was arrested. After two years in prison camps, on Holy Saturday 1945, as the shellfire of the approaching Red Army could be heard in the distance, Maria was sent to the gas chambers.

What inspires the lives and witness of people like Mother Maria? As Václav Havel put it: “It is scarcely possible to find a culture that does not derive from the conviction that a higher, mysterious order of the world exists beyond our reach, a higher intention that is the source of all things, a higher memory recording everything, a higher authority to which we are all accountable in one way or another.

“From time immemorial, the key to the existence of the human race, of nature, and of the universe, as well as the key to what is required of human responsibility, has always been found in what transcends humanity, in what stands above it. **Humanity must respect this if the world is to survive.**”

Time . . . Time . . . Time . . . What the times demand is eternity.

PRAYER: St Denys the Areopagite (c. 440-c. 530)

No. This Endless One we wish  
to know looms ever  
at an absolute remove  
from every pet conjecture,  
all conception, each limit,  
and thought. And yet,  
since that One remains  
the underpinning  
of all that is good,  
and by merely being  
is the utter cause  
of everything, to utter praise  
to this Beneficence, you  
must turn once more  
to all creation.  
He bides there, at the center  
of everything, and everything  
has Him as its destiny.  
Suspecting this, the puzzling  
theologians praise Him  
by every name—and also  
as the Nameless One.