

Hespeler, Dec. 1, 2019 © Scott McAndless – Advent 1, Communion  
Isaiah 2:1-5, Psalm 122, Romans 13:11-14, Matthew 24:36-44

**Y**ou brought a sleeping bag and wore your long johns and your warmest coat, but after sitting out here for many hours, you are completely chilled to the bone. How many times have you asked yourself over the last few hours, are you crazy to do this? I mean, what kind of fools put themselves through this kind of trial of their own free will? If your boss ordered you to go out and sit on a cold sidewalk from midnight until six in the morning and then fight off a bunch of other people in order to get your hands on a certain piece of merchandise, you would refuse. You would file a grievance with the union. You might even just quit right there on the spot. But here you have chosen to do that very thing of your own free will.

And why do you do it? Because your life actually depends on getting that particular piece of merchandise at a low, low price? No, not really. You do it because do you know that it's just what people do. Besides this, you know what time it is. It is Black Friday and the doors will be opening in just a few minutes and those door crusher specials are waiting for you and you have vowed that this time you will get them. It is just what people do at this moment in time.

And that is just one example of people doing strange things at this time of year just because they know what time it is. You know very well that on December 19<sup>th</sup>, just a few minutes after midnight, there will be hundreds, if not thousands, of people lined up to see the biggest movie of the year, which I'm guessing will be *Star Wars, the Rise of Skywalker*, and they will do it simply because it matters to them to be the first to see that movie on the day that it opens. It just will not mean the same thing the next day when it's not the right time. This time of the year is, more than any other, the time when we do things just because this is the time when we do them. "Tis the season," isn't that what we say. We gather with friends and family at this time of the year, not because it is always the most convenient time to travel (travelling can be horrible!), but because you are just supposed to do it and you will drive through the snowstorm to get there if you have to because you know what time it is. We give gifts to people, not because they are things that they need but just because this is the time when we are supposed to do it.

And, you know what, so much of that is great. I do so look forward to so many of those things that we do just because it is the right time at this time of year. And while I



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am not particularly interested in some of those events that take place at certain times (you will never find me crashing the door at a Black Friday sale, for example) if those things do bring joy to you during this season, by all means go ahead and make the most of them. There is great power and advantage to be gained by knowing what time it is.

But there is a question that we need to ask, maybe especially at this season of the year: what if you are wrong about what time it is? What if what the world is telling us about what time it is is wrong? That's not my question, by the way; it is the Bible's. In our gospel reading this morning, Jesus gives several examples of people who thought that they knew what time it was – who believed what the world was telling them about what time it was – but who were horribly and tragically wrong. Jesus speaks of the people in the days of Noah – people who were living just before a looming disaster but just did not recognize what time they were living in. If they knew what time it was, they would have been busy building ships like Noah and his family, but instead they were **“eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage.”**

He speaks of two men working in the field and two women grinding grain at the mill when it is clearly not the time to take care of those everyday tasks but instead a time to be prepared for a looming disaster that takes one of the two in both cases. And of course, Jesus gives the example of the homeowner who thought that it was time to relax and go to bed when there was actually a thief who was casing his house and getting ready to rob it; it was a time to be vigilant and prepare to resist intruders. The point of all of these illustrations seems clear. You had better not just take for granted what the world tells you about what time it is. To get that wrong could be very dangerous, even fatal. So, the stakes are very high.

In fact, some of these passages we read this morning really seem kind of annoying at this time of year. After all, it is Christmas time. There are so many disturbing things that are going on in the world all the time, can't we, just for this one season, forget all about that and celebrate and have a good time?

I don't think that any of this means that we are just supposed to ignore whatever the world says about what time it is. By all means go ahead and plan your special times with family and friends. Enjoy those special times and events of the season. But Jesus would say that, even so, you ought to keep your eyes open for any indication that God is operating under a different timetable.

Jesus' reference to the days of Noah makes me think of all of the ways in which we often deal with potential or looming disasters in our modern world. A majority of people, for example, accept these days that we are facing some serious environmental crises, but many go on with their regular

activities and make their usual choices as if there really was nothing to be concerned about.

Yes, I know that there are some who will deny that there is anything at all to worry about, but it seems to me that the more common response is just to not think about it and to go on **“eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage”** as if the worrying signs all around them didn’t exist.

I believe that that is what the Genesis story of the flood is about. I think the point of the story is that the world was on a course for destruction and it was plain for anyone to see. The problem in that story wasn’t environmental destruction; it was the spread of deadly violence. But the reaction seems to have been the same.

And I know why we react that way; I do it too often enough. Sometimes you just have to act as if the terrible possibilities didn’t exist in order to get on with your life and keep from going insane. But Jesus may be warning us that there are consequences for failing to recognize what time it really is. So, yes, carry on with your life, by all means, but remember that your life does not simply stand alone. You are part of a much larger system and your actions and your activism matter. And, somewhere deep down inside, you really do know what time it is.

But I don’t mean to just talk about dire or looming threats here. I do not think that being a follower of Jesus means that we have to be people who are constantly thinking of the worst thing possible that could happen. In fact, it is mostly the opposite. Knowing what time it is in God’s timetable, also means joyfully embracing the opportunities that God places before us. What that means is that, when we are busily going on with all of the things that the world tells us that we must do, God will interrupt us.

And you all know what that is like! You have just managed to get a couple of hours out of your busy schedule to get to the mall and finally finish all that Christmas shopping, or you’re heading to the grocery store and you absolutely have to concentrate and get everything you need for the big meal this time when something just happens to break in and disturb your flow. Say it is an opportunity to help someone – someone who needs a little kindness or a little bit of help and you, all of a sudden, are in a position where you can do something.

Oh, that’s frustrating, isn’t it? Here I’ve got a million things to do and then something unexpected comes out of nowhere. It’s enough to make you cry. But if you know what time it is – if you are sensitive to God’s time – you know that those things don’t just happen by accident. They are God’s timing. And, if you see them that way, you will be able to respond with joy and your joy this season will multiply. If you don’t, they are just another annoying interruption and the frustration will multiply. That is the difference that knowing what time it really is can make.

I'm going to lay another case of God's timing on you – another challenge. The world is telling you these days what time it is – it is a time to buy and buy and buy. It starts on Black Friday and continues on Cyber Monday and all the way to December 24 as we count down the real 24 days of Christmas as the world defines them. It's about buying and then receiving on Christmas Day, a frenzy that will lead to many a meltdown between now and then.

But we have discerned God saying to us that it is a different time. After Black Friday a couple of days ago and Cyber Monday tomorrow, the next day will be Tuesday – Giving Tuesday. We have joined in the Giving Tuesday campaign this year because we believe that, while the world is saying that it is time to exercise purchasing power, God is saying that it is time to exercise the practice of generosity. And if you can hear what God is saying about what time it is, you will find the greater joy of this season.

I do not say this because I am afraid that St. Andrew's is not going to be able to pay its bills. That's not what this is about. Sure, we are behind, but it is God who will provide for the needs of this church as we remain faithful to the work God calls us to do, so I'm not asking you to give because we need it. We will be sharing with you some of the amazing things we do here at St. Andrew's for our community and you definitely want to say after the service and join us in a celebration of those ministries, but this is not about making sure that you give to support those things.

Give prayerful thought about where God wants you to give and what God wants you to support. If it is not to St. Andrew's, that is not an issue at all, but just don't miss the opportunity that God is placing before you. I am calling on every single person here, on Tuesday or whatever day you can make it work for you, to give in some extraordinarily generous way as God has enabled you. I don't want you to do it out of compulsion. I don't want you to do it out of our need (that is in God's supply), I don't want you to do it grudgingly. I want you to do it joyfully because, besides you know what time it is.