

CLOCKS SET FORWARD! (Pastor Scott Klimke)

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At this time of year, the biblical readings we hear each week draw increasing attention to the gap that separates the expectations of the Church from the expectations of society at large. When I was preparing this sermon and service, it was around the time that clocks were set back for an hour. It struck me that this was completely out of step with how a couple of our readings set the clock all the way forward to the Final Judgment. This is how it goes every year as fall draws to a close. Society at large sets its clock back; expecting more of the same. The Church sets its clock all the way forward; expecting the arrival of circumstances so different that we might as well call them a new heaven and a new earth. But as the Church draws attention to the divide separating its vision and the vision of society at large, there's no guarantee it will be heard and heeded. To be heard and heeded the Church is going to need strong and faithful spiritual leadership.

As I see it, the need for strong and faithful spiritual leadership is made plain by our reading from Judges. In what can prove to be a footnote we might very well miss or ignore, it's said that Israel falls asleep, falls into sin, after the death of Ehud. Ehud is one of the spiritual leaders, one of the judges, after which the seventh book of the Bible is named. His presence, it would seem, makes a difference. When Ehud is alive and active, Israel stays awake. When Ehud is dead, Israel falls asleep. The message seems clear enough. To keep its distinctive vision alive, to keep its clocks set forward to history's most decisive moment, the Church shall require strong and faithful spiritual leadership. And let's be clear. This applies not only to my leadership, but to your leadership as well.

For starters, I want all of us to note today that Ehud's successor is Deborah not David, Don, or Daniel. In our reading from Judges, Israel's next spiritual leader is a woman, not a man. So much for spiritual leadership being a mantle worn by just one of the sexes. As far as the Bible is concerned, spiritual leadership is a mantle worn by all, whether they be male or female, clergy or lay. It's why in the Old Testament the entirety of Israel is called a priestly kingdom and a holy nation and in the New Testament the same language is applied to all of us in places like 1st Peter and the book of Revelation. According to the Bible we're all spiritual leaders and if we don't all rise to that office then it's likely that those who do will be drowned out by the snores and sighs of all those who have fallen asleep. Without strong and faithful spiritual leadership on the part of all converts to the Christian faith and cause are going to be far and few between; meaning the customs and expectations of society at large shall come to dwarf those of the Church more than they already do today. Without a doubt, the time for strong and faithful spiritual leadership on the part of all is now, not later. But as we seize this moment of both opportunity and necessity, what is our lived and spoken message to be?

Well, according to our reading from 1st Thessalonians, plain, old-fashioned faith, hope, and love shall do. According to St. Paul's inspired words, we keep ourselves and others awake while society at large is sleeping when we put on the breastplate of faith and love and for a helmet the hope of salvation. How strikingly different this attire is from the attire worn by the Roman soldiers who were raising havoc in Jerusalem and elsewhere when the New Testament was written! How strikingly different this attire is from those who today try to advance their agenda through violence, intimidation, and tough talk! Again, we see and hear that the Church is to be the Church, not society at large. But what are faith, hope, and love as described by today's readings?

Let's start with faith. It's a word that can carry multiple meanings. With respect to salvation, faith is the Holy Spirit's gift of belief in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior; a gift that naturally leads to all kinds of other things. One of the here and now consequences of this kind of faith is the trust that our salvation in Christ is so secure that we can stop worrying about it and instead worry about all the things God would have us do now. When our readings talk about faith today, this is what they have in mind. They refer to the trust that each of us has been given a here and now place in God's plan and the gifts to carry that plan through to completion. As Jesus' parable about timid and untimid investing makes abundantly clear, we have faith in the sense of today's readings not when we hold our God-given gifts back, but when we put them in play to the fullest extent possible. To use a sports analogy, when we have faith in the sense of today's readings, we don't burn clock or take a knee, but instead look to run up the score for the sake of the Kingdom of God. And so, if our clocks are to be set forward as so many others set theirs backward, we'll want to be asking ourselves how often and to what extent our time, talent, and treasure are in the game for God and neighbor.

Now as for hope, this too is a natural byproduct of the Holy Spirit's one gift of belief in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Christian hope looks beyond the odds championed by society at large and remains intent on the possibility of deep and transformative change. By way of example: 1) David can beat Goliath 2) Israel can escape from twenty years of oppression as it does in our reading from Judges, 3) We can get beyond red and blue and back to being one nation under God, 4) We can do a better job of making life for the corona virus more difficult, and 5) We can stop kicking the can of tomorrow down the road and start getting serious about it now. This is Christian hope. It's defiant. It's audacious. It's knows no marathon it cannot run. And so, if our clocks are to be set forward when so many others are setting theirs back, another thing we'll want to be asking ourselves is how often our disappointments and frustrations are tempered by the confidence that this too shall pass; particularly when we get our time, talent, and treasure in the game to the greatest extent possible.

And then, last, but not least, there's love; also born of the Holy Spirit's one gift of belief in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. But it's not just any, old love we're talking about. When St. Paul and the others writers of the New Testament bring love to the fore they're able to draw on the fact that the Greek in which the New Testament was written has more than one word for love. The word for love that's used is always the word for Christ-like love. This is the love that lays down its life for the sake of its friends. This is the love that will not sacrifice the greater good—the health of the whole community—for the sake of self. This is the kind of love that actually listens to St. Paul when in our reading from 1st Thessalonians he bids us to encourage one another and to build each other up. For when church becomes about us, rather than just me, church becomes a community in which we're all invested and this is what Christian love always seeks—the strongest communities imaginable—the best possible set of circumstances for everybody. And so, as we ask ourselves about how defiantly hopeful and deeply committed and engaged we are with respect to the use of our time, talent, and treasure, let's also make sure the aim of our hope and engagement is gain not just for self, but gain for all. It will be then that we love as Christ first loved us, as we also live out the rest of his example; trusting that God has put us all here for reason and that God's design for our lives shall not fail, even when opposed by evil, empires, crosses, and tombs. Amen!