

“The Time Has Come”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Christmas Eve – December 24, 2016

Luke 2: 1-20
Isaiah 9: 2-7

For many of us tonight, we are here feeling like we wish there was another day, or at least a few more hours, before Christmas morning arrives. Time seems to fly by - with end-of-the-year demands at work, with children's school activities, with parties and gatherings with family and friends, with racing to get all our gifts bought, wrapped, or sent. The month of December would be so much better if it had a few extra days before December 25, wouldn't it?

Surprisingly, I haven't felt that way this year. In fact, it has felt like Christmas would never get here. Don't get me wrong - this isn't normal for me, and many times I will feel like time has flown by in December. But this year, it has seemed like it took forever for us to get through Advent. Perhaps not surprisingly, this year is the longest Advent can be - a full, four weeks - since Christmas falls on a Sunday. But I think it's more than just a coincidence on the calendar. I think it's related to how we view time at different stages of our lives.

Time can fly by when we are surrounded by activity, and it can crawl at a snail's pace when we are isolated with nothing to do. Time can go lightning fast when we seek to please others with our gifts, our time, and our energy, even though when we are done, that time doesn't feel well-used or fulfilling. Time can seem to stand still when we feel trapped in an unhealthy relationship, or stuck in a dead-end job, or battling a chronic illness, or trying to breathe amid the suffocating reality of depression or mental illness.

There's no question that I still have moments of wondering where has the time gone in my life. I look at pictures from the past, and they don't seem that long ago, until I look at the date they were taken, and I can hardly believe it. I remember when Erin started first grade and they said, "Welcome to the Class of 2018!" I laughed and thought, "Yeah, right!" Now, that reality is just a year-and-a-half away.

But I think for me, at least this year, time hasn't moved as fast because as I age, I seem to savor time more than I used to. I soak in the moments with my family and friends, and I treasure them more than when I was younger, when I just assumed those moments would always be around. Perhaps as we age, we view time as a gift to be treasured, not a commodity to make the most out of.

This time of year also reminds us of how time marches on, and that our time on this earth does not last forever. We witnessed it this month as a community, when we learned of the death of former mayor of Indianapolis,

and former pastor of Second Presbyterian Church, Bill Hudnut. I experienced it this past week when I learned that the pastor who was a mentor to me throughout seminary, Bill dePrater, died at his home, and I had only been communicating with him on Facebook the week before. For many of us tonight, we are here, either for the first time or for another time, without our loved one with us.

Time does not stand still. Each day that goes by, we are reminded of our own mortality and fragility. Each moment that takes place, we are reminded that time is a gift. Time does not stand still.

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Mary and Joseph must have felt like time was a blur over the last nine months. They got engaged, but then were told Mary would conceive and give birth to a son, and Joseph knew he was not the father. Mary wasn't much older than a sophomore in high school today, and she was confused and scared, to say the least. And Joseph contemplated whether he should stay with Mary, seeing that she was pregnant and didn't want to expose her to public disgrace. But for each of them, at a time when they were unsure and afraid, God spoke words of comfort and reassurance. "Do not be afraid, Mary." "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." And so, they believed that this time in their life was to be treasured - together.

It would have been so much easier on them - especially on Mary - if they could have just stayed in Nazareth for the birth of their first child, of God's child. But at that time, a census was taking place, and it couldn't be completed by telephone or an online survey. Instead, it required them to travel to Bethlehem, while Mary was nine months pregnant, with no certainty about where they would stay or what they would do if she went into labor. And yet, they believed that this time in their life was to be treasured - together.

"While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child." The time came for Mary and Joseph's son to be born. The time came for God's Son, Emmanuel, to arrive. The time came for God to take on human flesh and bone, to come down and live as one of us. The time came for God to show the depth of his love for us in the form of Jesus Christ our Lord.

And this time was treasured. By Mary, "who treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart." By Joseph, who did not abandon Mary but stayed with her to raise their son together. By shepherds out in the fields surrounding Bethlehem, who found their way to the stable behind the inn "to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." By kings from a distant land, who recognized a star in the sky as a sign of the time when "a child would be born as King of the Jews."

The time came for God's love to be born into our world. And it was a time that was treasured.

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Earlier this month, Craig Sager died. Mr. Sager was a long-time sportscaster, known for his outlandish suits. But he was diagnosed two years

ago with a rare form of leukemia. He battled through treatments and returned to work last year, calling his first and only NBA Finals game this past June.

In July, in a speech that Mr. Sager gave on ESPN, he said the following: "Time is something that cannot be bought, it cannot be wagered with God, and it is not an endless supply. Time is simply how you live your life. I'm not an expert on time or on cancer or on life itself . . . If I've learned anything through all of this, it's that each and every day is a canvas waiting to be painted. An opportunity for love, for fun, for living, for learning."

The time has come – on this holy night – to treasure what God has done for us.

The time has come – on this holy night – to receive God's gift of love and live each day showing others that we truly treasure this opportunity for love, for fun, for living, and for learning.

The time has come to let go of the burdens that prevent us from hearing the angels' words of good news of great joy. The time has come to accept that the past will never replace the present, and that our future is in front of us – if only we will trust and believe that God is with us. The time has come to work on what holds us back – our anger, our resentment, our grief – and start painting on the canvas that is before us.

The time has come to not be afraid, as individuals, as the church, as children of God. There have been, are, and always will be threats that cause terror and fear in our world. Indeed, this holy night would be immediately followed by Mary and Joseph fleeing into Egypt, so that God's Son would not be killed by a vengeful Herod. The threats will always be present. The challenge is to take this time and use it for God's purposes. To show love in the face of hatred. To show hospitality to those whom the world rejects. To seek peace in the face of violence. To seek justice for the invisible and voiceless. The time has come to not be afraid.

Earlier this evening, we sang:

*"And our eyes at last shall see Him,
Through His own redeeming love,
For that Child so dear and gentle
Is our Lord in heaven above;
And he leads His children on
To the place where He is gone"
("Once in Royal David's City," verse 4).*

The promise of this night is that God not only loves us in the form of a baby born in a stable, but that God's love will never leave us, for he leads us on to the place where he is gone. Through all times of life, God is with us, never forsaking us. That is what we treasure. That is what we believe. And that is what we each paint on our canvases of time.

"The time came for her to deliver her child."

"Glory to God in the highest heaven!"

Alleluia! Amen.