

IN NEWNESS OF LIFE

**Texts: Philippians 3:12-16
 Matthew 8:18-22**

These two texts from Christian scripture point to a central truth of Christian faith: how we find ourselves in the mystery of time. I could add another dozen or more such texts - but let me add another from the canon of William Shakespeare.

My dear old high school English teacher was big on memorizing key verses and these from MACBETH stuck with me:

**TOMORROW AND TOMORROW AND TOMORROW
CREEPS IN THIS PETTY PACE FROM DAY TO DAY
TO THE LAST SYLLABLE OF RECORDED TIME
AND ALL OUR YESTERDAYS HAVE LIGHTED FOOLS THE WAY TO
DUSTY DEATH...**

There is some debate over whether Shakespeare was a closeted Catholic but there is no doubt here but that he resonates with the Gospel admonition to find life in the forward posture and leave the dead past behind.

Time is indeed a great mystery. Everyone has had a go at making sense of it: Augustine and Einstein, Freud and Zen monks, Proust and T.S. Eliot. And yet it is a mystery to every living person. I live in a community of 600 people, two-thirds over 80, and we daily deal with the memories of the past - its accomplishments and regrets and sometimes shame. Our sense of the future is short - not at all what we envisioned before work and marriage and children!

The most difficult part of time is not the known past or the unknown future - but the present moment. That is the tense that matters most. And, let's face it: we have

it as "present" for maybe 15 seconds at best before it goes into the past. That fleeting "moment" ever receding into the past yet on the moving edge of the future, that is the moment in which Jesus sees the possibility of the "kingdom" of new life, grace and truth. "The moment is coming, and now is, when we worship in spirit and truth."

The past can be a trap, a detour from life. I agree with the great Satchel Paige:

DON'T LOOK BACK. SOMETHING MAY BE GAINING ON YOU!

And yet it's important to learn from the past lest we repeat the follies and dead-ends of the past. Soren Kierkegaard had it right; **WE UNDERSTAND OUR LIVES BACKWARDLY - BUT WE LIVE THEM FORWARDLY.** So Paul exhorts the early Christians to lean into the future with expectation and hope.

That posture is possible because of Paul's conviction that Jesus is the bearer of God's forgiving grace. The past is done and it is forgiven. So Oscar Wilde could capture the heart of the Christian message in saying **ALL SAINTS HAVE A PAST; ALL SINNERS HAVE A FUTURE.** Even the best of us are flawed; even the worst of us are redeemable.

That is the heart of the Christian message. Everything else is marginal. I despair over these TV preachers who think the point of the Gospel is to get people into heaven. No the point is to open us to the kingdom of grace and truth in the Now. The heart of the Gospel is the word of forgiveness. Confession and forgiveness are the crucial turning points of Christian worship - and life! So Paul Tillich

could sum up the Gospel by saying; WE ARE GIVEN FORGIVENESS FOR WHAT IS PAST, COURAGE FOR WHAT IS TO COME, AND REST IN GOD'S ETERNAL PRESENCE.

And we should note that the "eternal" dimension of time is not quantitative but qualitative. Those signs you still see on back roads in the South - "Where will you spend eternity?" - miss the point. The "eternal" is not spent; it is enjoyed in the moment. Theologians have affirmed that Christ comes to us in the kairos (the ripeness, the depth of time) not in chronos (the measured length of time).

If that is the heart of the Gospel, then we have critical clues as to where we might expect to find grace and truth and new life. Our opening is in that brief crack in time with the past behind us (forgiven) and the future of infinite possibilities before us. This is true in art as in faith. There is always a growing edge in art in which we recognize and celebrate new vision.

Western painting goes back to Giotto who saw the human figure with new sight and perspective. Monet and the impressionists broke new ground by going outdoors to paint and gave us new vision of light on haystacks and cathedrals and water.

And Picasso plumbed the infinite complexities of humans - their lust, their deceit, their cruelty. (During the German occupation of Paris, the story goes that a group of Nazi officers asked to tour Picasso's studio. There they came up his stunning mural "Guernica" which is a visual protest of the Fascist bombing of a Spanish village.

One of the Nazi officers asked Picasso, "Did you do this?" "No," Picasso responded, "you did!") Art has a prophetic function.

And the genius of science goes in the same direction: the capacity to see anew, to move beyond the old formulae and paradigms. Copernicus and Galileo and Newton and Einstein and Hawking dared in their moments to see life anew. And, like many artists and saints, they suffered rejection because they saw beyond the conventional wisdom .

And what is true for artists and scientists is true for political leaders. Note I say "leaders" , not followers of the herd. In the crisis of the Civil War, Lincoln called upon our citizens "to think anew and to act anew." And in the myriad crises before us, we are called to new vision, full of daring and risk, to grasp the new.

In my parish church in Burlington, I am rediscovering the richness of the Book of Common Prayer and finding myself especially drawn to the prayer of confession

In Rite I of the Eucharist. It concludes like this:

**HAVE MERCY UPON US,
HAVE MERCY UPON US, MOST MERCIFUL FATHER...
FORGIVE US ALL THAT IS PAST;
AND GRANT THAT WE MAY EVER HEREAFTER
SERVE AND PLEASE THEE IN NEWNESS OF LIFE....**

"In newness of life" - that is how the God revealed in Christ is served. By leaning in expectation and hope into the new moment and finding there an opening into new possibilities. Not resting on the tired slogans of the past, the assumed formulae and paradigms. Not finding comfort in the conventional orthodoxies. But leaning forward in the faith that God's grace and wisdom will meet us there.

It's like old Abraham going out and not knowing where he was going - but seeking

a city with eternal foundations. Such a posture is risky - but as I've said before: "The opposite of faith is not doubt; it is certainty."

This is the choice ever before us: to endure the burden of time which

**CREEPS IN THIS PETTY PACE FROM DAY TO DAY
TO THE LAST SYLLABLE OF RECORDED TIME**

Or to see in every moment, on the brink of the future, in the depth of time,

that this is where God meets us. This is where we find newness of life.

Scripture rings with this awareness:

* "THIS is the day which the Lord has given us; let us rejoice in it!"

* "NOW is the hour of salvation.."

* "Before Abraham was, I AM the resurrection and the life"

**The risen Christ transcends the neat divisions of calendar time and meets us
in the depths of time.**

Knowing this, believing this, we can pray in real expectation:

**HAVE MERCY UPON US,
HAVE MERCY UPON US MOST MERCIFUL FATHER...
FORGIVE US ALL THAT IS PAST;
AND GRANT THAT WE MAY EVER HEREAFTER
SERVE AND PLEASE THEE IN NEWNESS OF LIFE.**

AMEN!

(Closing Hymn: "Be Thou My Vision" / Slane)