

Sermon Text: Luke 1:68-79; 3:1-6

As Rudy Powell reminded us at the beginning of the service, Jim Dennis is home on a surgical recovery leave. I spoke to Caroline earlier this morning. She says he’s coming along very nicely albeit slowly. Those of you who know Jim, know that for him, that’s going to be a burden, but he’s going to do his best. We hope that he will continue to progress in the recovery, which we trust will be fully.

Now, Jim asked me last Sunday to help him in the Communion service. I’ve been thinking about it. I think that was a practice run. He just wanted to see if I could stay on my feet long enough to get through the service. Today it’s the real thing.

I’m going to designate today “Jim Dennis Appreciation Sunday.” I don’t know about the rest of you, but I appreciate what he does up here Sunday after Sunday. If you don’t have a full appreciation for it, give me your name, and I’ll ask him to give you a chance. I’ll appreciate seeing him back. You know, you get very comfortable, as Jim Medley and Gene Eaddy and John Williams can tell you, when you make the transition from here to there. That pew gets better and better every Sunday.

Let us pray. Lord, take our minds and think through them. Take our lips and speak through them. Take our hearts and set them afire with Thy love, for Jesus’ sake, Amen.

You know what time it is? Don’t reach for your watch or your calendar. You’ll remember the story of the youngster, who had been raised in the nursery and the kindergarten rooms of the church, and finally, his parents said, “Well, you know it’s time for us to take him to morning worship.” On the appointed Sunday, they took the little fellow into the big sanctuary. The acolyte came forward and lit the candles. He leaned over and said, “Daddy, what does that mean?” His father quietly said, “Well, son, we light the candles to remind us that God is here. The light, the flame of the spirit, reminds us we’re in God’s presence.” The service went on. The organist struck the notes that chimed the Trinity. The little fellow said, “Daddy, what was that? What does that mean?” He patiently explained that the three notes represent the three persons in our Trinitarian understanding of God, His persons, Father, Son, Holy Spirit. The service progressed and with each step there was an explanation. Finally, it came time for the sermon. The minister pulled up his sleeve and took off his watch and laid it on the pulpit. The little fellow said, “Daddy, what does that mean?” He says, “Son, it doesn’t mean a thing.”

I want to tell you where I got the idea for this, and I want to give attribution where it’s due. If Jim Dennis is listening in, I want him to know that this is the sermon I asked him to write and preach. Last year, as we came to the close of the year, and it may in fact have been at the beginning of the year, Jim preached a sermon in which he talked about the nature of time. As I sat where you sit this morning listening to him, I began to think about that. Our children had been home for Thanksgiving, and Kent, who is the scientist in our family, had been reading a very interesting book. We began to talk about it. He

told me that the theme of the book was string theory. Well, my first thought was that the Post Office is on us again. We just aren't tying up those bundles well enough. He said, no, it's not twine. It is the fabric of the universe. He then went on to explain that the concept of the string theory, which has been developed because scientists have discovered some gaps in Einstein's "Theory of Relativity." They're trying to figure out how to fill them in. The string theory holds the notion that everything in the universe is in constant motion. The rock that makes up the roadway, if you slice it thinly, and place it under an electron microscope, you will discover it's doing a dance. The molecules are moving. The outward sign seems to be solid and immovable, but that rock is in motion. Like the wood in the pew upon which you are sitting, if you could see it under the electron microscope, you would discover that every grain is in movement.

I mentioned that to Jim, and he said he had a book for me. He went to his bookshelf, pulled off a paperback volume, Quantum Theology. I said, well, I've heard of quantum physics, but not quantum theology. He said that was the theme of the book – that it was the advent of quantum theology on the heels of quantum physics that gave birth to that book. The author of the book went on to say that as science makes newer discoveries, it sometimes finds that it has to go back and rethink something that was thought to be true before. You read a little of it in the paper this week. Is there or is there not water on Mars? We thought for a long time, no! Ha! Don't put it out in concrete. Keep the options open.

Science is constantly having to rethink. When Einstein postulated his theory of relativity, it was like an earthquake hitting the scientific community. While most of us can certainly not claim to understand the math involved in that theory, we do understand its working principle. You'll remember that Dr. Einstein said this universe in which we live is a vast curve, and if you had the ability to travel far enough and fast enough, you'd reach a point out there where time and space were the very same thing, no way to tell them apart. That led to other views of our universe. It paved the way for space exploration.

You read, I'm sure, that they managed to get the shuttle off the ground last night. I rather doubt we could have done that without Dr. Einstein's help. Quantum theology builds on that notion. What it says is that our world has a wholeness about it that we do not often see. It even applies it to time -- past, present, future. Now, this will boggle your mind, but what quantum theology says is there is only one time. Now, all you can see is a little piece of it, and we have conveniently invented past, present, and future to help us sharpen our focus at what we are looking. Maybe that's what the Psalmist had in mind when he said for a thousand years in thy light, or but as yesterday when it is passed, or as the watch in the night. You see, God can see it all – past, present, future. We see a part.

As John wrote the Book of Revelations, I wonder if he sensed this special quality about time because it is to him we attribute the words, "I am the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end, says the Lord, with that which is, which was, and which is yet to come, the Almighty."

Now, back to the basic question. You know what time it is? It’s essential for us to understand the time if we’re going to complete this journey through Advent. Now, Jim usually qualifies his jokes by telling you he has passed them by Caroline to see if they are sustainable in the pulpit. I got this joke from Henrietta so I know it’s all right.

The county agent was making his rounds in the county. He reached one of his farm families that was engaged in hog production. He visited for awhile, the usual small talk, and then he got around to the signs. He said, “You know, Henry, they have done some wonderful things with hog feed these days. They’ve got some additives that you can place in any of the feed, and it will shorten the production time for getting your hog to market.” “Interesting,” said Henry. About seven or eight months later, the agent was making his rounds again, and he came back, and he said, “Henry, last time I was here I told you about that food additive you could put in your hog feed. I was just wondering, did you try any of it?” Henry says, “Nope, I didn’t.” He said, “Well, do you mind telling me why?” Henry says, “No, I don’t. What’s time to a hog?”

That fellow didn’t understand time. Do you?

When Charles Dickens wrote that beautiful Christmas Carol, and we’ll hear it from time to time in every Christmas season, you know what he did essentially? He made Ebenezer Scrooge a time traveler. He went to Christmas past, Christmas present, and Christmas yet to come. Because Ebenezer Scrooge understood the imperative of time, it suddenly dawned on him, it was the point of his conversion. You remember how the story ended? Old Ebenezer could keep Christmas better than anybody. He was a time traveler.

We sometimes get caught up in Christmas in ways that aren’t always helpful. I remember that the traditions of Christmas are so important. The punch line in Cav song in “Fiddler on the Roof” is these traditions have meaning even if we can’t tell where they came from because they tell us three important things. They tell us who we are. We are what our traditions have made us. They tell us what it is we are to do. That’s why you’re here this morning. They tell us most importantly what it is that God expects of each of us. Tradition! Sometimes we don’t understand the traditions clearly, and we’re not sure where they all came from.

If you want an interesting exercise one Christmas, find yourself a copy of Roland Bateman’s translation from the German of Martin Luther’s Christmas sermons that he preached all through the Advent and Christmas season all the way up to Epiphany. Luther was a Bible scholar, and he shared his findings with his people. He would pose the most fascinating questions. He raised in one sermon the question of Mary and Joseph’s journey to Bethlehem. How did they get there? Well, the artists tell us that Joseph walked along Mary’s side as she rode on a donkey. Where did that donkey come from said Luther. I couldn’t find any donkey in the Gospels. I rather suspect that Mary walked just like Joseph, her pregnancy notwithstanding. Don’t forget Mary and Joseph were poor people. Those kings later on in Phiphany, how did we get three kings? Well, let’s see now, there were three gifts – gold, frankincense and murrh. Luther says look at

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the Gospel. You don't find three kings. There may have been a dozen. We need those traditions of Christmas, don't we, to help us sort out who we are and what we're to do.

In every age, we need Christmas of the past if we are to celebrate Christmas on the present. I often wonder what would John Wesley think if he came to our service, to our homes, to our Christmas observances? What would Saint Paul think if he saw how we celebrated Christmas? Finally, what of Christmas of the present spilling over into Christmas of the future? If time is of a piece as some claim, what you do this Christmas season is going to impact Christmases yet to come in your family, in your church. What time is it? How do we measure the time?

I want to tell you a little story that I think has importance as to how we appreciate Christmas. Every now and then, Jim Dennis will say something about his days at Duke. When I was at Duke, one of the things that we looked forward to was visitation of the great preachers of the day. Those who held the great pulpits in the 40's and the 50's were the Reinhold and Richard Neighbors, the Elton Truebloods, the Paul Tillichs, who shaped theological thinking. Paul Tillich came to this country as a German immigrant to teach in Union Theological Seminary. He had to learn a whole new culture. One day, one of his colleagues at Union said, “Dr. Tillich, I'm going out to Yankee Stadium today to see a ballgame. Would you like to go?” Dr. Tillich said, “Yes, I'd like to go.” They made their way out to Yankee Stadium. As the game progressed, like my little fellow in the church story, the professor had to explain to Dr. Tillich what was happening as the ballgame moved along. It finally reached the ninth inning. The home team was trailing. They had managed to get a man on every base, and one batter was up at bat, and there were already two outs. It was a crisis for the home team. The batter took his place. He swung at the first ball and missed it wildly. The second ball came, and he took a swing, and he missed it as well. The third ball came. It hit the bat with a resounding crack, and one could tell it was long distance, a home run. The crowd was on its feet as one by one those runners came in, including the batter, and the Yankees took the day. Paul Tillich leaned over to his friend, Tillich had not stood, and grabbed him by the coattails, and said, “Professor, what is happening?” The professor thought for a moment and said, “How do I explain this?” Then he says, “I've got it! Dr. Tillich, this is the tyros! It is the quality time! It is the time when everything that was before has now been stood on its head, and we have won the day!”

Do you know what time it is? Christmas is the tyros, and you can't tell that time with a clock. Only God sets that time, and friends, what the Bethlehem story tells us is He does not wait until it is convenient. He comes in his fullness and He brings us His gift of love and salvation. Let it be so for you, for me. Let us pray.