

"TICK TOCK"

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
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Last night, old, decrepit Father Time, worn out from a heavy year's work, retired, and at midnight, a vivacious, energetic, promising new year was born. So today we are looking with expectancy and hope, a second chance, like the coming of new ministers! Then, the days settle down again. The ho-hum routine sets in. Time marches on. Tick tock.

Time is a mystery, beyond understanding; yet constantly confronting each of us day by day, minute by minute. Time is relentless, indifferent. Time listens to no reason, listens to no pleading. Time pushes us into the teens, then into middle age, then into old age and death, without asking us, without our permission, and usually before we are ready for the new era.

Time is painful. It enters our consciousness with a painful awareness. You graduate from high school with the feeling that part of your life is gone forever. Remember how you longed for the day to come when you could say goodbye to school, but then when it came, how difficult it was to leave your friends, the comfortable nest. There was excitement about the future, but a sadness about the end of an era.

Time is relentless. A man stopped at a farmhouse and asked a farmer who was rocking on his front porch what time it was. "Twelve o'clock," said the farmer without breaking his rhythm. "Only twelve o'clock! I was sure it was more than that." "Nope, it's never more than that around here. It goes up to twelve o'clock and then starts all over again." Time is relentless. A man finds an increasing number of gray hairs in his beard as he shaves and realizes he is no longer a "promising young man." A woman experiences terror as she sees wrinkles deepening and giving birth to other wrinkles.

Time causes anxiety. As time relentlessly marches on, it produces anxiety. Anxiety is the deep-seated fear that we are dying day by day, that our own death will someday happen. In the words of Langdon Gilkey, "Time is not something that merely moves the hands of our clocks and regulates our external comings and goings. It is also something that pulses through our own essential being, graying our hair, shortening our wind, softening our passions, and ultimately ending our existence."

A major task for everyone is to learn how to handle the anxiety that time produces. How can we handle time so that anxiety is diminished and creativity, zest and excitement might flourish?

A popular solution is to act perpetually young. Our culture especially handles the anxiety of time by trying to be young. We worship youth, while other cultures respect old age. We want young teachers, young doctors. District Superintendents will tell you that most churches request young ministers. Women spend fortunes on their hair, face and clothes to hide the fact they are growing old. Some women would rather be told they look as if they were their daughter's sister, than be complimented about being a good mother to that daughter.

Many men flip out when they experience the mid-life crisis. They lament, "Where has my life gone?" They act like kids at conventions, buy sport cars and boats, play around with sweet young things, lose their marriage and the respect of their children. An advertisement for a church rummage sale read, "Your chance to rid your house of everything not worth keeping, but too valuable to throw away. Bring your husband."

Trying to stop time and be perpetually young is a very poor solution to the anxiety of time, because it is a losing battle. No matter how much we pretend, the wrinkles will come, youth will put us in the back seat and take over, the hair will fall out, the stomach will bulge, the body will wear out, and someday we will die. Why pretend? Why fight it? There is a better way to handle time than to pretend youthfulness.

Handle the anxiety of time by living each moment in the light of eternity. Look at your life from the perspective of eternity, where there is no time. Our gospel lesson this morning, John 1:1-18, began, "In the beginning was the Word.." In the book of Genesis, the first words of the Bible are, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." The last book of the Bible, Revelation, describes heaven, eternal life. The Bible begins and ends outside time. Bertrand Russell wrote, "The child lives in the minute, the boy in the day, the instinctive man in the year, the man imbued with history lives in the epoch, the true philosopher lives in eternity." So does the Christian live in eternity. This life is only a phase, a brief moment, in the light of eternity.

Therefore, each moment is precious. Make each moment count, for what is the purpose of this short experience called life, life within the framework of time, birth to death? The purpose is to prepare for eternity.

Work out, therefore, your relationship with God, the creator, the eternal. If you do not enjoy God now on this earth, what will you do in heaven? If you are not comfortable in his church, if worship and prayer are not important parts of your day and week, what will you do in heaven where worship, Revelation tells us, is the norm? Time is precious. Live each moment in the light of eternity, for you are preparing for your eternity.

Likewise, work out your relationships with others, for we believe we will know each other in heaven, especially our loved ones. The relationships that are formed here on this earth will continue into eternity. If that relationship is strained here on earth, what will you do in heaven? Do not let the sun go down on anger or on strained relationships. Make each moment count. Work to effect love, forgiveness, patience, understanding, so that heaven begins here in this life and continues into the next. Live each moment in the light of eternity, knowing that you are preparing the way, planting the seeds, designing the eternal dwelling.

As we renew our covenant with God in this service, as we celebrate Holy Communion, may this new year begin with your resolve to live each moment in the light of eternity. May the passing of time not cause you anxiety, but expectancy, believing that each experience, each day, each moment, is a preparation for heaven, where we will live beyond time in the presence of God.