

# **In God's Time**

**October 9, 2016**

**Genesis 18: 1-15**

**Luke 10: 38-42**

Our scripture lessons speak to us of time, of human time and of God's time. Times that overlap occasionally and intersect, and in so doing contest or challenge us in our faith.

The first, human time, is a measurable reality – seconds, minutes and hours, days and years – centuries and millennia – are easy for us to understand, able to be measured by our time pieces, and recorded in the annals of history.

The second, God's time, begins rather as a concept for humanity and can only be realized or touch into our imaginations in part – in the spirit sides of our beings in our lives as people who would seek to trust our God who is beyond our understanding.

While both these cause us to ponder, nevertheless, time as we know it, remains perhaps God's greatest gift while at the same time, our greatest challenge. It can pass all too quickly – as does our vacation time, an evening with friends, or visits from our grandchildren. Or time can seem interminable...when someone we know is suffering, when a child is missing, when we wait for test results, or for a college acceptance. And we can each add our own personal examples to those lists.

What is it in us – that creates such different measures – such different experiences of like periods of time? Perhaps it is a set of standards shaped by our families and society by which we create norms in time for ourselves? Or, I wonder, could it also be that spirit within, which lives intensely –heightening and accelerating our perceptions in times of joy, while slowing and elongating them in times of fear?

In the story of creation, - on the first day, God created light and darkness and began time. Then came the seas, the sky, and dry land, followed by things that creep and swim, and fly. Lastly, humankind was created in God's own image, both male and female – created not to be alone, but to be both helpers and partners to each other in all the chance and change of this life. And so we were given the gift of one another as we move through time – if we are willing to give and receive such gifts.

That brings us to today, children of God all of us, brother and sister to one another, with a world of time before us – to spend frivolously, to pas through thoughtfully, to ignore, to run away from, or to embrace as we choose according to the life events we face.

With so much before us, let us take a moment to pray.

Eternal God, who was and is and ever shall be, we gather here - as your children burdened and blessed, with our weaknesses and challenges, with our strengths and gifts, in the midst of our journey through your gift of time. There is much we understand, for you gave us good hearts and minds. And there is much we do not understand, for your hopes and dreams for us, your care and love of us – is beyond our imagination. As we look today at the stories of Abraham and Sarah, and Mary and Martha help us to journey with them through their struggles that like them, when time challenges our faith, it may also strengthen our faith and help us to find you in our midst. Amen.

Our stories today encapsulate the human dilemma, where life either passes all too slowly – or all too quickly. In our Genesis reading, Abraham was visited by the Lord. We should remember this was not Abraham's first encounter with the Lord. For the Lord had promised more than once that Abraham and Sarah would parent a great nation, not only that – also that their descendants would be as numerous as the stars. In today's scriptures, we find Abraham and Sarah in their nineties, being told yet again, that one year hence, Sarah would bear a son. Are we surprised that Sarah laughed at such a ridiculous idea? The mere suggestion of such must have dearly tried their patience. But then, perhaps laughter was easier to let out, than the tears that may have been just below the surface. God's timing was clearly not their timing. Put yourself in the place to those two, could even God bring forth a child from a father of ninety-nine, and a wife of equally advanced years. Yet Sarah, while she may have doubted God, nevertheless, feared God, feared/respected God's power and possibility as shown in her denial of her laughter.

Luke's gospel shows us the other side of the coin. Mary and Martha were at home, when their friend, Jesus, came to visit. With his unexpected time of arrival Martha quickly tended to the house-cleaning, while Mary stopped what she is doing and simply sat next to Jesus as he taught her. Martha pointed to the unfairness of the situation, but Jesus validated Mary's choice, to stop and learn. In the brevity of his visit, Martha missed the chance to join with them.

Which way is it for you? Is time moving too slowly? Or are events and the people in your life moving so rapidly, that you cannot keep up with them? There is hurt in both these stories, a sense of emptiness and of loss. But there is also something else. Notice, there are people able to be present to one another.

When timing leads us to think we are missing out, or hurt or feel empty, how is it that we feel about God? Angry is one possibility. Why, after all, hasn't God chosen to bless me – the way others are blessed? Doubtful is another. How can I believe in a God that lets things happen the way they do? People in the insurance industry classify hurricanes and floods, up-rooted trees, and more as "acts of God". But for me, such an understanding of God is too simplistic. I don't see God as controlling the

workings of creation, but rather setting it free and walking with it as a loving Parent – who rejoices in the right, and is grief-stricken when tragedy occurs. But, just as we notice Mary and Martha there to support one another, and Abraham and Sarah present to one another, is it such a stretch to think of God as also present to them – and if them, then why not us?

Our lives are filled with challenges and blessed time. Yet we rarely take time to recognize our blessings – until they are threatened. We are much better at seeing the negative, and recognizing our broken places. It is here, I think, that we need to recall the story of creation and the fact that God gave us one another with whom to journey through this gift of human life. And there is a story of one such life written by Jack Reimer of the Houston Chronicle that I'd like to share with you now.

“On November 18, 1995, Itzhak Perlman, the violinist, came on stage to give a concert at Lincoln Center in New York City. If you have ever been to a Perlman concert, you know that getting on stage is no small achievement for him. He was stricken with polio as a child, so he has braces on both legs and walks with the aid of two crutches.

To see him walk across the stage one step at a time, painfully and slowly, is an unforgettable sight. He walks painfully, yet majestically, until he reaches for his chair. Then he sits down, slowly puts his crutches on the floor, undoes the clasps on his legs, tucks one foot back and extends the other foot forward. Then he bends down and picks up the violin, puts it under his chin, nods to the conductor and proceeds to play. By now, the audience is used to this ritual and sits quietly while he makes his way across the stage to the chair. They remain reverently silent while he undoes the clasps on his legs. They wait until he is ready to play.

But this time, just as he finished the first few bars, one of the strings on his violin broke. You could hear it snap. It went off like gunfire across the room. There was no mistaking what that sound meant or what he had to do. People who were there that night thought to themselves, “We figured that he would have to get up, put on the clasps again, pick up the crutches and limp his way off stage to either find another violin or else find another string.

But he didn't. Instead, he waited a moment, closed his eyes and then signaled to the conductor to begin again. The orchestra began and he played from where he had left off. And he played with such passion and such power and such purity as they had never heard before. Of course, anyone knows it is impossible to play a symphonic work with just three strings. I know that and you know that, but that night, Itzhak Perlman refused to know that. You could see him modulating, changing, and recomposing the piece in his head. At one point it sounded like he was de-tuning the strings to get new sounds from them that they had never made before.

When he finished there was an awesome silence in the room and then the people cheered. There was an extraordinary outburst of applause from every corner of the auditorium. We were all on our feet, screaming and cheering, doing everything we could to show how much we appreciated what he had done.

He smiled, wiped the sweat from his brow, raised his bow to quiet us. And then he said, not boastfully, but in a quiet pensive and reverent tone, 'You know, sometimes it's the artist's task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left.'"

Itzhak Perlman's gift to the audience that night was not just a gift of his skill as a musician. It was in his daring to share his brokenness, and to deny the easy human concept of "impossible" that we find the real gifts. For when we are willing to share all of who we are – our gifts along with our broken edges, we discover the depth and gift of human wholeness. We are all broken in one place or another. We are also all gifted – created to care for one another.

That night Itzhak Perlman's plight must have seemed a painfully long period of time, perhaps most agonizing to those who were waiting. But they stayed with him, and he shared all he had to share with them. The story may at first cast the image of a sole figure on the stage, but he was surrounded by the orchestra, the conductor, and each member of the audience. They could have interrupted the process, but they didn't. They hung in there, they stayed with him – and an event which defied imagination took place. God's grace touched everyone present. There was a sense in those moments that this is what it is all about.

My prayer for us this day is that the time we inhabit now might become a time when we can be fully present, live passionately, share our gifts, and not be fearful of letting our broken places show. Then maybe we, too, will be blessed with moments of "what it's all about". And glimpsing Eternity better come to know our God who journeys with us. Amen.