

“WHAT TIME IS IT?” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, January 3, 2016

We live in a time conscious world—not just at New Year’s but throughout the year. Folks today are always checking their watches, clocks, cell phones, and calendars. We call friends up and ask them to do something with us. The first question asked: “When?” or “What date and time?” Then they usually say, “Okay. Let me check my calendar...” We talk about “clocking” and “calendarizing” things all the time.

Of course, reflecting the fact that time is a built-in facet of nature, measurable by everything from tree rings to the radioactive decay of rocks, human beings have probably always been time-aware. The Bible acknowledges this. Significantly, the first chapter of the Old Testament Book of Genesis goes to great lengths to explain for us how God created heaven and earth in seven days. (*Genesis 1:1-2, 4*) Moreover, following the story of Noah and the Great Flood, Genesis as the “Book of Beginnings” further declares that “as long as the world exists, there will be a time for planting and a time for harvest. There will always be cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night.” (*Genesis 8:22*) Later, however, biblical scripture also acknowledges that time can be relative and that God’s time is not the same as our own. Specifically, the Apostle Peter writes to the Christian faithful awaiting the second coming of Christ that “With the Lord one day is a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.” (*2 Peter 3:8*)

Historically, anthropologists and archaeologists have often assessed the sophistication of any given civilization, ancient or modern, by its clocks and calendars. The ancient Sumerians and Egyptians hold us in awe today for the great strides they made with sun clocks or sun dials. The early Greeks and Chinese impress us with the accuracy of their water clocks. And right here in the Americas the Mayan and Aztec civilizations created elaborate systems for accurately calendarizing the days of the year—maybe not as good as our own 365 day per year calendar but pretty close.

Our English word *calendar* from the Latin noun *calendarium*, meaning account book or index. That original Latin meaning of the term is most fitting because

calendars help us—whatever the age or locale in which we live—to keep account of days, months, and years. Almost universally, the development of calendars has been based upon the movements of the sun or moon in relation to the earth—or vice versa. In other words, our calendars can be solar or lunar.

The ancient Babylonian calendar, devised in the “Cradle of Civilization” in the valley where the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates meet in present-day Iraq, was definitely lunar. A new month began every time a new crescent moon appeared low in the night sky. Perhaps because the Jewish people were conquered and enslaved by the Babylonians, they too adopted a lunar calendar, creating a year that extended twelve months and only 354 days. Thus, approximately, every three years, the Jewish people had to add another full month to their lunar calendar in order to keep up with the seasons as dictated by weather and agricultural cycles.

Borrowing or adapting words from the Babylonian and Assyrian languages, the names for the months of the Jewish calendar are Nisan, Iyar, Sivan, Tammuz, Av, Elul, Tishrei, Cheshvan, Kislev, Tevet, Shevat, and Adar. The additional month necessary to keep the Jewish calendar on track is called Adar Bet.

Does all this sound strange? It would not have been strange to Jesus. As a devout Jew, he conducted his daily life according to the months of the Jewish lunar calendar. The 25th of December which we celebrate as his birthday would have been observed as the tenth day of Shevat.

The daily calendar that is now used in the United States and throughout most of the world dates back to Roman times preceding Jesus’ own birth. Based on the rotation of the earth around the sun, rather than the cycles of the moon, it has pagan origins. In 46 B.C., the Roman leader Julius Cesar established by a law a new 365 day calendar, adding one day every four years. Named after Julius Cesar, this Julian Calendar wasn’t widely used by Jesus’ followers until after the destruction of the Great Jerusalem Temple in 70 A.D., forty years after Jesus’ death.

Fast forward 1500 years. In 1582, Pope Gregory XIII, the head of the Roman Catholic Church, proposed an update for the Julian Calendar to keep it more

accurate. The whole calendar was shifted thirteen days forward to better align it with the spring and winter solstices when the earth is either closest or farthest away from the sun. Adopted by the Roman Catholic Church and then our Protestant churches, this calendar revision came to be known as the “Gregorian Calendar” to honor the pope who proposed it. But to this day Eastern Orthodox Christian Churches have never acknowledged the spiritual leadership of Pope Gregory or the calendar changes he laid out. Consequently, the Eastern Orthodox Churches continue to abide by the older, less accurate Julian Calendar. This is the reason the Russian and Greek Orthodox Churches won’t be celebrating Christmas until next week on January 7th.

Like the Jews before them, the early Christians fiercely combatted the polytheism or worship of many gods that was pagan practice. Yet, in the end, finding their own way as a distinct community of faith and looking to convert pagans to Christ, the early Christians opted for the Roman calendar rather than the Jewish calendar. Thus, Christians embraced a calendar with months named after pagan deities. For example, the months of January and March are named in honor of the pagan gods Janus and Mars. And July and August have their sources in the names of Julius Caesar and his nephew, the Emperor Augustus Caesar, whose representatives crucified Jesus. Likewise, days like Thursday and Saturday are named after the pagan gods Thor and Saturn.

Despite this embrace of the Roman *calendarium*, Jesus’s followers did try to Christianize everybody’s time-keeping and date-keeping where they could. Accordingly, they encouraged the faithful to use Jesus’ birth as the fresh starting-date for the count of time. By Jewish reckoning, Jesus was born in the year 3760. But Christians instead identify the year of Jesus’ birth as zero. Given the influence of the Christian Western World, much of the rest of our planet now counts the years in the same way.

Among Christians it has become habit to refer to the years after Jesus birth as “A.D.”—an abbreviation for the Latin words *Anno Domini*, meaning “In the Year of Our Lord.” Years prior to Jesus’ birth are designated as “B.C.,” in other words, “Before Christ.” However, non-Christians who do not embrace Jesus as Lord and Savior as we do don’t always feel comfortable with these “B.C.” and “A.D.”

references which they regard as statements of faith. As a result, they often prefer using the letter “B.C.E.” or “C.E.” next to any given year which, translated, stands for “Before Common Era” or “Common Era.” This is a declaration on their part that, even though they choose to share our year-to-year dating system, it’s a matter of pragmatism, rather than faith.

Of course, counting time from Jesus’ birth was not the only way that the Christian churches sought to Christianize time. In the Fourth Century, A.D., when the New Testament was being assembled in its present form, the Christian churches began to develop a special calendar for worship use. The outcome was a calendar with six seasons. Most of you are already familiar with these seasons. Starting from the beginning, they include Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. Each season emphasizes a different aspect of Jesus’ life and ministry and God’s efforts on behalf our salvation. Moreover, the Christian Churches began to identify certain days as especially important. The first day of each new season was to be highlighted. But other days were incorporated into the worship calendar as well—most notably, Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday, but dozens of other days dedicated to the memory of particular Christian saints and martyrs.

The great Protestant reformer Martin Luther thought attention to the saints was getting out of hand, displacing Jesus as the focus of faith. Accordingly, he abolished prayers directed to the saints and eliminated the days devoted to honoring them. Yet he kept the all major seasons and days of the Christian worship calendar and encouraged other Protestant reformers do so as well, even though some, such as John Calvin, did choose to abandon them. Indeed, among some radical Protestants, even the celebration of Christmas was suspect, criticized for being too pagan and too Catholic.

The conflict between Christian churches over the worth of a sacred Christian calendar is exemplified by actual correspondence that took place during the early 19th century between an Anglican Catholic Priest and a very Protestant Presbyterian minister. When the priest sent a letter to the minister dated “January 17th, St. Anthony’s Day,” the minister responded with a letter dated

“January 20th, Washing Day.” It was his way of saying that any allegiance to traditional saints’ days was foolishness.

Here at St. Paul Church we have roots in the both the Lutheran and Reformed Protestant traditions. But when it comes to our sacred time-keeping we probably stay closer to our Lutheran roots. Although we don’t emphasize the Christian seasons to the same extent that Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or even high Protestant traditions do, we do recognize and mark the change of seasons through the colors that we wear for the occasion or that adorn our pulpit and lectern. Decorations in our sanctuary also remind us of the Christian season at hand. If there are lights and tree up, you know it’s Advent or Christmas. If just the star is shining, then we’ve arrived at Epiphany. Finally, the appearance of an old rugged cross at the front of our sanctuary, hewn from the last live Christmas tree ever used by our congregation, puts us on notice that it’s the start of Lent and that Holy Week and Eastern are already looming on the horizon. That same cross festooned with a spray of lilies announces the joy of Easter in our midst.

I was personally raised in a very reformed church community. Apart from Christmas and Easter, there was no notice of the different sacred seasons. Yet as I have gotten older I have come to appreciate our sacred calendar as it highlights Jesus’ birth, death, and resurrection. For me our Christian seasonal calendar is a call to walk in time with Jesus and to serve him in all seasons of the year. Provided we don’t get distracted from keeping Jesus Christ the center of our lives, the flourishes with which we observe the Christian calendar add a richness to our lives and make our faith journey more meaningful.

As we continue a New Year, which actually began by our Christian reckoning on the first Sunday of Advent more than four weeks ago, may we recommit ourselves to walk at all times with Jesus Christ as our savior. **Amen.**