

“What Time Is It?”  
Communion Meditation by Rev. David D. Colby  
First Presbyterian Church of Marshfield  
July 2, 2023  
Scripture: Jeremiah 28:5-9 and Matthew 10:40-42

I serve as the Transitional General Presbyter for Winnebago Presbytery. Nearly every word of that sentence could be more confusing than clarifying, even for Presbyterians.

You know, when I was five I wanted to be an astronaut, and then when I was six, I wanted to be a baseball player, but when I turned seven, I realized that my biggest dream was to one day become a Transitional General Presbyter. [*sarcasm!*]

We don't have bishops – we don't put that much power in any one persons hands – but if we did, I would be like a transitional or interim bishop for NE Wisconsin Presbyterians. To be a pastor to pastor, to support the mission and ministry of 29 congregations, to offer strategic guidance, help in times of crisis, connect to resources, both regionally and denomination-wide.

I am delighted to be with you at First Presbyterian Church during Laurie's sabbatical.

Let's begin with a prayer:

May the words of my mouth,  
And the meditations of all our hearts,  
Be acceptable to you, for you, O Lord,  
Are our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Do you know what time it is?

Tone matters, of course, but if someone asks me that question, my starting assumption is that I have done something wrong. That question often sets me into a panic. Am I late for something? Did I overlook something on my calendar? If I would have been greeted by this question as I walked into church this morning, I would have assumed that despite double and triple checking your website and the bulletin drafts I was sent to confirm that worship starts at 9:30 that I have that wrong and your summer worship start time is 9. (You really don't know how much this one freaks out a guest preacher.

What time is it?

- It's 9:53 says the literal ones in the congregation
- It's sabbatical time – say the staff and session who are having to step up to do additional work and connecting and those who show up in worship still expecting Laurie to be here only to remember – oh yeah, some stranger in the pulpit.

What time is it?

- It's summer – partway through what for many is a wonderfully long weekend
- It's almost time for tomatoes say the gardeners and farmers market aficionados.

I have two kids and my youngest, Max came home from preschool with this great chant:

What time is it?

It's time to have some fun.

Phh uh uh uh un. What time is it?!

I remember that fondly. You can probably tell that I really enjoyed this chant – and get into it. The problem is that that kid just finished 7<sup>th</sup> grade. And if I ever start this chant in his presence, I get a stare and then a wicked eyeroll. It turns out for Max it is long past the time for this chant.

But the question is still a good one. Worthy of exploration. A spiritual question about how we will choose to use the time that we have.

You know – if we knew the horizon of our full life – it would go so much better. How much money do we have to have invested for retirement – an easier decision if we know exactly how long we will live. That is the plot of more than one excellent book – in which a character or characters, are told the date on which they will die.

It's a fascinating plot device, and I could see how it would help to make decisions about money and whether or not to pursue pleasure or delay gratification and so on, but it would also be terrifying knowledge to live with.

But that is not the case – for most of us at least. We know that we are mortal, that we will one day return to dust – but again, for most of us, we have no idea of the years and decades to come. So the question remains – as we try to go about our lives, can we do the difficult work of discerning what time is it? Is it a time to keep working, or can we retire early? Is it a time to eat rich food and luxuriate or is it a time to begin a diet? Is it a time to move for that new job or to be closer to family or whatever, or is it time to really sink our roots deep. Do we put our names on the waiting list of the Assisted Living Community – or do we wait until it is closer to when we think we will really need to be there. Trying to figure out what time it is for us.

A lot of my work is spent with Sessions and pastors and congregations thinking through this question for a church. What time is it in the life of the congregation? Is it time to step on the gas, to add staff and really capitalize on some momentum and ramp up programming? Other churches, at a different point in a congregational life cycle, have to come to terms with never being able to afford a pastor again.

It's a tough time to be church. I feel like my whole career has been during times of exciting change (more on that during the forum for those who are interested) but also the decline of the mainline denomination church. So many challenges, and now, in this (what do we call it?) late Covid, post-Covid time, so much uncertainty.

It was a rather chaotic week in our country and in the world. Last Sunday I awoke to news of a convoy marching on Moscow, and the threat of a coup or a civil war. Trying to figure out if that was good news or dangerous news or what. And then on to days with terrible air quality, wondering if this is the new normal for us in the Midwest. Warnings to stay indoors. Wondering whether or not to cancel sports and exercise. And then capping off the week, a series of opinions released by the United States Supreme Court, with rulings and impacts that will feel intensely personal and far-ranging to many in worship today.

What time is it? What are we, as people of faith, supposed to do in this time of war and destructive climate change and when fear is rampant and discrimination is acceptable?

The prophet Jeremiah, in our passage this morning, speaks to a time not that dissimilar to ours. A time when different people are prophesying. When worried voices are speaking loudly and public pronouncements are coming fast and furious.

Jeremiah has been offering words of comfort but also challenge to a people who have been exiled, who are living far from their homeland. And now in our snippet of a passage today, Jeremiah acknowledges that there are other prophets out there. And they have a completely different outlook. Polarized views on current events, with very different diagnoses of the problem and urging solutions that seem diametrically opposed.

These few verses from Jeremiah give just a glimpse for today of a contest between two prophets: Hananiah, who proposes that the exiles should revolt against the Babylonians, or submit to their captors, and bide their time, as Jeremiah proposes. It turns out that this snippet of a passage remembers a key moment – a time to decide – a hinge point. And the people of Israel had to discern what it was that they were called to do and then act upon it.<sup>1</sup>

A different book of the Bible, the wisdom of material from Ecclesiastes says that there is a time for every purpose under heaven. A time for war, and a time for peace. Jeremiah might say that is all good and true – but right now – you need to decide which time it is. Is it a time for war, or a time for peace? And what kind of peace? Spoiler alert – Jeremiah – the true prophet in this contest – his news would not be viewed as instantly good news. No victory celebrations would erupt, no fireworks would be set off. For Jeremiah, it would be a time of waiting, of staying in exile.

How about here at First Presbyterian Church in Marshfield. What time is it? I would begin by saying that this is a summer weekend, in the midst of a good and helpful pastoral sabbatical. Now is not the time for major strategic conversations while Laurie is gone – you trust her and need her to help with those conversations. A sabbatical is not the time to launch a major capital campaign or make decisions on that will impact the course of a congregation. It is a breathing time, for Laurie, but also for you. A chance to catch your breath. To reflect upon where you have come as a congregation, and start to anticipate what new ventures you will embark upon starting this fall. It's a reminder to everyone to catch your breath, to think broadly, to remember what energizes you.

And yet – some things can be done even now. You don't need to wait for Laurie to be the church. To welcome the stranger. To care for one another. To reach out to newcomers. The Gospel story keeps it pretty simple. Basic acts of kindness and goodness matter. To offer up a cold cup of water to someone who is thirsty.

To offer a concrete act of hospitality and welcome. You have a sign out on the corner of Lincoln and Y that says, "We Choose Welcome," and I grabbed a bookmark with that same slogan. That choice of welcome and kindness may take the shape of small acts – and yet the intention is as gracious and can be far-reaching. Choosing welcome would capture a part of the DNA of this church that I have come to experience. Choosing welcome. Offering hospitality.

That may be your work this summer. To choose welcome. Welcoming strangers into worship – and even into your pulpit. Choosing welcome to one another, and welcome to the Spirit of God that will be present in simple gifts of bread that sustain us and a taste of juice that offers a foretaste of a heavenly banquet.

May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Sophia Baard, in Feasting on the Word (Year A, Vol. 3) ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2011) 170.