

“Past, Present, and Future Meet”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Psalm 148

Luke 2:22-38

Congratulations! In 37 hours, we will have all **survived** 2018! Maybe you have already thought about your personal best and worst of this year, and also of the best and worst we have experienced together as a community, as a country, and as a world. Now we are in that in-between space that Christmas and New Year’s cradles. It is a good time to look backwards, look forwards, around at the present, and see where God is born.

I want to ask you a question that I hope you will turn over in your head as this sermon continues. “What are you trying to survive right now?”

The second question I want to ask you is this:

“How can God be present in this moment to help you give birth to a future that has hope in it?”

I have asked these questions on a piece of paper that was given to you when you came into the church. Think of how you would respond to these questions during the sermon if you can do two things at once. If you want to check out during my part of the sermon and just write your responses, I give you permission to not listen to me, if there is a more important voice that needs to speak to you or through you right now. However, there will be a few minutes at the end of the sermon when you can also write down your own thoughts.

In a church like ours, we have several moments of counting when the New Year begins. The first Sunday of December was actually the first Sunday

of the Christian year, which starts with Advent. And then in February, we will celebrate the Lunar New Year as we head into the Year of the Pig. And we know that the foundation for Jesus' life and ministry is Judaism, which marks the New Year on Rosh Hashanah in the fall.

What can we say besides the fact that we are constantly marking time and reflecting upon God's role in it? In Christian tradition, Jesus doesn't get born just once; we retell and await the drama of his birth Every. Single. Year.

Spiritually speaking, time is not a linear thing. In other words, time does not happen in a straight line. Time is an important theme for the passage today, and in the passage, we can see a space where past, present, and future intersect. The verses start by setting the scene: "When the *time* came for their purification according to the law of Moses, [Joseph and Mary] brought [Jesus] up to Jerusalem to present him to The Lord." Of course, Jesus is the present, and as is the Jewish custom reaching back to the time of Moses, his parents are presenting him for blessing in the Temple, and giving an offering for sacrifice. The fact that their offering is a pair of birds rather than a lamb indicate that they were poor, not wealthy.

As Mary and Joseph bring their child to the Temple, they encounter the past represented by two elders in the Temple, Simeon and Anna. But although they are both advanced in age-- Simeon waiting for his death, and Anna an 84 year-old widow, they both speak words that witness to the future. It had been revealed to Simeon by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. When he beheld the young Jesus, Simeon blessed him and announced, "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel." In the present moment of holding a baby, this older man, who had seen the past, could also see the future. Anna, who had dedicated herself to the Temple, announced to all around that this child beheld the future redemption of Jerusalem.

The interaction between Anna and Simeon, Mary and Joseph, and the baby Jesus is an illustration of what I love so much about the church. It is a place where the generations come together. Old people do not get trapped in nostalgia for the past but proclaim bold visions for the future. Moments that get held and drawn out, so that we can meditate on God's presence before we have to rush on to the next things, just as Simeon could not rush on to die until he had a chance to behold the Messiah. Children held and valued, not just as the future of the church, but as worthwhile participants in the present. People who are widowed, or empty nesters, or who never had kids sit among children who look to them as spiritual role models. Those of the sandwich generation, who have young children and may also be caring for aging parents, get a break where they can go to an adult bible study to tend their own spirituality while someone else takes charge of teaching their own kids. Friendships develop, not because people are at the same stage in life necessarily, or even from the same culture, but because they see in one another a glimpse of who God might be, and find that in their friendship they can in fact grow closer to God.

As a seventh grader, I developed a tendency to stutter. I'd gone through some difficult transitions that shook my confidence. And looking back, I think that I had so much yearning for connection and such a deep desire to be understood, that when I tried to speak it would just come rushing out as a flood and would never make any sense. There was that, and my mouth was literally harnessed by the braces that were trying to organize my teeth. I remember when I wanted to be friends with someone, I would practice in my mind things I would like to say to them so that I would not lose my tongue when we were talking face to face. Of course, the actual conversations always went more awkwardly than the imagined ones in my mind.

I wonder what my parents thought of me then. I know Chris and I have whispered conversations about our daughter's development; when the bedroom door is closed we discuss our parenting choices and remark on

how we see our child growing and changing. I try to imagine what my dad and stepmom might have whispered behind closed doors about me. To be honest, they might have been worried about whether I would turn out okay. And my mom, she didn't have a parenting partner to whisper to, but I am sure she wondered too.

If I could have told my younger self that I would grow to be a preacher, I am not sure I would have believed it. As a child, I did not have much of a compass. Although I was compassionate and kind, I could not envision a future beyond surviving the next hurdle life threw out at me.

But I like to think that maybe God knew what the future would hold for me, so perhaps God's Spirit was there, holding and comforting me in my most uncertain times.

Years ago, when I was working in youth ministry, I had a kid, a 7th grader, whose parents came to me because they were worried about him. "All he wants to do is play video games," both parents, who were doctors, lamented. The mom tried to nudge him towards skateboarding, just to get him out of the house. But other than that, and showing up at church occasionally, he spent most of his free time on video games.

Well, just last night one of the adults who had volunteered with the youth group sent me a link to an article in the Chicago Tribune. This kid is now 23 years old and works as an elite, professional... video gamer. He makes up to \$25,000 per month and enters tournaments where the prize is \$250,000 per team. I regret telling his parents years ago that they shouldn't be afraid to unplug the Nintendo, because it is doubtful he is now tithing that money to his church!

I asked Nick Topousis, who came to our church as a teenager and now has some of the perspective of adulthood to look back on his childhood and tell

us something he or others never would have expected of his future, when he was a child.

(Nick shares...)

I like to wonder what Jesus and those around him expected of his future when he was a child. Jesus was like at his most awkward and most uncertain point of childhood or adolescence. We don't hear much about that time, although there are some funny stories in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, which was never declared authoritative enough to make it into our bible. There we see a young Jesus, 5, 6, 12 years old, who is wrestling to know how to use his powers appropriately. Should he smite people who disagree with him? When a child he is playing with accidentally falls off the roof and dies, Jesus resurrects the boy-- but it is to prove that Jesus did not push the boy more than it is to value the boy's life.

Of course, we have seen angels and shepherds and next week we will see the magi. We already know from the beginning that this is no ordinary baby. But because God chose in Jesus to fully enter the human experience, we can believe that Jesus was vulnerable to the same kinds of fears and insecurities about the future that we are. And just as Christ has been born to us this day, Christ will be born again into our future, each and every day, so that we never know a moment that was not infused with God's holiness.

In Greek, there is a distinction between regular time-- Chronos-- and holy time, which is called Kairos. *Chronos* time can be measured by a watch, or by the sun's path across the sky. *Kairos* time is measured in moments full of growth or change, and it can be personal but it can also be communal. You cannot plan *Kairos* moments, but you can be ready for them, so that you recognize them when they are here. As we prepare to hand 2018 to the past and rise to greet a new year, let us look for moments when we

might see that God can be born into our time, with all its struggles and yearnings, infusing us with holy possibility.

I will now give you a few minutes in silence to write your own letters and prayers. Seal and self-address them, then send them to your future. Write in whatever language fits you best- it is only for you to read. If you need more time than this service, you can bring it back next week. I will mail these letters back to you several months from now, when this moment is forgotten.