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 Texts: Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8; Matthew 16: 1-3
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Old Growth

On occasion, I hear an opinion from one or another member of this community that I'm sure is exceedingly rare. The service was good, they'll tell me, and the sermon was just fine too, so far as it went. But that's the thing, they'll inform me: it *went* too long. Now I'm confident that doesn't represent the content of *your* innermost thoughts on Sunday mornings, but on occasion it might represent the thought of your spouse or your neighbor. Whenever I hear such things, I take it in stride, because I know something that almost no one else knows. I see what no one else can see. There is in plain sight from where I stand a clock, on the upper left-hand wall. And the minute hand is forever hovering just above the 9. It has been that way for years, maybe decades, but what it means is this: when one stands in the pulpit of the First Congregational Church of Old Lyme, it is always 15 minutes before the hour! What a fortunate accident – a preacher's ultimate fantasy. I will even tell you this: even I have had Sundays when, standing up here, I can feel that it's going a little too long, but then I look up at our clock and – happy day! – find to my astonishment that I still have 15 minutes before all of you rise up in mutiny. One former minister of this church called this pulpit a sacred piece of real estate, and you now know why. Here, the flow of time has at last been arrested and in such a way as to give the preacher a chance to make one final point.

I share all of that to make a serious point. In faith, as in all of life, the driving question behind most all that we do is this: “what time is it, anyway?” The various books of the Bible are all consumed with answering that all important question. But the biblical writers give the question a different shade of meaning, for in that part of the ancient world, time was far less a unit of measurement of before and after. Instead, it's more a designation of quality or characteristics. Think of the way the book of Ecclesiastes puts it: “there is a time for everything...a time for giving birth, a time for dying, a time for planting, a time for uprooting, a time for killing, a time for healing...” and so forth. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the trick is always to discern what character the time has, and what it is calling for in each individual moment. To the question, what time is it, in other words, an ancient Hebrew would have responded by ascertaining what needed to be done in that particular moment. Each time the question was asked, a new and different response would be required. Was it a time that called for mourning, or a time that called for celebration? Was it a moment that required fasting, or was it a time in which to eat well? To misjudge or misunderstand the time could be catastrophic. You may remember a story found at the end of the book of Genesis, about the Egyptians. When told that a famine is coming, they fail to read the times correctly. They might have starved, but for Joseph, who in his wisdom did understand the time, directing that grain be stored away for the coming emergency. To put a finer point on it, I'm reminded of a cartoon that hangs upstairs in our church office, depicting dinosaurs standing on the last remaining piece of dry land as Noah's ark sails away. One dinosaur looks to the other and says, “Oh shit. Was that today?” Failure to understand the time, and what the time calls for, can have serious consequences.

That same quality of time can be found in the Gospels as well. Jesus is forever playing with time in his parables, such that listeners, and readers, are left to wonder: is this the time when the owner of the vineyard shall return? Is this the night that the thief shall break in? Is this the hour when the Son of Man shall appear? What time is it, anyway? In a testy exchange with the Pharisees and Sadducees, Jesus famously proclaims that for all their learning, they have little skill in discerning the signs of the times. They were too caught up in the past to be able to read the present effectively, too consumed by their texts and their traditions to sense what was actually going on around them. “Yes, you can sense what today or tomorrow will demand,” Jesus tells them, “but you have little idea of just what time it is, and what the time requires.” For Jesus, the time required abandoning the old religious strictures, such that a rural peasant population suffering the effects of empire could at last sense their dignity and humanity as children of God.

One of the great gifts of biblical faith is that it is never static, but always dynamic. In that, faith stands in stark contradistinction to belief. Faith is what is entrusted to us by Jesus. Beliefs, by contrast, are what the Pharisees and Sadducees remain trapped within. Faith has to do with discerning what the times require *now*, in this moment, not twenty years ago or two thousand years ago. Beliefs, by contrast, have to do with aligning oneself with particular truths, brands, or ideologies that are unyielding and unchanging. Faith contains within it the gift of freedom, and of improvisation. Belief, on the other hand, demands conformity. Faith implies change, and evolution, and startling development. Belief requires that you get the answers to life’s great mysteries correct, or else! Faith hears in the first great question of the Bible, “Adam, where are you?” an open question from which there is no need to hide, for it is a question of genuine curiosity, like a parent wondering what’s on a child’s mind. Belief hears within it a judgment, a sign of wrath for a failure to obey. Faith understands that God not only is doing a new thing, but is ever becoming something new. Belief, on the other hand, has it that God is the same, yesterday, today and forever. Faith, in other words, is the freedom to respond with creativity to the question of what time it might be, and what the times might require.

Let me put the question to you. What time is it? I mean that question in the biblical sense – what does the time require of you, today, now? Is this a time in which you need to forgive somebody for something they’ve done to you? Is it a time in which you need to end a relationship, or begin one? Is it a time that’s calling for you to make a qualitative change in your life, or is now a time to hold things steady? Is there a new project that it’s finally time to begin, or is there one, perhaps, that it’s time to bring to an end? One of the effects of the pandemic has been to raise questions in all of our minds about what’s worthy of our time and attention, because the truth is, we never quite know what time it is in our lives. It always seems as though we have fifteen more minutes, but one never knows. What does the time require for you?

I’ll let you to ponder that. I’d like to spend what time remains pondering that question at a different scale. What does the time require of us collectively, I wonder? What time is it in the world around us, and what does faith mean in this instant, today, not some previous instant? Who are we to be in this time?

I confess to some trepidation about that question, for I have had a hard time reading the times of late. I know what I see, but I don’t always know what it means. I see many in our country

reverting to nativist impulses, circulating crude and cruel racist and anti-immigrant sentiments in the public sphere. I see in our country a desire among some for authoritarian leaders who deny basic science and verifiable facts. I see a mobilization of class power that's driving those tendencies, a pattern that Jane Mayer has traced in her book *Dark Money*. I see the erosion of civil liberties such as we're seeing in Texas, among other places, where both voting rights and a woman's right to choose what happens to her body are in the process of being stripped. And I see a frightening pattern of climate disasters that, even after thirty years of warnings, a sizable majority of individuals simply can't bring themselves to believe. Now, I can tell a plausible story about each of those phenomena explaining how those tendencies have always been a part of United States history in some form or another. And I can tell an equally plausible story about how we've done our best, sometimes successfully and sometimes not, to yield to the better angels of our humanity. That much I can do when reading the times.

But here's what puzzles me. What does it mean that those patterns aren't unique to the United States at all? What does it mean that countries all around the globe are hemorrhaging from within by those exact same phenomena? Let's name but a few: Brazil under Bolsonaro, Great Britain under Johnson, Israel, until recently under Netanyahu, Turkey under Erdogan, India under Modi, Russia under Putin, the Philippines under Duterte, Hungary under Orban, Haiti, until recently under Moise, Poland under Duda, Tunisia under this new guy Saied, and probably countless other places that I've missed. Each of those places has its own particular story, but they are each places where virtually the same authoritarian and nativist tendencies that we're seeing here are also being unleashed. In each of those cases, including our own, religion has played a decisive role in shaping those tendencies. And often, though not always, it's a very conservative branch of Christianity that has brought about or supported those changes – sometimes under the guise of Catholicism and sometimes under the guise of evangelicalism. That's certainly been true in the United States. But it's also been true in Brazil and in Poland, in Hungary and in Haiti, in the Philippines and I would also add in Israel. Christianity has had a rather abysmal record of late in lending support to anti-intellectual, anti-democratic, and authoritarian regimes around the globe.

I have a hard time wrapping my mind about why this is so. And I have an equally hard time grasping what exactly lies behind it. Maybe some of you have insights, and if so, I'd love to learn from you. But with or without an explanatory story, those global tendencies do represent a sign of the times – a rather dangerous sign - and they do call for a response. That's one reason I think churches like ours are so important in this moment. And it's why I thank God for the ongoing witness of the First Congregational Church of Old Lyme. We represent what I hope is an alternative stream of Christian faith that stands in marked contrast to the far-right tendencies being deployed around the world. That stream of faith is found in liberal Protestantism and in the reforms of Vatican II, now being furthered by Pope Francis. It can be found in Latin American liberation theology and North American black theology. It can be found in *mujerista* theologies, started by women throughout Latin America, and it can be found in *minjung* theologies in South Korea. It can be found in Dalit theologies in India and in queer theologies all around the world (and by the way, don't be thrown by that designation if you come from an earlier generation of LGBTQ activists – that's now the prevailing term). This congregation falls squarely within the tradition of liberal Protestantism, but we have drunk deeply from the wells of many of those other traditions. From the liberal Protestant tradition, we have learned that

religion is not inimical to scientific inquiry but can be entirely compatible with it. From that same tradition, we have learned that religion is not hostile to the freedom of minds and of bodies to think and act for themselves, but is entirely consonant with such values. From liberation theologians, we have learned that religion need not be allied exclusively with capital interests and with industry, but that religion can support the poor, and an ailing planet as well. From black and mujerista and other theologies, we have learned that religion is not a tool to be used in the degradation of people, any people, but is rather a lens through which we can glimpse the infinite value of all. And from queer theologies, we have learned that bodies and the many varieties of bodily pleasure, are not to be shunned but celebrated as a divine gift. I thank God for such theologies in the world, for in a time when repressive and dogmatic versions of politics and Christianity have been fused, they remind us that there exist other, better, more life-giving alternatives. And all along, this community has been paying attention to those alternative voices, all of whom were and are faithful answers to the questions, “What time is it – and what do the times require?” We must keep doing so if we are to respond faithfully to the spirit of these times, our times.

But we’ve also responded in another way that’s been important. We’ve opened ourselves to indigenous and to African expressions of religion that help inform and broaden our sense of who we are. I would go so far as to say that indigenous and African religious expressions represent one of the ways in which God is changing in our present landscape. Let me offer a story. This summer, I spent time talking to my niece Anna, who was about to depart for college. Anna has traveled with us to Green Grass on the Cheyenne River Reservation in South Dakota several times now, and she’s drawn to the spirituality that is expressed there. It’s a total vision that draws her – landscape combined with music combined with visual art combined with a veneration of ancestors combined with a way of life that far too many people have misunderstood. Anna has spent plenty of time in church – her uncle and her grandfather and her great grandfather all work, or worked, in churches – but when it comes to questions of spirit, it’s the vision of life she experienced at Green Grass that seems to draw her most deeply. I feel it too sometimes. Last weekend, I wound up at the Mashantucket-Pequot Reservation, where a Native American powwow was taking place. It was a vision of aesthetic and spiritual splendor, dropped into the woods of rural Connecticut. People from tribes all around the country gathered there for several days, in order to practice and preserve their traditions and rituals. At one point, Travis and I sat watching dancers, dressed in intricate costumes, moving with incomprehensible precision and grace, and then stopping precisely, on the beat, when the drummers ceased to play. The drum represents the heartbeat of the world, Travis explained to me, and each movement of the feet is a chance to be aligned with the rhythm of the earth. It all expressed a way of being attuned to the heartbeat, the very timekeeping of the world, and to adjust one’s movements accordingly.

Young people are hungry for that attunement. It’s why kids seem to come alive when they visit Green Grass. But those of us who are a little older are hungry for it as well. It’s why an author named Robin Wall Kimmerer has gained international prominence of late. Her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, which our own book group has recently discussed, reminds us of a wisdom that is older than whatever fundamentalisms are seizing the world, traditions that offer powerful healing resources. Among those is what she calls the celebration of old growth. “If we are looking for models of self-sustaining communities,” she writes, “we need look no further than an old-growth

forest. Or the old-growth cultures they raised in symbiosis with them.” She has in mind native communities in the Pacific Northwest, but she might just as well be describing the landscape of New England, where old growth trees date back hundreds of years. Such trees grow in the yard of the parsonage. They grow in the nature preserves scattered throughout each of our towns. Indigenous wisdom, and old growth cultures, help to articulate an answer to the question of what the times might require. Such wisdom invites us to inhabit a different kind of time altogether, where we learn to think not in years or centuries, but in terms of millennia.

Say it’s true that God not only sometimes does a new thing, but that God is ever becoming new. Say, just perhaps, that it’s so. Might it be, that after all the crusades and colonialisms, the enslavements and invasions, the plunder and the killing, might it be that we are all being directed back toward that which we sought to expunge from the earth all those years ago? Might it be that the times are actually calling for a return toward that which much of Christian culture rejected for so long, namely a relation to the heartbeat of the earth, to the old growth of the world, and to the deep time of a hurting planet? Might it be that such wisdom is precisely what all those nationalisms and fundamentalisms are seeking to sweep away? Might it be that an inhabitable future lies in a fusion of our own faith tradition with the wisdom emanating from indigenous traditions, and African ones as well, which were nourished in similar soil, soil that produces old growth?

You’ll have questions, no doubt, about the ethics of such a vision, about the mechanics of such a vision, and so forth. I have those questions too. The good news is that here at FCCOL we’re practiced in raising such questions, and sometimes even exploring what a credible answer might entail. In the meantime, you’ll be glad to know that, even though the minute hand on the clock suggests that it’s 15 minutes before the hour, I do know what time it is. I hope we can each of us say the same. As a famous biblical character has it, even now the hour is at hand. Amen.