

I have been doing a lot of thinking about time recently. This occurs naturally in the rhythm of ministers' lives because we preach the Word of God and that Word tells of God's master stories from the past that shape and guide our present. Stories such as God leading the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt to the promised land, and stories of death and resurrection. And that Word also calls us to look, not only backward to God's stories from the past, but also forward toward God's vision of the future—a vision wherein all creation will be restored. That vision of the future is perhaps even more important because it is in essence our mission: we exist to work with God to bring about the future of God: the healing of creation. Thus we begin with the end in mind, and our end in mind is that future time toward which creation is moving when God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things will have passed away (Revelation 21:4). In essence, the Church also affirms the almost impossible notion that that promised future is actually moving backward in time to our present to draw us forward in time to its present.

Now, I know that many people in the sanctuary this morning are not exactly regular church goers. After all, our average Sunday has 250-300 people and today we expect 800-900. So I am sure that there are at least a few of you who must be thinking, "Oh, come off it, preacher man, time is linear. The future doesn't go backward and the present doesn't leap forward. Can't the church EVER admit to the discoveries of science?" Actually, and curiously, there is a growing body of evidence that it is the other way around: that the discoveries of science are admitting the ancient truths of religion, particularly when it comes to time.

It was Einstein and his theory of relativity that really got this going. As startling as this may be to most non-scientists and even to some scientists, Einstein concluded in his later years that the past, present, and future all exist simultaneously. He believed there is no true division between past and future; there is rather a single existence. When Einstein's lifelong friend Besso died, Einstein wrote a letter to Besso's family, saying that although Besso had preceded him in death it was of no consequence, '...for us physicists believe the separation between past, present, and future is only an illusion, although a convincing one.'

This whole speculation about time in the world of physics has been quite heated recently due to the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) in Switzerland. You know, that 17-mile-long underground circle where scientists are hurling atoms at each other trying to find physical evidence of the theorized Higgs boson, sometimes quite erroneously called 'the God particle.' It seems that the LHC has been having a series of mysterious setbacks that keep it from concluding the existence, or non-existence, of the Higgs boson. The most famous setback was when a piece of baguette, apparently dropped by a bird, short-circuited the power supply to the collider, causing yet another shut down. CERN's spokesperson said that the piece of baguette was, and I quote, "naked and unfilled", and had caused a short circuit when dropped on an electrical installation that supplies energy to the massive experiment. While the bird was unconfirmed as the definite culprit, it had been spotted beforehand carrying bread near the substation, said the spokesperson. You would think scientists might write off this event as a freak accident. You would be wrong. Two well respected physicists have formulated a theory of, and I swear I am not making this up, "Reverse Chronological Causation." In other words, a time-traveling bird was sent from the future to sabotage the experiment. Bech Nielsen of the Niels Bohr Institute in

Copenhagen and Masao Ninomiya of the Yukawa Institute for Theoretical Physics in Kyoto, have published several papers over the past year arguing that the CERN experiment may be the latest in a series of physics research projects whose purposes are so unacceptable to the universe that they are doomed to fail, subverted by the future. The papers suggest that the Higgs boson may be "abhorrent to nature" and the LHC's creation of the Higgs sometime in the future sends itself backward through time to sabotage its own discovery. Harvard post-doc and CERN collaborator Kevin Black relates their argument to the grandfather paradox—that a particle like the Higgs boson goes back in time and prevents its own birth (i.e. the future changes the events of the present).

So, I have a quiz for everyone this morning. Which of the following statements is so absurdly outrageous that it cannot possibly be believed?<sup>1</sup>

An enslaved people was led out of slavery to freedom by a series of ten plagues—frogs, boils, hail, locusts, etc., and by walking through a sea that parted and stood as walls on either side of them as they passed through it.

God took human form for human sake, lived and ministered among us, was crucified, died and buried, and rose again on the third day.

A time-travelling bird intentionally sabotaged the scientific discipline of particle physics by dropping a piece of baguette on power lines because the Higgs Boson's future intercedes in the present because it does not want to be discovered.

All of the above.

I have been doing a lot of thinking about time recently, and not only because the church year demands it, and not only because world renowned physicists are speculating about it, but also because the human condition exists . . . in time, and I am noting that many people struggle because of that. That is to say, some people's lives are so marked by emotional and/or physical pain that has gone on so long that it is as if a time travelling bird or imp has come back from the future to sabotage a release from a painful present. I am thinking of man whose wife committed suicide to spare him from the consequences of her actions . . . and the nightmare his life has become. I am thinking of my friend Kathy Martini's parents whose lives have been shattered by their daughter's contract rape and murder. I am thinking of a woman named Hazel who spent her life alone and saw herself so useless that she could not even die when she hoped she would, which she interpreted as meaning that not even God wanted her. I am talking about people whose past holds a specific history of crushing anguish, whose future seems to hold no promise of relief and whose resultant present can only be defined as "hell."

I have been doing a lot of thinking about time recently, praying that God's promised future would hurry the heck up and save a lot of people from their present hell. I have also been doing that thinking in terms the present mission that God has provided us . . . because the people I spoke of above have turned to the church—that beloved community of incarnate love—to help them in their present.

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this quiz was first written by the Rev. Erika Hewitt, in an article published by the Church of the Larger Fellowship, Vol. LXVI, No. 4, April 2011.

And we the church do this by emulating Jesus, by so completely ministering to others that we let our hearts be broken as acts of saving love. Said differently, the action of God in the past and the promise of God's restored creation in the future invite us into being ministers of God's compassion in the present. If we open ourselves and allow our hearts to be broken so we can listen to and embrace another's pain, together we are bearing that pain into the heart of God and resurrecting God's pure love—literally creating God's future now. This is how Jesus endured the cross, and how we can do the same. For Christians, resurrection is not simply a past reality that informs our present, it is a future reality that guides our present. The working of the resurrection happens across time, where the past and the future collide, like atomic particles in a physicist's accelerator. But unlike the Higgs boson's future working to *sabotage* our present, God's future works to *redeem* our present and give us the strength to live through today into tomorrow.

There are, beyond doubt, many of you in this sanctuary this morning holding pain so deep that you wonder how you can live one more day with your burden. There are many here today who have been through that hell and remember the fragility of that "time." And there are also many here whose future will know the suffering of the cross. And in that space where past and future meet, stands the Church—that place of the eternal present that travels both with God and humanity, facing in both directions, offering the strength of God's love, the ministry of God's son, and the blessing of the God's Spirit. Thanks be to God for our past and future present. And thanks be to God for the blessing of ministering in Jesus' name. And let all the people say: AMEN.