

“What Time Is It?” (A Sermon Suited for New Year’s Day)

Colleagues,

The Rev. Lars Olson is today’s contributor. I haven’t met him, and can tell you nothing about him beyond those things you can read for yourself at the website of [First Lutheran Church, Sioux Falls, South Dakota](#), where he serves as an associate pastor. First Lutheran is a large ELCA congregation with enough oomph to broadcast its Sunday services. Steven Kuhl of Crossings caught one of them a year ago while visiting his parents in nearby Worthington, Minnesota. Pr. Olson was preaching. Steve’s ears, ever attuned to the distinguishing of law and gospel or a lack thereof, perked up. Once home, he wrote to Pr. Olson and secured the transcript you’ll read below.

I bill this in the title above as New Year’s Day preaching. That’s a bit of editorial license. In fact, the day when it happened was the last Sunday in 2014, or in the Church’s reckoning, the first after Christmas. The day’s texts included [Galatians 4:4-7](#) and [Luke 2:22-40](#). You’ll see Pr. Olson making good use of both as he encourages his listeners—that now includes us—to put Christ to the work he was born for.

Thanks indeed to Pr. Olson for his permission, via Steve, to send this to you.

Speaking of time, another reminder that the next Crossings Conference is in the offing. It breaks loose just over three weeks from now, in Belleville, Illinois, across the river from St. Louis. No, it’s not too late to get your registration in. I hope you will if you haven’t yet. The fare will be rich, the feasting grand, and all the more if you’re there to share it.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

“What Time Is It?”

Grace and peace to you, from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who was born under the law in order to redeem us from the law, so that we would no longer be slaves, but heirs of the kingdom. Amen

The birth of Christ was not a secret. It had been foretold, expected, and anticipated and yet it was a complete surprise. Even though Mary and Joseph had been greeted by angels with God’s word about Jesus’ coming, they were in no way prepared for what this child was to accomplish. How could they be? Truly new things are impossible to prepare for, otherwise they would be just updates; newer versions of the same old things. No, when truly new things arrive, we can only just adjust to them upon arrival. And this Jesus, the God in the flesh baby, was truly something new.

So how did they react to this new thing? Well, in exactly the old ways. Did you notice how tied to the regular patterns Mary and Joseph are in the Gospel lesson? Circumcised on the 8th day, according to the law. They reported dutifully for the rites of purification, for both Mary and Jesus, and there they offered a pair of birds just as the law required. You can read all the details for yourself in Leviticus 12 if you like. Luke also points out that Jesus was presented to the Lord, as the first born, to be holy and set aside as God’s own, as God commanded following the Passover in Exodus 13. Yes, you see this new thing that God was doing (Isaiah 43) was incomprehensible to the old ways, and so they treated him as an old thing.

Can you see it? They go through all the laws demands because that is what they know of God! The law gives a pattern, a structure, a set of do's and don'ts. All of which was given by God for the purpose of bringing forth the savior of the world. But as usual, God's law becomes a god to the point that the law is the way of salvation. The do's and don'ts become the ultimate power in the universe. The morality of justice and equality become worshipped and adored as an almighty power that cannot be resisted, whose opponents will all be overthrown. The God we have come to know in Jesus Christ is then seen as a vassal, an underling and a servant of the unchangeable, all powerful *Law*.

It's almost a wrestling match. Like Jacob at the Jabbok River (Genesis 32), or Hulk Hogan vs. Andre the Giant. Or Parents vs. Kids who are trying to open Christmas presents during Advent. You just don't know who will prevail until the moment of truth.

It is in the midst of this confusion, about who is God and ruler—is Jesus our savior, or is the law?—that the old man Simeon and the old prophet Anna appear. There in the temple, in the midst of fulfilling the law's demands, the good news of Christ is revealed. Simeon and Anna both began extolling the wonder of the *Child*, not the keeping of the law. In the temple, surrounded by the people of God, they praise God and talk only of the baby Jesus, saying nothing of the purification rights or the ritual dedication required according to the law. Even the offering of the doves is overlooked, in favor of the little boy in their midst. Both of these devout and elderly persons praise God, pointing only to the long awaited Savior. Here is what was promised. Finally, their years of waiting had ended.

For Simeon, this means that his death is near. God promised that he would see the Messiah before his death. Now that he has seen Jesus, he sings of his happy departure! "Lord let your servant go in peace; your word has been fulfilled. My own eyes have seen

your salvation, which you have prepared for all people—a light of revelation to gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel (Luke 2:29-32).” Oh, he is comforted, even comforted to the end of his life, that God is true to his word, sending a Savior not just another set of principles, rules, or laws.

And what is finally wrong with the law? Well, first off it is never perfect. Those with the power to interpret or judge get to make the rulings in every gray area (and there are always *many* gray areas). So even in the last few months we have seen the call to change laws, for more justice, a better system, to fine-tune the laws and make the system fairer. Good and fine, it is good for society to have better accountability, and more justice. But remember well the second problem with the law: it always accuses (Apology IV)! Just when you think you’ve got it all together, there will be another outcry from someone else who has been oppressed. The more we use the law as our great keeper and judge, the more we will be found unworthy.

Which is exactly why we need a Messiah not a Moses. We need redemption from the law itself, for the law brings wrath (Rom 4:15). St. Paul saw this so clearly when he wrote his letter to the Galatians, “When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law.” At the right time, Jesus came to tussle with the law. Not to defeat it, but to fulfill it.

Here is Martin Luther: “Christ himself says, ‘I judge no one’ (John 8:15) and ‘I did not come to judge the world, but to save it’ (John 12:47).” Or as Luther paraphrases, “That is: ‘I did not come to promulgate the law and to judge men according to it, as Moses and other lawgivers did. I am performing a more sublime and better function. I judge and condemn the Law. The Law kills you, and I kill it in turn; and as through death I abolish death’” (*1535 Commentary on Galatians, Luther’s Works, Vol. 26*

(ed. J. Pelikan and W. Hansen, 1963), 368).

That's a match fit for pay-per-view.

This is why Simeon sings God's praise, because a Messiah has been given, a Savior has come to do something completely new. Jesus will do what people cannot. He will establish the law, that is, he will give it its limit and its place. Whether you've been naughty or nice will not determine your standing, and even Santa's judgment will not rule you, for the law will not be your god. Rather, in your hearts and minds, deep down in your very conscience, Jesus will rule with a word of comfort and peace; he will reign by granting you his forgiveness and righteousness; justification apart from the law.

Of course, Simeon realizes that it will be a true struggle, for in Christ Jesus "many will be falling and rising in Israel, and he will be a sign that will be opposed." He will have to wrestle the kingdom into existence, against sword and sin, against, destruction and death. But what Simeon doesn't even realize, is that Jesus will lose. When the time comes, he loses the wrestling match, giving himself to redeem you. He is pinned and defeated, and in his falling he promises to raise you up. And in so doing, you are saved from being a slave to the law under which you were born, and incredibly, in Christ Jesus, you, sinner that you are, have been adopted as a child of God.

So, my friends, the question for us now is, "What time is it?" I don't ask if you have a watch or if this sermon has gone on too long. I don't mean it in the accusing tone of a parent waiting for a teenager sneaking in past curfew (or that same teenage wondering how long she has been grounded). I'm not looking for a scientific answer about time being relative, or the more philosophical notion "that time waits for no one." I'm not even asking you to take stock of the last year as the calendar is

about to flip.

But I'm asking it in the sense of what Simeon speaks. Are you still waiting and wondering? Or has your Savior arrived to bring you joy and wonder? Has Christ arrived as your salvation? Do you trust the promise that this child born of a woman, born under the law, has redeemed you from and saved you from sin and death?

The time has been fulfilled. The Savior has been given. And in Christ Jesus, God has kept his promise and sent a Savior to you—to do a completely new thing!

The Rev. Lars Olson

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