

Nothing Is Lost
Ecclesiastes 12:1-8
II Peter 3:8-13

“The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.”

Whenever the clock is turned back and the hour of sunlight given in spring retreats into darkness, I think I am not alone in anticipating a season more taken with reflection than ceaseless activity, a time more likely to find us curled up with a novel than setting out on a pilgrimage. This is the season of gathering in, of taking stock, of recollecting. If I were asked to name the reason for this, all that comes to mind is the inchoate awareness of our finitude that darkness portends. Without invitation, it seems, the fact of life’s brevity and limits insinuate themselves upon our subconscious as dusk descends, causing us to engage in that uniquely human act of asking after the meaning of the time that flies forgotten:

*Deep in our subconscious, we are told
Lie all our memories, lie all the notes
Of all the music we have ever heard
And all the phrases those we loved have
spoken,
Sorrows and losses time has since consoled,*

*Family jokes, out-moded anecdotes
Each sentimental souvenir and token
Everything seen, experienced, each word
Addressed to us in infancy, before
Before we could even know or understand
The implications of our wonderland.*

So wrote playwright Noel Coward, insisting in the title of his poem that *Nothing Is Lost*. If you have lived long enough, you likely will beg to differ. The tragedies, the failures, the disappointments, the rejections muddy the meaning of the time we have anxiously attempted to control between birth and death. Would that, as the darkness deepens, we could curl up with a story which, when placed over our nights and days, might order our memories, the notes of all the music, the phrases those we loved have spoken, the sorrow and the losses into some coherent whole with nothing lost before we lie to die.

Scripture is such a story, yet it is a story that does not give up life’s meaning without a struggle. In the beginning, we read and must immediately confess that time itself with its endings and beginnings, the time God has created, defies our understanding. Open this foreboding book with double columns and read on the first page that God created time. “God said, ‘Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and for years.’” Like everything God created, the time God created and has given to us is good. Yet implicit in time is time’s turning and so its endings that defy our understanding.

Therefore the preacher of Ecclesiastes complains and we with him, “When I applied my mind to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth...then I saw all the work of God, that no one can find out what is happening under the sun.” That is to say, from the beginning the meaning and purpose of God-created time has been hidden from our understanding, apparently for a reason. “We shouldn’t spend too much time trying to answer the ‘why’ questions” wrote journalist Tony Snow as he lay dying. “Why me? Why must people suffer? Why can’t someone else get sick? Why can’t we answer such things...the questions themselves often are designed more to express our anguish than to solicit an answer.” Time with its beginnings and endings defies our understanding.

According to the second story of creation, at least in part, this is because the God who once walked in the garden in the cool of the day has vanished from our sight. Left alone east of

Eden, we necessarily quit the 'why' in order to do business with the 'how': How shall we fill our time? Chapter two of Genesis tells of a second time: our time, the time when each one of us chooses, no less than Adam and Eve first chose, to be makers of our own meaning, authors of the script and directors of supporting characters who refuse the lines we have written for them. "'Our' time is time produced by us," says Karl Barth. And because we alone are responsible we are variously anxious, disappointed, elated, confused, angry, astonished, alarmed while the time that is ours either bends to our control or reminds us that we are dust.

Very soon we do begin to understand that "The time we think we know and possess, 'our' time, is by no means the time God created. Between our time and God-created time as between our existence and the existence created by God," says Barth, "there lies the Fall," leaving us with the lonely and arduous task of creating meaning out of the chance and accidents that defy human understanding. Sifting through all the memories, the notes of the all music we have heard, the phrases those we loved have spoken, sorrows and losses, family jokes and out-moded anecdotes, we sift in search of a pattern that would explain us to ourselves...or a well-worn path that would help us take the next step...or a coincidence that suggests a hand reaching down from above to guide and goad us along the way. Some die convinced this is enough; others conclude, in spite of great effort, that the attempt itself is vanity.

The preacher of Ecclesiastes is among the others. Immersed in the effort to make sense of our time, he considers the work his hands have done, the toil he has spent doing it and concludes "all was vanity and a chasing after wind; there was nothing to be gained under the sun." Even at his poetic best, in the last chapter of a book that barely made it into the canon, the preacher believes himself left alone to make his own meaning. He futilely counsels the young to "remember their creator [the creator of time] in the days of their youth [the time that is theirs] before the days of trouble draw near and they will say, 'I have no pleasure in them', before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return with the rain;...before the dust returns to the earth as it was and the breath returns to God who gave it." He can only conclude at dusk that all is lost, everything is vanity. "Our time, the time we know and possess, is and remains lost time," according to Barth, Noel Coward notwithstanding, "even when we believe that God is the creator of time." "We need," says Snow, stating the obvious, "to get past the anxiety. The mere thought of [your end] can send adrenaline flooding through your system. A dizzy, unfocused panic seizes you. Your heart thumps; your head swims. You think of nothingness and swoon." We need to get past the anxiety but how?

Alongside God's created time and our time, there is given, in these double columns, a third time. First, says Peter in sum, there is God's time--from which past, present and future are seen whole and complete and finished, albeit hidden from our minds. That is why with God one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like one day. Then there is our time, the time we think we possess that makes of God a thief when our time comes to an end, the time that makes us impatient with a God who has made human existence incapable, on its own, of finding out what is happening under the sun. But in the fullness of time, the God who created time and the God who has given us our time, enters time in Jesus Christ. Now is the time of revelation when the God who once walked in the garden in the cool of the day returns, sending the Son that we may know him and that he may save us from the lonely and impossible task of making meaning without him.

Because in him we may see ourselves redeemed, see ourselves wholly ourselves, see our creation finished in him, no longer must we cobble together the pieces, broken and sharp-edged, to fit a made up story we have decided to tell ourselves. Rather a light has shone upon our hopes and fears, our anxieties and insecurities, freeing us from the tyranny of that sort of time to see, still hidden in flesh, the God who has time for us. "Your quandary," says Snow, "has drawn you closer to God, closer to those you love, closer to the issues that matter—and has dragged into

insignificance the banal concerns that occupy our ‘normal time.’”

Hence the second word to say about this third time is that as we find ourselves accompanied by the God who has time for us, we find that *our* time is taken from us. The theater has gone dark. The script whose final act had yet to be written, these characters we believed ourselves to be directing are but sound and fury signifying nothing. At first we are shocked to death, offended, afraid because it is the end of our time as we know it and the end of our life as we have managed it. But then as the grace of him who has come to seek and save the lost breaks in upon us, we are relieved, to say the least, because as Martin Luther put it for himself, “My time is in thy hands.” In God’s hands says Snow: “...the world is shorn of fearful caution. The life of belief teems with thrills, boldness, danger, shocks, reversals, triumphs and epiphanies.”

Now it begins to dawn on us, after this long pilgrimage toward home, that God is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with us, not wanting us or any of God’s creatures to perish, but wanting all to turn to him: wanting nothing to be lost. That is to say, in Jesus Christ God has all the time in the world for us and for any who, at dusk, long to understand the implications of this wonderland.

In the end it seems that Noel Coward was right for the wrong reasons: nothing is lost. The God who in Christ entered our time also has assumed every detail of our human existence, leaving nothing—not even our deaths—beyond the reach of his redeeming hand:

*There they all are, the legendary lies
The birthday treats, the sights, the sounds,
the tears
Forgotten debris of forgotten years
Waiting to be recalled, waiting to rise
Before our world dissolves before our eyes*

*Waiting for some small, intimate reminder,
A word, a tune, a known familiar scent
An echo from the past when, innocent
We looked upon the present with delight
And doubted not the future would be kinder
And never knew the loneliness of the night.*

We have waited at dusk, you and I, “for some small, intimate reminder, a word...” to make sense of the memories, the music, the phrases, the sorrows and losses time can never finally console. The word we have been given is Jesus Christ, who was in the beginning and awaits us in the end. But now in our time he has come alongside you so that nothing will be lost; so that at dusk you never again need know the loneliness of the night. “We do not know much,” says Snow at the last,” but we do know this: ...no matter how bleak or frightening our prospects [as the dusk gathers] each and every one of us...lies in the same safe and impregnable [time that is] the hollow of God’s hand.” In God’s hand, together at dusk, according to God’s promise, let us hasten the coming of the day of the Lord as we wait for new heavens and a new earth where righteousness is at home. Thanks be to God.