

Acts 17:22-31

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³ For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶ From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷ so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸ For "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are his offspring." ²⁹ Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰ While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

John 14:15-21

Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. ¹⁸ "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹ In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹ They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them." (450)

When do you think this will end? How do you think this will end?

This is the question I keep wanting to ask anyone and everyone. As if I think anyone has a better guess than I do, as if I think everyone has some say in the matter, like it's a consensus we need to come to or a majority-rule sort of thing: when will this end, and how?

What do *you* think?

Because I just need a time-frame and a vision of what comes next. Because it's the not knowing that's really draining to me, not knowing how I should pace myself, and what we're aiming for. That's what's really draining.

Like, whether it will be a couple more weeks, in which case I should just aim to finish this now second big book I've been poking my way through, and in which case I should just continue to make online worship good enough as a substitute for now, and in which I case I should begin imagining being together in our sanctuaries, anticipating the decisions I'll have to make and the

guidelines I should be ready to articulate and even enforce; or whether it will be a couple of months, or maybe another season, in which case I should line up a few more big books to poke my way through, and in which case I should really institutionalize online worship offerings that more carefully take into account the two congregations' cultures and practices, maybe draw some distinctions rather than do this catch-all, and whether I should really embrace the boys' making their own way into the season ahead and any given day, shaggy in manner and appearance and aim, along with everyone else in the world their age so what will it matter if their fine motor skills go to seed: which will it be?

Not knowing the end: it makes the getting there feel enervating, tedious and toilsome. Confusing! I sometimes literally don't know what time it is, what day it is. "Without a vision, the people perish." That's Proverbs.

And it struck me this week that this is how most moderns live—not knowing anything about the end.

As it happens, that big book I mentioned earlier, which I've been poking my way through, urgently but slowly because there's a lot to consider and seek to understand, is Charles Taylor's gorgeous tome, *A Secular Age*. In it, he tells the story of how, over the course of these last five hundred years or so, we went from a world in which disbelief in God would have "virtually impossible" to a world in which this disbelief is "not only easy, but even inescapable."

It's a longer story than you might assume. It's not just about Darwin; it's not just about science. It's not simply a story of subtraction, as Taylor says like a mantra throughout the book. It's about a shift in social imaginaries, those sets of values, institutions, laws, stories, images, and symbols that a people hold in common, and in which a people are held in common—a corresponding society through which people imagine their social whole.

These take a long time to develop, and there are many threads that come together to knit the whole. So, it's a longer story than you might imagine, nearly 800 pages long in fact. And Taylor's telling of it is like tonic: he's an elegant, smart, funny writer, and now knowing how we got here makes me feel better about being here, in this secular social imaginary, outside of which there is nothing to imagine because there is no outside. Time is flat and linear and stretches on like a factory floor. Matter is inert. Life is contingent and self-creating, which can only mean also

self-exhausting. I feel better for knowing how we got here because it sets me on better footing for imagining my way out, *our* way out. I'm reading it as a person and as a preacher, after all.

One of the changes this enormous shift brought about—this shift from one social imaginary to another, this shift from an enchanted world to a disenchanted world, from a world alive with spirits to a world of classifiable facts, from a cosmos, which implies the presence of intent, to the universe, which might well be all contingency—is, as I already indicated, the felt experience of time. Once it was that time felt to have a beginning, an ultimate end, and therefore a meanwhile. Once it was that time's beginning was a storied thing, most premodern human cultures having a creation story to tell—or two. The Hebrews had two (at least), which we still have, in the first and second chapters of Genesis. This isn't to say these stories were believed in in some scientific sense, such a sense being itself a product of the modern era. It's instead to say that the imaging informed the people's social imaginary, and this informed their felt and very real experience. It *held*.

But this is no longer the case. We can no longer imagine our origin, and not only because we understand ourselves to have evolved from simpler organisms, but also because the timescale of existence has become ever vaster. We've moved from a time scale that could be imagined as by the listing of generations in the book of Genesis to one that can't be imagined at all. Perhaps it can be understood, but it can't be imagined, which is to say something about being related to or feeling identified with. Of all this, Taylor writes, "Reality in all direction plunges its roots into the unknown and as yet unmappable."

What's more, the short 6,000-year timespan was set in the matrix of God's eternity. Eternity enveloped time, as it were, and this made it so eternity could be felt as presence, even close presence (the unknown God who is yet not far from you, the God revealed to the Hebrews who is yet not far from you, the God revealed in Christ who is indeed very close, as close as your mind and breath, as close as the Holy Spirit who comes as advocate, ever calling to you,) a reality dwelling just beyond the tight envelope of being but ever ready to break in.

For this enveloping of time did indeed make it so God's eternity could be accessed. Eternity could be accessed, evoked and ushered in at certain times or in certain places or by engaging in certain acts. Breaking the bread of the Eucharist. Gathering as a particular people in a sanctuary at a given time. Lighting a new fire at an Easter vigil. Eternity could break into this firmly held time, either spontaneously or as a matter of human intent and effort. High time, Taylor calls

this, which has more in common with the time it enacts than with the time just prior to it in a secular sense. Easter morning in the year 2000 has more in common with Easter morning in the year 1999 or even Easter morning in the year 1900 than it does with the Saturday prior to it or the Monday following. It has more in common with that first Easter morning than it does with the Tuesday of the next week.

High time. Liturgical time. Kairos, which is Greek and names the notion of momentous time, the touching down of God's eternity, like a bolt of lightning hitting an entity well-grounded.

But once people came to live more and more in vast secular time, that matrix of eternity, which had previously been felt to hold time, could hardly be imagined because time outstretched, went on forever. Time was itself an eternity, but one without form or intent, was instead disenchanted, made secular. For this, too, eternity couldn't be accessed or realized; it couldn't be imaged and so no longer informed the social imaginary.

It was quite a loss, though the people weren't quite aware of it. Nevertheless, some came up with substitutes for it, formulating imminent orders that bore in mind some good and final end. Communism was a social imaginary that plotted to realize perfection. Central planning got to work, and public relations kicked into high gear so everyone would get on board with this imminent form of social perfection.

It just made time even more toilsome.

You'd labor on in order to labor on in order for your children to labor on.

See, the loss of a beginning, which secular time insists upon: it annihilates also any sense of an ending. Judgment day, it's often called in scripture, as Paul called it in his sermon to the Athenians. Remember, just in our hearing: "While God has overlooked times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent." This is to say we must change our thinking, all people everywhere. We must change it so to perceive what lies beyond, "because God has fixed a day on which God will have the world judged in righteousness..."

It wouldn't surprise me to learn you heard this as a little threatening. Judgment day: when it's all going to come out. But that too is a result of the secularization of time and matter, the disenchanting of the world. This disenchantment effectively individuated us from one another, made it so we operate in the world as buffered selves, impermeable to one another and to the wider social imaginary. We are atomized operators, our world is now disciplined and juridical

rather than permeable and less empowering of us, so when imagine ourselves as such judged, it is **in** this juridical-punitive social order. It puts us in mind of punishment more than advocacy and wisdom.

Yet judgement day would once have evoked in people's imaginations the point of gathering into which all time flows, into which all time comes full and every purpose comes fulfilled. "Judgment day" would have indicated the aim and end of all time, which (time) is then fulfilled and revealed as to its full meaning—judged as in the exercising of wisdom, not judged as in coming to punishment. Taylor writes, "The final meaning of any incident is given in the entirety, the 'judgment' on it is made in the light of the whole."

This means the significance of history, as Taylor writes, is in its "entering eternity as gathered story."

The church was elemental to the social imaginary of the premodern age, and this is what the church would come to imagine as the end, that is the eschaton: an entering into eternity of all history as gathered story, this which is comprised of the paths we each travel and the stories that are our lives, our choices and our accidents and all contingency that acts upon us. These stories are vast and unplanned from the beginning. Yet the aim of them is already realized in God—and it is, rest assured, a good and glorious end for all, every part and particle, every possibility and actuality, every creature which cannot be removed from any other creature without disrupting the whole.

"That these stories end well," Taylor writes, "is sometimes seen as their having been rigorously scripted from the beginning...But a rather different model is suggested by the Bible. God's Providence is God's ability to respond to whatever the universe and human agency throw up."

God's providence is God's ability to respond to whatever the universe and human agency throw up as we go: I *knew* it! I knew it. And I told you so, some of you. I've said this over and over again from any pulpit that will have me. Really, this has been my sense of God since I was a girl. And finally, I have someone really smart to confirm it.

I never believed all those "Oh, God has plans for you." I never bought it that my job was to figure out God's plan for me. I always suspected, always sensed, that God's providence isn't about control but is about response, that renewing of the promise—which is what response means, "re-*spond*," *-spond* being Latin for promise. I knew it! God was *playing* with me.

So, hear me now. God's providence isn't a plan set from the beginning but is a providing what's needed as we go. God's provision is in order to arrive at glory at the end, which God set from the beginning, though what would happen in the meantime was up to any of us. Truly, our reaching the good and glorious end that God has in mind for us and all creation, and indeed has had in mind from the beginning, doesn't imply control from the beginning, or even management and manipulation throughout time, but response. "God is like a skilled tennis player," writes Taylor, in one of the colloquial images that always surprise in this otherwise apparently scholarly tome. "God is like a skilled tennis player who can always return the serve."

As to the aspect of God that is so intimately and utterly present in this meanwhile, here we meet the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit: this aspect of God which is most difficult to preach about but is always present in any true proclaimed word, which is most elusive when we attempt to receive it as object but is utterly present when we allow its coming and its vanishing, playful, even teasing. Though it's difficult to make it intelligible, it is essential to all intelligibility, the thing by which we know anything at all: the Holy Spirit of truth.

Really, there is something "meta" about the Holy Spirit—ever beyond our having it, though we are sustained in its presence, and we are given being in its abiding, and we are granted purpose and aim in its calling to us as advocate, which is *ad-vocare* or "calling to." As Jesus said, by this Advocate, this Holy Spirit, we are not left orphaned as atomized bodies, individuated, buffered, and cast off each unto ourselves, but we are gathered in and sent out full of the God of life. By this Holy Spirit we are not but adrift in secular time, untethered in this flat stretch of mechanized, linear, toilsome time, with its many difficulties and pains but its lack of purpose or aim, but are rather free to wander and explore, to create and redeem, all to be gathered at the end which is fullness and praise: Alleluia! Alleluia! Quite a ride.

This social imaginary: it's largely lost to us. It, largely, no longer holds. Meanwhile, everything sticks to us, but nothing holds. I read that somewhere recently. It seems like a sad thing.

It's quite a loss. To lose the sense of what time it is: it's quite a loss.

I've felt it more during this time of pandemic than I'd ever felt before. Often, even literally, I don't know what time it is. I'm sorry for this sad state of secular being. And I won't have it. And I won't have you have it if you suspect that there is yet more life than what we can classify and nail down.

So, this loss of it, so acute these days at least to me: it is indicative of its ultimate presence. This sense of loss is confirmation of its being in the first place and abiding until the end, if though sometimes vanished from us in the meantime.

Feel this stretching out of unshaped time before us, then, as the moment before you breathe in a fresh breath. Feel it.

Then breathe.

Thanks be to God.