

A Merry-Go-Round at a Baseball Game

Daniel 7; Revelation 1

A sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's, Austin on November 21, 2021

Are you tired? Do you wonder where the years went? Has your doctor told you that you can't keep eating like you're sixteen anymore? Did you know that if you haven't ordered all your Christmas presents by now they're probably not going to make in time? Did you realize your vehicle registration is already expired again? Why haven't you responded to mom's email about whether or not you're free on the weekend of February 25th, 2024? Are you feeling anxious yet?

Today is Christ the King Sunday. It is the last Sunday in the Church year. Because next week begins the season of Advent, the beginning of a new church year. But it doesn't really feel like we're collectively taking stock and reflecting on a year gone by, does it? It doesn't feel like an ending before a new beginning. It feels like it's 3/4 of the way through the fall semester; the calm before the storm of final exams; it feels like this is Q4 and if you don't sell enough semiconductors then you can kiss that raise goodbye. It can be hard to keep track what's happening in church when there's so much swirling around outside it. Which is all to say that Christians have a complex relationship to time.

Or perhaps to say it a little differently, to be a Christian is to live within different kinds of time at once. I want to try to map out some of that complexity, in hopes that doing so provides some perspective and maybe even comfort for whatever stressors your current family calendar is feeling.

The first kind of time we live within is the tick-tock clock kind of time. The 24 hours a day, 365 days a year that starts with January and ends in December and leaves our memory a little foggier and our bodies a little more broken every circle we make around the sun. Call it linear time. Call it we're-late-for-soccer-practice time. Call it the time that stares back at you every time you wake up your phone.

The second kind of time is liturgical time. The time when Christ the King marks the end of the year and Advent the beginning. Liturgical time moves more or less in a circle. It goes from blue to white to green to purple to white to red to green and then back to blue again. It moves our souls through an annual rhythm of anticipation during Advent, to festivity during twelve days of Christmas, to revelation in Epiphany, to confession, fasting, and reflecting on mortality during Lent, to resurrection joy and glory in Easter, to the abundance of the Spirit in Pentecost, to the great green growing season of Ordinary Time. The Church year is like a giant merry-go-round of spiritual formation where the music playing in the background is the life of Jesus.

We liturgical Christians live in both of these times at once. It is as if merry-go-round has been loosed of its anchors, been given wheels, and is now leaving the county fair to explore the rest of the world. Imagine having to ride a mobile merry-go-round wherever you go—that's the Christian life. If you look toward the middle of the merry-go-round, toward church, you can always see the life of Jesus, including the stories of Israel and the early church. But then you look in the other direction, outside the merry-go-round, and you see your friends from school, your boss from work; you see your dentist and Jeff Bezos and Starbucks and global supply chain

issues. The challenge of the Christian life is not to forget the world on the inside of the merry-go-round when your facing the world outside it, to remember you're a Christian when you are going about your life the other six days of the week. And vice versa. It's important to remember the outside world when you are inside here. The world inside the merry-go-round invites you to bring everything from the outside world in here, whether its sin that needs forgiven, sickness that needs healing, new life that calls for celebrating, or confusion that calls for wisdom. The constant back and forth can feel like whiplash. There are those who decide to live their entire lives on the merry-go-round. We call them monks and nuns. There are those who decide to live entirely on the outside. We used to call them pagans, but I like to refer to them as those who are using the freedom God has given them to not-yet-believe in God. For those of us straddling both worlds, a little whiplash is the only option. The back and forth is called sanctification. In Church you receive everything you need to be a Christian. Outside church you get to put it into practice. As you go round and round, year over year, you might just find that you begin to look more and more like Jesus.

I'm afraid there are more than two kinds of time. There's a third kind of time that we live in as Christians. I call it baseball time. What is unique about baseball is that no clocks are required for baseball. Time within a game of baseball does not move according to seconds, minutes, or hours, but according to alternative units of time measurement called outs, innings, and runs. Which is to say, time is advanced within a baseball game only by particular events occurring within the game itself—namely, 3 outs for each team 9 times unless at that moment they have an equal number of runs in which case they keep adding innings until that is no longer true. I know what you are now wondering. The longest professional baseball game ever played lasted 33 innings. How long in tick-tock clock time did that take, you ask? Well that's a complicated question. The game began at 8:25 pm on April 18, 1981. The game was put on pause at 4:08 am on April 19 because the players were delirious and the owners worried about them injuring themselves. When they resumed the game again, it only took one inning / 18 minutes for the Pawtucket Red Sox to win. But that 18 minutes took place on June 23rd, more than two months later. How long did this game take? The only true answer is 33 innings.

Christians live in baseball time because we believe history is moved not by years passed, but by the actions of God in history. And in this baseball game, there are five innings instead of nine. The first inning is called Creation. The second is called Israel. The third is called Jesus. The fourth is called Church. And the fifth is called The End. The fifth inning is what we read about in our lesson from Daniel. We're living in the fourth inning. We've been living in the fourth inning for quite some time.

The important thing to understand about Christian baseball time is that it's not us who bring about the outs or actions that say any particular inning is over. We are players in the game only in a very limited sense, which is to say we're not exactly on the mound or at the plate. We're more like the backup right fielders. We're part of the game, but our actions don't have consequence on when one inning ends and when another one begins. That's all up to God and always has been.

The important lesson is that this takes some of the pressure off. It removes some of the anxiety of being creatures trapped in tick tock clock time. First of all, it's not up to us to make sure the game turns out right. We already know who wins. We can relax in the knowledge that Christ is King not only now but for all eternity. Second of all, it's not up to us to submit to the historical record some supreme human achievement, as if it is up to us to do something no ever human has done before. The most important thing that happened in history and

that could ever happen in history happened back in the third inning in the death and resurrection of Jesus. We don't have to win the race to space or the moon or to Mars. We don't have to scramble to leave an imprint on history lest our family name be forever forgotten. Time isn't moved by empires come and gone, by technological advances, or by any other kind of human achievement. In baseball time, we are spared the burden of being effective. We are freed to concern ourselves only with being faithful.

Now do you understand our complex relationship to time as Christians? All cleared up? The Christian life is like living on a mobile merry-go-round bouncing from wall to wall inside a baseball diamond. Simple as that.

Not quite. There is yet one more kind of time that you and I live in. And if all of what I have said up to now feels a little too complicated and ridiculous, then this one is for you. Return to your place on the merry-go-round for a moment. Imagine stepping off your ceramic pony and weaving your way around the other horses and dragons towards the very middle of the merry-go-round. And imagine that once you're there, you discover a small door. You go in.

And you hear a voice say to you, "I am the Alpha and the Omega. The beginning and the end. I am who was and who is and who is to come." This is the calm center of the chaotic storm of life outside. This is a space and a time outside of space and time. This is the present tense. You could call this Eucharistic time.

The Eucharist is a space and time outside of space and time and yet so inside it that past, present, and future all meet together in this moment. God brings the sacrifice of Christ on the cross into the present. The body of God's Son broken for you. A memorial of our redemption. A sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. We remember his death. We proclaim his resurrection. And we await his coming in glory. God brings not only the past into the present, but grabs the future and brings it back into the present too. Our voices join those of the heavenly chorus's never ending song: Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of power and might. We partake of the food and drink of the heavenly banquet—the bread of heaven, the cup of salvation. We stand inside of him in whom we are delivered from evil and made worthy, in whom we are brought out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, and out of death into life. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. You can occasionally hear God's still small voice speaking to you, slipping outside of time, outside the Eucharist too. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Like Elijah on the mountain hearing God in the sound of sheer silence. But above all, here, at God's altar, all the variety of complicated kinds of time collapse into a time outside of time, into the present moment, into right now. All the noise and all the anxiety fades into the background. Nothing else matters. The Alpha and the Omega, the God who was and is and is to come, is here. And all you need to do is eat.

Amen.