

# *OUT OF TIME:*

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# *OUT OF TIME:*

## PREACHERS' NOTES SAMPLE

**NOVEMBER 19: TIME IS RELATIVE**  
**Kathryn Pocalyko**

### *Revised Common Lectionary Texts*

Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18

Psalm 90:1-8, (9-11), 12

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Matthew 25:14-30

Time can be a sneaky scoundrel.

I vividly remember the week in college when I was waiting to hear back about admission to my school's version of the Greek system, social clubs. Knowing those days were going to pass excruciatingly slowly, I filled them with everything I could: prescheduled meals with friends; extra volunteer hours; heck, I even read ahead on course syllabi that week. Waiting for a result seems to turn time's regular fluidity into old, sticky molasses, and it's probably a familiar feeling in your ministry. Any pastor knows what it's like to accompany the person waiting for the biopsy results. Especially when the outcome could be bad, time can feel like it's hardly ticking forward at all.

Then there are events or phases when time flows rapidly. Consider those youth group trips that the teens can't bear to see end, or the Habitat for Humanity workday where you look back and can't believe what everyone accomplished. Think of the times when, as you are writing a sermon or immersed in reading, you've hardly realized that two hours have passed. It seems that when the experience is good, the passing of time speeds up.

Scripture contains this trickiness of time as a relative experience. Notice time's leisurely passage in Psalm 90. "Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations," the psalmist proclaims in the first verse, taking the long view of time. "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God" (Psalm 90:2). The psalmist contemplates time not in daily units, but in "a thousand years in [God's] sight" which "are like yesterday when it is past" (Psalm 90:4). Time elongates in this view. Blink and you might miss God's eons.

In the reading from Zephaniah, something less than longed-for is coming: the day of the Lord. It is a day of punishment for the complacent, a day of battle cries against the lofty, fortified cities. The

day of the Lord is not a good day: “That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness” (Zephaniah 1:15). But time’s march toward it, rather than lugubrious and slow, is *quick*: “For the day of the Lord is at hand . . . The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast” (Zephaniah 1:14). There’s not even enough time to consider how to fill the waiting, because there’s hardly any wait. This day is coming, and soon.

It seems we can’t quite pin down the passage of time. The speed at which we feel time’s movement depends on our subjective experience. Time’s pace is relative to our feelings, opinions, or premonitions about what we’re doing and what’s to come.

Maybe this is why, when dealing with God and time, it makes more sense to throw the measuring units and the linear timelines out the window.

Read carefully Paul’s words to the Thessalonians, a group of people who are probably closer to the Zephaniah-style experience of time. They want and expect an event to come, and fast. But that event, which also happens to be the day of the Lord, tarries. Paul notes how the community needs no teaching “concerning the times and seasons” (Thessalonians 5:1); they seem to know that they cannot put the day of the Lord onto a temporal plot. Rather, it comes like a thief in the night, like labor pains upon a pregnant woman, like wakefulness instead of sleeping in the dark.

In this scriptural imagination, time is personified. Time—generalized here from the day of the Lord—is a thief, a pregnant person, people alert all night. It is not like a line or a march or a flow, but rather like a *person*.

This sets up the epistle text’s closing revelation beautifully: “For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him” (1 Thessalonians 5:9-10). The day of the Lord is not just a metaphorical person, it’s literally a person.

The day of the Lord is the day we obtained salvation, which was through Jesus Christ. The day of the Lord—and the time it fills or arrives around—is not a day, a season of wrath, or a time. Instead, it’s a person: Jesus Christ, who died and rose again for us. Regardless of when we sleep, regardless of whether we’ve ever labored with child, regardless of what we’ve taken or had taken from us, Jesus brought us through our day of reckoning and into salvation on the cross.

The idea that Jesus is time personified and the day of the Lord incarnate reminds me of a sermon I watched years ago. Op-ed columnist Michael Gerson preached at the National Cathedral, and his sermon had nothing to do with time. But it did contain the following line, which has always stuck

with me as summarizing what makes Christianity unique, special: “At the end of all our striving and longing we find, not a force, but a face.”<sup>1</sup>

Not a force, but a face: this is God’s view of time, of the day of the Lord. We are not destined for wrath but for salvation. We need not fear the wait nor mourn the quick passage. Time is not a sneaky scoundrel after all, nor a line or a march or a flow or a force. It is the face of Jesus.

### ***Questions for Reflection***

- How have you experienced time’s variability? How has your parish or community experienced time’s relativity?
- Is your community currently experiencing time more like the psalmist or like the prophet Zephaniah?
- How does considering time as a person—as Jesus—complicate, negate, or amplify our experience of relative time?
- Although it’s not discussed here, there’s an element of time in the gospel reading: the slaves have to give their investments time to grow in the hands of others. How might time be less of a commodity and more of a medium for relationship with others?

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon is worth thirteen minutes of your time. I promise. Michael Gerson, Washington National Cathedral, February 17, 2019. <https://cathedral.org/sermons/michael-gerson/>

# *OUT OF TIME:*

## CHILDREN'S MESSAGE STARTERS SAMPLE

NOVEMBER 19

**Scripture focus:** Zephaniah 1:14a and Psalm 90:1

**The clock:** Use the clock to demonstrate what it is like when time feels like it is going slowly, like while you're on a long car ride, when you're waiting for your birthday, or when you are waiting in line, and what it feels like when time is going fast, like while you're having a great time at party or playing at the park and suddenly it's time to go.

**Ask the kids:** Can you think of a time when time seemed to go really slowly? Really fast? Can you demonstrate what it looks like to go in slow motion, then to go very fast?

**Summarize the story:** Compare Zephaniah 1:14a "The great day of the Lord is near; it is near and coming very quickly" and Psalm 90:1 "Lord, you have been our help, generation after generation." Other texts or verses assigned this day can also provide a similar contrast.

**Connection to a concept:** If you didn't do this earlier, take a moment to demonstrate and reflect on the idea that sometimes time feels like it goes slowly and sometimes it feels like it goes quickly.

**Takeaway:** God is always up to something good! Sometimes it takes a long time to happen, maybe our whole lives or even longer. Sometimes God works really quickly and does something good all at once. Can you give an example?

**Take-home activity:** Challenge your families to observe something in their immediate surroundings that God is doing or has done slowly: the change of seasons, a change of heart, a child's growth, an answer to a prayer someone prayed a long time ago. Challenge them to also look for something God does quickly: a flash of inspiration, a good thing that surprises them, a cold or illness that healed overnight.

# *OUT OF TIME:*

## SUNDAY LITURGY SAMPLE

### INTRODUCTION TO THE LITURGY

These prayers are provided for liturgical use in the worshipping assembly. As with all Barn Geese Worship resources, you are welcome to adapt them as needed to suit your context. Please see the Licensing and Use document in your download package for complete details.

Whenever people of varied ages, backgrounds, and abilities gather for worship, the likelihood is high that some of them do not read. Some of these prayers are intended to be used every Sunday throughout the Advent season, a regularity that will help nonreaders of varying ages to participate fully in worship. In particular, the Call to Worship, the Prayer of Dedication, and the Blessing include simple or repetitive responses.

### CALL TO WORSHIP

*To be used throughout the season*

We gather today.

**It is time to worship!**

We listen for God

**It is time to hear!**

We receive God's grace.

**It is time to be loved!**

We leave in peace.

**It is time to serve others!**

As we wait for Jesus' arrival,

Emmanuel, God-with-us,

is already here in this time and place.

### LIGHTING THE ADVENT WREATH

*Scripture and prayers for this rite are specific to each Sunday's date. When planning for the lighting of your worshipping community's Advent wreath, consider how to involve participants beyond the usual worship leaders. Assign each week to a different household, a different affinity group, or a different ministry within the congregation, such as the youth group, the food pantry volunteers, or the new members' class. You may invite two or more voices to read the scripture and prayer each week or let one person read while others light the candles. The wreath may be lit during the prayer, or while the gathering sings in response, or at another appropriate time. Each week, the congregation sings "Out of Time" or a similar hymn in response to the prayer.*

## November 12

*Scripture to be read aloud:*

“Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” (Matthew 25:13)

Let us pray.

God of alreadys, nevers, and everything in between:

It is hard for us to sit with uncertainty.

We do not know when you will return,

we do not know if it's too late to prepare,

we do not even know exactly how to get ready.

As we light the first candle on this wreath,

dwell with us in this uncertain time.

Meet us in the space between always and never.

Help us name our grief for what's past,

and our hope for what's to come.

**Amen.**

## PRAYER OF DEDICATION

We give thanks together for all God's gifts as we offer them back to God. To every prompt, I invite you to respond with this simple phrase: “Thank you.”

Loving God,

For the time we have, we say:

**Thank you.**

For the gifts we offer, we say:

**Thank you.**

For the chance to help others, we say:

**Thank you.**

For the people whose lives will be better because of these gifts, we say:

**Thank you.**

For the ways you are changing the world, we say:

**Thank you.**

We pray in the name of Jesus, who appears wherever people need our help.

**Amen.**

# OUT OF TIME:

## DEVOTIONAL RESOURCE SAMPLE

### WEEK OF NOVEMBER 12: "THE UNCERTAIN TIME"

#### SCRIPTURE READING: AMOS 5:18-24

*Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light; as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?*

*I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

#### PRAYER

It's already too late, God.  
It is too late in the day  
to turn my thoughts to you;  
you could have been my companion all day.  
It's too late to redo  
everything I should have done better today.  
It is too late to savor  
the day's most wonderful moment.  
It's too late for a flickering candle  
on an Advent wreath  
to push away the night.  
It's too late in this year  
for a totally new beginning.

It's never too late  
for you to arrive in my life.  
It's never too late  
for you to deliver some peace.  
It's never too late



for fresh perspective.  
It's never too late  
for a flicker of hope  
to spread.

In this one second,  
let my faith  
feel like a small candle:  
defying the unknown,  
casting light where I cannot observe,  
yet vulnerable,  
and dependent on your spark.  
It is never too late  
for your goodness.

In this one second,  
let my faith feel like the shadow:  
glimmering with unseen possibility.  
It is too late  
to turn away from you.  
Amen.

## REFLECTION

How long will I live? What happens when I die? What is this world coming to? What will happen at the end?

When it comes to thinking about our relationship with time, these are some of the most urgent questions that spring to mind. At first glance, they're about us: as individuals, as a human community, as part of creation. But look deeper: they're also questions about God. The way we dwell with our uncertainty about the end, personal or cosmic, is tied directly to whether we believe God is involved or distant, gracious or judgmental, protecting or punishing.

*The way we relate to time is connected to the way that we relate to God.* That's the first of two big ideas that this devotional guide explores. The second is that *God uses our experience of time to connect with us*, even though God's experience of time is so different from our own. At the center of the Advent season is an immortal God who dwells in eternity, yet chose to become incarnate in a mortal body during a particular moment of history.

We see that same particularity shimmering in Amos' prophecy. Amos takes our questions about the day of the Lord and connects them to the present moment. You're wondering about justice and righteousness at the end? Amos asks. God longs for justice and righteousness now.

Imagine that: all the urgency and anxiety that we feel around endings, God feels about this moment, here, now, today. How is God inviting you to transform uncertainty about the future into concern for the present moment?

## IDEAS FOR DEVOTION

### Start time

Reflect/journal/discuss: Who do you hope that God is? Where do you see God's divine character becoming incarnate today? In this world? In the community in which you live? In your own life and actions?

### Marking time

Look at your schedule for this week and notice its uncertainties: meetings you know you'll have but you're not sure when, events you're hoping to attend but you don't know that you will, work shifts that have yet to be scheduled, and so on—what one might call *uncertain time*.

- What does it feel like to have uncertainty as a feature of your calendar? Is it stressful, liberating, neutral, or variable?
- How do you represent uncertainty in your calendar? Do you mark these moments with a pen, highlighter, Post-it note, or electronic scribble?
- This week, consider putting an asterisk or a cross (or other symbol) beside uncertain time in your calendar so you can remember that God works in these moments.
- If you don't keep a calendar or do so sporadically, choose a recent day for which you have no notes on your calendar. Using a saved email, a phone call, or other such documentation, can you reconstruct what happened that day? Consider how uncertainty affects your memories.

### Making time

Sometime this week, make time to sit with your uncertainty about the future and think about what feels most urgent to you about it. Commit to doing one thing this week that redirects your urgency outward into your community's need for justice and righteousness. For example, if you worry that you'll never be able to afford a home, take an hour to learn about unhoused people in your community and how to help them. If you worry about earning a passing grade this semester, give an hour or two to volunteering with a local literacy program, tutoring program, library, or school.

### Time out

In prayer this week, bring to God all your uncertainties. You don't have to ask God to give you certainty, although you can. Just be honest with God about what you don't know.

## Break time

Find a block of time in your calendar (even ten or fifteen minutes) when nothing is currently scheduled, and block it out. Don't make any plans for it. See if you can hold it as an open, uncertain time. Schedule this time as uncertain time so you can refer to it later.

- After your block of uncertain time, make a small note about what happened during that moment. You may also write how uncertain time made you feel.
- Immediately schedule another block of uncertain time for next week.
  - Can you give yourself more uncertain time?
  - This week, did you take less than you wanted?

## A moment in time

The reading from Amos invites us to hold the tension between a feeling of “It’s too late!” and “It’s never too late.” One place we experience that tension is when we are delayed: late, but maybe not *too* late? Throughout the week, take pictures of things that remind you of the word *delay*.

## *OUT OF TIME:*

### LITURGY FOR THE LONGEST NIGHT SAMPLE

Longest Night is a type of service that emerged in recent practice in the Northern Hemisphere. It is offered on or near the winter solstice, when the darkness of the winter season stretches to its furthest limit, and it provides a time of worship for those who struggle during the holiday season. This liturgy also goes by the names Darkest Night or Blue Christmas.

#### THE "REVERSE TENEBRAE" SUGGESTION

If you've ever been to a Tenebrae liturgy during Holy Week, you're familiar with a service that begins with a full complement of burning candles that are then extinguished one at a time throughout the service.

For the Longest Night service, we suggest that you do the opposite: begin with the unlit candles on your Advent wreath, and light them throughout the service. Light slowly seeps into the worship time and space, flowing in around song and scripture, prayer and lament.

#### CALL TO WORSHIP

Tonight  
the earth tilts and tips,  
its axis pulling this half of the world  
away from the sun.

**This is the longest night.**

The shadows lengthen.  
The darkness lingers.  
Those we love  
don't always notice,  
but it's true:

**this is the longest night.**

Tonight,  
we bring to God  
what weighs on us  
in the small hours.

**This is the longest night.**

This gathering darkness  
is not a threat  
but a shelter,  
a time to name what is true:  
Sometimes joy doesn't come easily.  
**Yet God still meets us.**  
Sometimes merriness is not within reach.  
**Yet God still meets us.**  
Sometimes despair doesn't depart at dawn.  
**Yet God still meets us.**  
Come, bring your whole selves to God.  
**God's arms are open wide.**

## PRAYERS

*This prayer format encourages the assembly to offer extemporaneous petitions in response to the leader's prompts. These petitions are easily adaptable to a more familiar format in which the petitions are offered by a worship leader and the assembly concludes each one with a recurring phrase.*

Trustworthy God, God who knows us, we pray to you.

We pray over our yesterday.

*Here people may pray for every burden they have carried from yesterday into today.*

We pray over the day that has been.

*Here people may pray in thanksgiving for what they have experienced, in sadness for what they have lost, or in acceptance of their finitude for that which they could not complete.*

This longest night, we pray over the season and this turning world.

*Here people may pray for circumstances awaiting daylight and hope: for those struggling through the holidays, for places of environmental suffering, for situations of crisis and despair.*

We pray for our tomorrows, as many as we may receive.

*Here people may pray for what they hope for tomorrow.*

We pray for all things out of season:

This grief that we carry that separates us from those who feel merry;

The impatience that drives us forward in a season of waiting; or the centering peace we draw from you in this frantic world;

And the great day of your joy, which will come when it comes—never too soon, never when we expect, not in the way we have planned.

We offer these prayers in the name of Jesus Christ, the One for whom we wait, who taught us to pray . . .

*The service continues with the Lord's Prayer.*

# OUT OF TIME:

## AN ADVENT & CHRISTMAS PAGEANT SAMPLE

### SCENE 3: MARY & JOSEPH

MARY, JOSEPH, and DONKEY walk (slowly, lots of stops) for the duration of this scene, perhaps down an aisle or from one side of the chancel to another.

*Notes for performance:*

*Three actors:*

*MARY and JOSEPH, frustrated travelers*

*Their recalcitrant DONKEY*

*Props: Whatever burdens JOSEPH must carry because the DONKEY will not*

MARY, *looking at Joseph.*

Uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuugh!

JOSEPH, *looking at Mary with concern.*

Uh, Mary are you—

MARY, *looking at Joseph, again impatient for him to get it.*

Uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuugh!

[JOSEPH nods, and joins in.]

BOTH.

Uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuugh!

MARY.

This trip is taking forever.

JOSEPH.

I know.

MARY.

And I am tired of being pregnant, Joseph.

JOSEPH.

I know.

MARY.

But you know what the worst part is?

JOSEPH.

No, what?

MARY.

THIS DONKEY!

JOSEPH.

Oh yeah, I do know.

MARY.

The donkey was supposed to make this trip easier. I was supposed to be able to ride her—but she has arthritis in her back. We were supposed to be able to put our bags on her—but she hates carrying a load. She was supposed to help us go faster, but she stops every other minute to do . . . I don't know—THAT!

*[DONKEY just stands there.]*

JOSEPH.

This trip is taking forever.

BOTH.

Uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuugh!



## SCENE 4: TOWNSFOLK

*In the sleepy town of Bethlehem, the whole city settles in for a restful evening.*

*Notes for performance:*

*Actors:*

*One NARRATOR*

*EVERYONE in the gathering participates*

*SOMEONE standing with the NARRATOR and cueing EVERYONE*

*Props: None*

*Just prior to the pageant, SOMEONE has run the group playing EVERYONE through yawning and snoring on cue*

NARRATOR.

Meanwhile, the whole town of Bethlehem—that's all of you out there—

*[NARRATOR gestures to EVERYONE.]*

was in an uproar. The town was filled with travelers arriving for the census, creating all manner of commotion. And what's more, an incredible miracle unlike any the world had ever seen was about to happen in their midst.

*[At SOMEONE'S cue, EVERYONE yawns.]*

NARRATOR.

Are you yawning? You are supposed to be in an uproar! Don't you know what's going on?

*[At SOMEONE'S cue, EVERYONE snores.]*

NARRATOR.

Seriously? You're asleep?! Don't you know what time it is? Don't you realize what is happening right now?

*[At SOMEONE'S cue, EVERYONE snores.]*

NARRATOR.

Oh, never mind.