



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR

THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 11, 2018

NUMBERS 21:4-9; PSALM 107: 1-3, 17-22; EPHESIANS 2:1-10; JOHN 3:14-21

COMPOSED FOR THE END OF TIME



John 3: 14-21 [Jesus said, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”]

In two weeks' time, at 2 p.m. on Palm Sunday, Saint Mark's will host a concert in which an exquisite piece of chamber music will be presented. *Quartet for the End of Time* is considered one of the masterpieces of 20th Century music, but the origins of the piece make it all the more remarkable. We are quite honored to host the quartet, guided by James Falzone who will be on clarinet. That it will be presented at the outset of Holy Week makes it all the more meaningful.

Today we stand a way off from Easter still, but on this Fourth Sunday in Lent, often known as Refreshment Sunday, we mark time and lean into the good news that causes us to consider time in a different light. We pause to rejoice today that God is up to something, even in the midst of darkness, and I want to unpack the notion of time, and especially eternal notions of time, divine notions of time, that nudge their way into our scriptures this morning, and into our lives this day.

First, the piece of music.ⁱ It was composed by French musician Olivier Messiaen who at the age of 31 was drafted into the French Army to resist the Nazi forces pressing hard on western Europe by early 1940. He served briefly as a medic, but was captured in short order, in June of that year, just as France fell. Along with thousands of others, he was transported to Stalag VIII-A on the German-Polish border, where the barracks were built to house 15,000 men. More than twice that many were pressed into the camp as POWs. There were other musicians in the camp as well, and he sought to work on the composition, drawing on a passage from the Book of Revelation in which an angel declares: "There shall no longer be time."

A sympathetic German guard, Karl Albert Brüll, who saw Messiaen as musician and fellow human more than enemy, supplied Messiaen with paper on which to write his music, and he helped secure four badly damaged instruments—clarinet, violin, cello, and piano—and the work was premiered in the prison yard blanketed by snow on January 15, 1941. Several hundred men, including the German guards, gathered in the freezing temperatures to be



moved by the piece, and by its quest to stand outside the bounds of time, incarcerated as they all were by the haunts of war. That one hour spent together, listening to the music, remains one of the great stories of human history.

Messiaen's brilliance as a musician included rhythms and patterns that offer the listener non-retrograding harmonies that if carried out will repeat

infinitely. He drew on birdsong for rhythms and serial loops of time, and he passes through the abyss of sadness bound in mortal time and unfolds into a timeless chorus of praise designed to resonate across the cosmos in endless fashion.

Brüll would help Messiaen gain release from the prison in 1941, allowing him to return to France as a non-combatant, and Messiaen would serve as musician at Saint Trinite Church in Paris for more than fifty years, but this piece, forged in the



crucible of such pain, held a special place in his heart.

It strikes me as particularly poignant that Messiaen drew on the passage from the Book of Revelation as the seed around which his music would bear fruit. Revelation is a much misunderstood and much misappropriated piece of Scripture, and I believe Messiaen unlocks some of it for us in sublime ways.

Time is perhaps the hardest element of reality to get our heads around—more so than space or even energy. Humans have constructed time as a linear proposition—past, present, future—but is there another way to think about it? Are there rhythms of time that offer a cadence of wisdom that resists linearity? For my part, I think that's the heart of the spiritual journey, and our liturgical seasons, and the essence of eternal life.

This gospel passage from John this morning is the second half of an encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus, a seeker of divine wisdom, who comes to Jesus in the darkness of night, in the dark night of his own bewilderment, to ask Jesus some earnest questions.

Jesus doesn't answer in linear fashion. Nicodemus, old man, you must be born again, born from above. It makes no sense in linear time. Jesus is speaking in divine terms, not earthly ones. The linear construct will not hold in the face of such truth.

And then comes the most-quoted verse in all the bible: God loved the world so much that he sent his only-begotten Son so that everyone who believes will have eternal life.

God loved the world—the cosmos—the universe—all of it, every last part of it...Jesus did not say “God loved the earth (ge),” which had been coopted by the Roman Empire as its point of reference. It was a bold statement of polemic against the imperial power of the world, which doesn't love universally. God does.

And God sent the only-begotten Son, the Son of God, which was the term Rome used for its emperors—they were sons of God—and here John is defiantly saying they are not sons of God. But that God has acted in the universe for the sake of all who will believe it is true.

Those who believe, who orient to this cosmic hope, experience eternal life, which is not so much about longevity as it is about quality of life. In several places John uses present tense in speaking about eternal life, not just future, because the shackles of time bound in linear prison have been released so that the divine realm and the mortal realm are free to comingle.

When the angel in Revelation stands with one foot on the sea and one foot on the land and declares “There shall no longer be time,” it is not a proclamation of earth's destruction, but rather a clarion sentence heralding the passing away of imperial, worldly power, which gives way to God declaring: “Behold, I am making all things new.”

Which is why John 3:16 quoted as a single verse cannot stand alone. The next verse frames the purpose: God sent the Son not to condemn or judge the world, but to save it. Again, cosmos, the entire universe. God is making all things new...

And God does so in eternal ways, such that this divine work is happening, will happen still, and

in the mysteries of divine time, has already happened, and we are invited to release into that reality. It is the only way I can make any sense of resurrection life which we profess.

Jesus came so that we might have life, and have it abundantly. Past, present and future—eternal life. Here and now.

That doesn't remove the dark shadows of life that lurk about. Darkness and light—that's another sermon altogether, but let me just say here that we cannot, as humans, make sense of full light on this side of the grave. Artists tell me that visual art is really about the interplay and contrast between dark and light. We need both to find our way, to discover the contours of life's meaning, to see the cadence of wisdom pulsing in our lives. But in it all, know that God is gathering the whole of it up, dark and light, everything,

including you and me, in an eternal embrace of hope and mercy and love.

And a coda to the story: More than 45,000 prisoners in Stalag VIII-A were liberated in May 1945. The land lay fallow for decades save a sandstone memorial placed in 1976 which read: *A place sanctified by the blood and martyrdom of the prisoners of war of the anti-Hitler coalition during the Second World War.*

Messiaen died in 1992, but his widow and others raised money to build on the site a cultural center where children, youth, artists and musicians gather, across national identity, to make music and art together. The center opened in 2014. And birds sing once more in their midst.

ⁱ Details of the story are drawn from various sources including https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quatuor_pour_la_fin_du_temps
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/03/22/revelations-2>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olivier_Messiaen



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