

May 17, 2020
“God Moves”
Psalm 91 / Acts 17:22-31
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Hello everyone! I want to start by acknowledging that this is different. I've been a guest preacher twice before at Calvary. And, as someone who holds a doctorate in literature, not theology, I've always approached preparing a sermon like I would a class lecture or a research paper. I think about what stories the week's scriptures bring to mind, what message it makes me think about, a lesson I learned at some point in my life—I try to think about something that might make a compelling story and I hope that others will find it helpful in some way.

When I agreed to sub for Pastor Tim back in February—in what I've been jokingly calling the Before Times—I felt pretty sure that I'd do the exact same thing when writing this sermon. But, then the world completely shifted under our feet and I really started to question if I had anything useful to say. I knew that I'd be talking to beloved friends of my community who have lost jobs, lost loved ones, suffered health setbacks—and all this on top of the challenges that the regular world already presents us.

I asked myself—what story could I possibly tell that would be appropriate?

So, as this weekend approached, I spent quite a bit of time thinking about what I wanted to say and, often, why I felt like I wasn't sure what it would be. And what really came to me was this profound feeling of a rupture in time.

Maybe rupture isn't quite what I mean. But when I think about what experiences, what knowledge, that come to mind for me when reading this week's passages, they just don't seem to apply in the same way. Since the shutdown, time has shifted dramatically. Our experience of it at least—in ways that seem incomprehensible both intellectually and physically.

Let me offer some examples. I don't know about you—but I get REALLY tired at night. Even if I haven't done anything but Zoom. I still work on the weekdays and, mostly, not on the weekends. But I have a really hard time distinguishing Monday from Wednesday. Trash night is Thursday. So I remember that. All the other markers of time that we rely on just aren't there. I don't drive anywhere anymore, so I rarely go any distance that requires significant time or effort to get to. And nothing compels me to get anywhere quickly. All meetings I have are either upstairs or downstairs—and I'm often still late.

What has struck me the most during this experience is that the weeks just blend into each other. I try to go to the grocery store only every other week. Yesterday, I ate the last of my favorite dried mangoes and thought—wow, has it already been two weeks since I went to Trader Joe's? I'd have to look at a calendar to remember. When I think

about time now, I picture something huge, smooth, and round—it has no edges or marks to distinguish any one point from any other point.

It turns out that we measure time with and by other people. A few years ago, I heard this professor who was a specialist in the 1700s speak about some letters that he had found in an archive. They were letters between a woman, Sophie, in rural France and her daughter, who had moved to Paris. Each letter, thanks to the new postal service, took two weeks to arrive, which was delightfully fast for Sophie. Her whole world changed when she realized that she could still be in such close contact with her daughter. And she began to measure her life in two-week increments. The speed of the communication served as distinct marks in time—something by which to measure her days—and two weeks, because it was so much faster than anything possible before, was an easy period of time to wait.

Today, in the hubbub of normal life, things move at amazing speed. And unlike other periods in history, they move at a speed that is far faster than that of our biology. We can text a picture from the U.S. to Australia in seconds, but it can take a full two weeks for our body to show any signs of having contracted a virus. We can speed up our connections with each other to be instant despite distance, but we cannot change the slowness of our physical vulnerability.

This shutdown has forced us to rethink time—perhaps even re-experience time. This is why Zora Neale Hurston's words, the quote I put on the front of the bulletin today, moved me so much when I ran across them again last week. Hurston writes, "There are years that ask questions and years that answer." If a question takes a whole year—or maybe two, three, five, ten—to ask, then answers naturally have to come just as slowly, no matter how hard we try to speed them up.

We measure time with and by other people. And I also measure, experience, and feel God by and with other people. This is the story that came to me, finally, after much thinking about the scripture passages for this week. I feel such peace and joy when I'm actually in the room at Calvary, hugging, singing, holding hands, with members of this community. We share a bit of ourselves with each other—which is precisely why we must, for now, stay apart.

But what we have in the passages for today is an invitation to think of time differently—and to think of God's presence and power in our lives differently. In Psalm 91, we're reminded: God will cover you. God will offer refuge. Day, or night, God's still right there. In sum, time moves, and God is right there with you in that movement.

Moreover, as we see in Acts 17, God "allotted the times of their existence." God controls time, decides time, asserts time.

Perhaps because time feels so incredibly different, so unrecognizable right now, our experience of God does, too. And that's okay. It's a shift, not a departure. For us modern, technologically spoiled folks, ten weeks of isolation has been a slow, amorphous blob of experience, filled with panic and peace, fear and anticipation, all rolled into one.

For Sophie, ten weeks would be five whole letters, lovingly handwritten and filled with fascinating details. The life that happened in between paled in comparison to the joy of those letters.

For Hurston, this time is simply one long question—and we'll just have to wait for the answer on the other side. It feels different. It all feels different, but what we do know, is that God—however we feel God's power, however we find peace in the storm—God is with us, we just might have to slow down to feel it.