

The Fullness of Time

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Galatians 4:4-7 and
Ecclesiastes 3:1-13 on December 31, 2017
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

My family has a practice that we've stumbled into almost by accident, but almost certainly out of necessity. You see, from time to time, our darling children wake up on the proverbial wrong side of the bed. They awaken grumpy and belligerent, and the screaming and pinching starts before Josh and I have even had our second cup of coffee! One morning in the midst of such a scene, inspiration struck as I noticed a pencil with a purple pouf on the end. That purple pouf became "the reset button" for us, and anyone in the house — kid; parent; heck, even the dog! — could hit the reset button, and it was like the day would start all over. Once again, we'd go through the morning greetings ('Well good morning! How did you sleep last night?'), doing so without a mention of all the discord that had transpired before the reset button reset us. More times than not, that reset button has been just the thing we've needed to save the day.

We arrive back to the church house on this Sunday after Christmas, and uniquely this year, on the morning of the eve — New Year's Eve, of course, when our world marks the turn of the page from year to year at the stroke of midnight. The culture that swirls around us proclaims that the advent of a new year is like one big reset button on life — from your health to your home, your finances to your time. And yet, we pause today

with this old old text from Paul's letter to the church at Galatia, one that proclaims another truth: "for when the fullness of time had come, God sent the Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem..."

For much of my 20s, particularly while in divinity school, a theological question that grabbed hold of me and wouldn't let me go stemmed from this very passage. I wondered: "why did God pick 1st century Palestine as the time and place in which to become human?" Or rather, "of all the times since creation, of all the locations in which a message could thrive, among all the communities of people around the world, of all the eras that could change the course of human history — why that one?"

"Well, it was the fullness of time!," I remember my dad telling me in response rather decisively when we 'talked shop' about it one Christmas I was home for a break. He said it with such confidence in this idea of the 'fullness of time,' a concept so cosmic in scope and enigmatic in function.

I learned from him what scholars and historians tell us: that Jesus came in 'the fullness of time' because the time was right for his message to spread. Politically, the Roman Empire was at its apex of power, and the *pax Romana* of that time, extended peace after years of war, became a period that saw the construction of roads, the stabilization of trade, and a fair government to oversee it all. Culturally, the Greeks provided widespread education through a common language — literally, in the ordinary words and phrases of *koine* Greek, and metaphorically, in the shared experiences and interests of gods and rituals that made the story

of Christ take off. And spiritually, the Jews' desire for the long-awaited Messiah, their monotheism and life together in synagogues throughout the region created the right framework for communities of Christ-followers to take root.¹

"Yes, I get that," I remember saying back to my dad, but I couldn't help but wonder: were those Roman roads used to get word from one place to the next faster than the subway, Uber, Southwest, or Skype? Was that common *Koine* language a more effective communication tool than email, texting, blogging, or social media? And the cultural commonalities provided by Greek mythology and Jewish rituals — were those more widespread and unifying than millions around the world watching the ball drop in Times Square tonight or the Super Bowl in a month? If "the fullness of time" was the moment in human history where God could be sure the gospel message was heard and received, how then, my 20-something mind wondered, might it be better or quicker or more effective than what we have now? What was fuller about that time than this one?

With some years to ponder these things in my heart, I wonder if my intrigue about this question of time, this curiosity about 'why then and not now,' is rooted in a deep desire for a season of God's clear presence, for the hope and peace and joy and love of Christmas to not simply be a thing

¹ Pieces of this information found in a variety of sources: conversations with my dad (David Hull); "Galatians 4:1-7," *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, p283; http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2274; and <http://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2010/november/waitingforfullnesstime.html>.

we celebrate each December, and then just pack it away with the ornaments and the garland at year-end. Then and now in the fullness of my mind, I began to wish for conditions like those of 1st century Palestine, conditions ripe for God to break in in our midst.

That wish renews itself with each passing year, and 2017 is no exception. The dizzying tone of each "Year in Review" we read these days attempts to evaluate the change we can hardly keep up with, much less make sense of. A political climate trickling from D. C. Streets to Wall Street **and** Main Street, a climate arguably more toxic than ever before. The country divided over everything from immigration to health care, taxes and terrorism, facts and fiction. Mass shootings in churches, at concerts, in schools, on ballfields. Marches in the streets and #metoo's on our feeds. Hurricanes drowning Houston and Puerto Rico, and opioids storming across America the beautiful. Wildfires laying waste to cities, and home fires robbing families of their loved ones. An eclipse even darkened it all if but for a moment. Fullness? Hardly. Sounds more like a void of the hope, peace, joy, and love we talk so much about this time of year.²

As you look back on this final day of the calendar year, the specifics of your review may sound a bit different but the gist is the same. For you, grief may have stained the pages of your year, so fully consuming you that

² One of the more effective "Year in Review" pieces I've read this week can be found here: https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/was-2017-the-end-of-something-or-just-the-beginning/2017/12/28/c3537c4c-e4fc-11e7-a65d-1ac0fd7f097e_story.html?utm_term=.166614c5e71e

you can't remember any moment of the year apart from sadness's unwelcome visitor. Or your year may be one peppered with bursts of emotion — anger that burns hot with every news notification you see, anxiety that silently sidles into everything despite your best efforts at keeping it at bay, loneliness that chills you to the bone. For you, maybe 2017 has been the opposite of full, a drain around every corner at best — your work that sucks the life from you, a relationship that empties you of joy, drama in all corners that depletes your energy and your confidence. The idea that these days of Christmas could be anything but pained is one for another year, another person, another life stage, another season.

I think that's why the annual lure of January 1 is irresistibly intoxicating to many of us. For those whose past year was just plain hard, personally or culturally, turning the page into something new feels like a welcome reprieve, like hitting the proverbial reset button. For others who may have had a fine year past, a new year still offers promise and hope that things can be set right. This can be the year that you finally work on that bucket list: get organized, clean out the basement, make those photo albums, lose the weight, quit smoking or drinking, get out of debt, start that business, go back to school, read a book a week, slow down, practice Sabbath, fix the relationship, run the marathon, take the trip of a lifetime, really *do it!* Whole industries are in full gear right now, chomping at the bit to sell you their 'new year, new you' package. They know what the author of Ecclesiastes did too — that the season of evaluation upon the close of a

year is in full swing, and a new season is just waiting to begin anew. And if we're not aware of it, this time of year can trick us into thinking that January 1 marks the pivot from the already to the not yet, that these 12 days of Christmastide are nothing more than an offramp from holiday festivities and an onramp into the new year.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood this mindset, and it was to those who find themselves knowingly or unknowingly buying into it that he wrote: "At the beginning of a new year, many people have nothing better to do than to make a list of bad deeds and resolve from now on — how many such 'fron-now-ons' have there already been! — to begin with better intentions... they believe that a good intention already means a new beginning; they believe that on their own, they can make a new start whenever they want... [But] where people are on their own and live by their own devices, there is only the old, the past. Only where God is can there be a new beginning."³

Brothers and sisters, I have good news to share with you today, and it is this: God is here, and God has already brought about a new beginning! Time is not limited and marked only upon the end of a calendar or the moment the clock strikes twelve, but rather it came into fullness on that silent night in a swing of history so ordinary it was practically overlooked.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *God Is in the Manger*, p80.

For it is through the fullness of a baby that God did that long-promised new thing. It is through the fullness of the father's only son that we have received grace upon grace. It is through the fullness of Emmanuel (God with us) that you and I have been redeemed and claimed as children of God. It is through the fullness of Christ that we are no longer slaves to our past — to all the grief and anger and anxiety of this year — nor are we slaves to our future — to the temptation of reinvention from our own strength, but rather we are heirs to the promises of this season, of hope, peace, joy, and love. It is through the fullness of time that we know who and whose we are.

You know, perhaps the fullness of time at the birth of Jesus came to be **because** God broke in, not **when** God broke in. Maybe there was nothing magical about 1st century Palestine, but simply it was the moment where God felt overwhelmingly compelled to pitch a tent and dwell right here in the midst of it all. Singer/songwriter Bruce Cockburn got it right in his song "Cry of a Baby," when he said this: "like a stone on the surface of a still river, Driving the ripples on forever, Redemption rips through the surface of time, In the cry of a tiny babe."⁴

So may we be encouraged today, dear church, that whatever this new year might bring for you, the fullness of time that comes at Christmas has already named and claimed you. Even if personal **reinvention** can

⁴ As quoted by David Lose here: <http://www.davidlose.net/2014/12/unlikely-carols-bruce-cockburns-cry-of-a-tiny-baby/>

happen for you in 2018 through a completed to-do list or cleaned-out closet, in the gym or on a scale, with a new habit or an improved relationship, or even if it doesn't, know that our **redemption** in this new year has already happened, redemption in a simple stable filled with noisy animals, and sleep-deprived parents, and the "hopes and fears of all the years," and the promise of God that sounds an awful lot like the cry of a tiny baby.

I've shared with you before that great poem from U. A. Fanthorpe entitled "BC:AD":

This was the moment when Before
Turned into After, and the future's
Uninvented timekeepers presented arms.

This was the moment when nothing
Happened. Only dull peace
Sprawled boringly over the earth.

This was the moment when even energetic Romans
Could find nothing better to do
Than counting heads in remote provinces.

And this was the moment
When a few farm workers and three
Members of an obscure Persian sect
Walked haphazard by starlight straight
Into the kingdom of heaven.

Amen!