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Easter Vigil 2005 – St. Mary's, Castleton

We usually think of time as something that marches along in equal segments of second, minutes, hours and years. However, even though we think of time as something that always goes at the same pace, that's not exactly how we experience it.

No one can convince a child that the seven days before Christmas are “only” a week, and no one can tell us as we grow older that time doesn't speed up so that how can it be Christmas again already? Our uneven apprehension of time is not only an individual phenomenon that we experience by ourselves. Often in offices where I have worked, the whole staff would find that a particular day seemed to speed by. On the other hand, I've been in lectures where 150 people are shaking their watches and looking at one another in wonderment that 50 minutes can be so long. Maybe you've experienced something like that in church — but not tonight, and not, of course, when any of the clergy here preach!

This experience we have that, despite what the clock says, not every segment of time is equal, can give us, I think, some insight into what it is like to exist outside of time. This is what the Psalmist means when he says to God, “A thousand years in your sight are like yesterday that is past, and like a watch in the night.”

The Psalmist's insight is very different from the popular concept of eternity. We usually think of eternity as an endless succession of moments of time. You might have been scared by this image when you were young, as I was. Imagine a granite mountain 50,000 feet high. Every thousand years a bird brushes the mountain with its wing. Imagine how long it would take for the brushes of birds' wings to wear away the whole mountain. That, says the teacher dramatically, is the beginning of eternity.

My reaction to that image as I repeat it to you is the same now as it was the first time I heard it — a terrifying claustrophobic racing of my heart, and a wild desire to escape, to be free. It feels as though I'm going to be imprisoned for ever in a never-ending duration of time. Worse than the worst criminals, we'd all be “doing time” for ever.

I never wanted that image of eternity to be right. Besides, I realized on reflection, that image just *can't* be right, because God created time, so God's reality can't be bound by time. If eternity is endless duration, it would mean that God is just as imprisoned by time as we are.

I think our uneven experience of time and the aspiration to escape time that is embedded in most religions are gifts from God that point us to the truth that time and space are both aspects of the physical creation that one day will pass away. God's existence does not depend on space or time. He created both; so while He is present throughout the creation, He is not bound by His creation. God exists in an eternal *now*, where all moments and all places are present to Him, and there is no sense of duration.

Not only has God given us both the insight that time is not always the same, but He has also given us places of meeting where our succession of little nows is intersected by His eternal now, where past a future are brought together and made present. We get little glimpses of this from time to time in some of our close relationships. Holding a baby, the rush of affection we feel for friends, and the sharp memories of departed loved ones can sometimes bring God's eternal present into our time-bound present, so that we perceive it even as it slips away.

God has given us other places of meeting. The whole Easter event is a major interruption of history that keeps becoming present for us. At every baptism, Christ's death is not repeated, but is made present, as another child of God participates in Christ's death of Calvary and in His rising to new life from the empty tomb.

Every time we celebrate the Eucharist, not only do the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven join with us, but — on March 26, 2005, say, on a small island in downstate New York — God makes present to us both that quiet night in the Upper Room long ago, as well as that future banquet where we and all the saints will feast for ever in the consummation and bliss we will find in our true home.

It's all present now: God's promise to Noah, God's covenant with Abraham, the escape of God's people from bondage in Egypt, the Last Supper, the Cross, the empty tomb, the final day when God will bring us all to Himself and all the days in between — it's all present now. This is the night. Now is the time. Heaven is present because Jesus is here. Alleluia.

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