

July 23, 2017
Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

This passage is another one of those that stands in the liminal space of already-but-not-yet. Paul split the verb tenses between past, present, and future. We were saved. We were adopted. We now live in the Spirit. We *may live* in the flesh. And we wait for the fullness of God's family that will be revealed. It's a time warp. The story is over, while the story is still happening, while we wait for resolution of the story. And we are stuck in the middle of it all. Salvation is already, but not yet. Suffering is over, but continuous. God's glory is known, and yet to be revealed.

This is a reminder that God's experience of time is not the way that we understand and experience time. We have a very linear way of being – from past to present to future, but God is not bound by that dimension. It actually seems as if God experiences all time at once. Like a big sandwich, with each era layered on top of another, so that all of time is in God's hands at once. The first chapter of Genesis is famously shaped by this idea: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." God was there before creation, and yet, something was already present at creation. Darkness. Deepness. Waters. They were there at the beginning, and yet there was nothing. Our minds seek an orderly chronological path from one thing to the next, while God sees all that was and is and ever will be at the same time. It seems that God exists in another dimension, beyond our understanding of time and space.

Most days, we don't think about such esoteric information. Most days, God's sense of timing doesn't matter to us. But some days, some very important days, these verb tenses, and God's timing, consume us. As people approach their death, they often ask questions about their

salvation and God's sense of timing. People wonder, "Is it too late... to ask forgiveness?" "Is it too late to say, 'I believe'?" "Is it too soon to ask forgiveness?" We act as though there is a sweet spot at which we should aim ourselves and our souls. As though we could miss the wormhole into God's salvation. Some churches actually direct their theology and praxis this way. It is not uncommon for Baptist churches to require new members to list the date and place of their salvation, and to require a rebaptism if it has been too long since their first, or if a major life change occurred since someone's last baptism. They want to be sure that each member's salvation is secure. From a different perspective, but with a similar concern, the Roman Catholic Church receives their members' final confession of sins immediately before someone's death. Both traditions emphasize the critical timing of salvation.

To this end, deathbed conversions are not unusual. The Roman Emperor Constantine professed belief in Jesus Christ throughout his adult life, but refused to be baptized until his deathbed. Those who do this only fish for the wormhole straight into God's grace, seeking the potential for a magic moment that might guarantee salvation.

For us as Presbyterians, the sacrament of baptism is something that we receive once in life. We don't repeat or redo baptisms. We don't rush to baptize before a certain age, or delay until a certain age. Baptism is not pursued out of superstition about the state of someone's soul. Babies are welcome, even if they live a life of wanton sinfulness forever after. Adults are welcome, even if they have already lived a life of wanton sinfulness. We practice baptism in this way because we believe that our salvation is something that is already accomplished. Jesus has already lived and died and risen to save us; we trust that God's grace will continue to flow down over our lives however long or far we go from the font.

And yet, there is something sacred about the moment when a believer turns to Jesus and says, “Yes. I believe.” When a baptismal candidate approaches the font they (or their parents) state what they believe, committing their lives to our Triune God. There is something sacred about the moment when a newly baptized person steps away from the font, still dripping with water, somehow a bit different than they were before baptism. At what point is someone actually saved? When is our salvation complete?

Paul’s language to the Romans suggested that our salvation is all done, happening now, and about to happen. We *were* lost, but the Triune God – through Christ and the Holy Spirit – saved us. Now we are reclaimed by God; adopted and named children of God – with the same rights (“heirs”) – with Christ. But even though we are saved and adopted, we must still suffer and wait for God’s glory to be fully revealed. This is our life. Already, but not yet. Complete, but not yet begun. Liminal.

Instead of worrying so much about the timing of our misdeeds, and the timing of God’s grace, perhaps we should consider more God’s larger nature, and God’s relationship with us.

Within the sacrament of baptism is the recognition of our identity as “child of God.” This is when we give thanks for our family who stand around us at the font, and also step away from them and step toward God. No longer just “Flannagan” or “Fischer” or “Wagner,” we are part of something bigger ... and better! Through the sacrament of baptism, we are adopted into the family of God. I asked a young friend who was adopted what it meant to them. What was important for someone else to know? And they said that you’re “adopted by parents who can take better care of you.” If we take my friend’s understanding and apply it to Scripture, we would read that the situation we were in, the rule that dominated our bodies, the law of sin and death – that wasn’t taking very good care of us. And God knew it. God knew us and loved us. So

God adopted us. God pulled us into the family because God knew that God could take better care of us. God called us into a loving, nurturing family. Not one in which we will be slaves, not one in which our relationships will be dominated by fear and anger, but called into a family that lives in love.

Baptism is the singular moment when we celebrate our adoption into God's family. It is also a time when we claim our sinfulness. We lean into the waters of baptism, just as we admit the sinfulness that clings to our feet. When candidates first approach the font, they are asked to renounce the power of sin and death. Some ancient churches actually submersed their baptism candidates in a font shaped like a coffin, so that people would symbolically die, and be cleansed and raised to a new life through the waters of baptism. However the font is shaped, however the water is placed, we leave the font sealed and set apart for a new life. Yet the moment we are on the other side of the font, even though we *just* professed our desire not to sin, we immediately return to our broken and sinful state. So that our life after baptism isn't much different than before, except that it is completely different. Living a baptized life is both-and; sinful and cleansed of sin; already-but-not-yet.

“For in hope we were saved... and we wait for it with patience.”

Who we are isn't very promising. We suffer. We groan. We long. We are caught in futilities. So we wait. And we hope. With patience. We wait with patience, not because of our own nature. We don't wait patiently because we want to or are able to, but wait patiently because of who God is. Our waiting is not waiting at all. For the waiting is already over. If we believe who God is, our waiting is a sign of our assurance in God's nature. We wait patiently because we know that God has accomplished what God said he would do. We wait patiently because God is doing what Jesus said he would do. We wait patiently because God will continue to shower grace

upon the world as God promised he would do. We wait patiently for God to finally and ultimately reveal God's nature (not our own) to us. We wait patiently because there is no more waiting to be done. Thanks be to God. Amen.