

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Christ the King
Sunday, November 24, 2024**

**“Who Is and Who Was and Who Is to Come”
Revelation 1:4-8**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

Time wields enormous power over us. Time imposes limits on us; time, in many ways, controls us. Think how often we speak of time as the power that determines our lives and our decisions. “You know, I really wish I could; I just don’t have the time.” “We need to do something soon; the fact is, time is running out.” Or “I’m afraid there’s nothing more we can do; time is just not on our side.”

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth, who died in the 1960s, offered some wonderfully insightful reflections on this—on how we live under the control of time, and how powerless we are in the face of the past, the future, and the present.

The past, Barth observes, is something that’s continually slipping away from us. Barth points out that the past is something we’re losing, something we’re forgetting, something that’s torn away from us a bit more every day. He writes: “For us the past is the time which we leave and are in no longer. It was once ours. We had our life in it years ago or yesterday or even this morning. [...] In it we were then ourselves. But we are so no longer. For [...] it has now eluded us and been taken from us. It has remained behind, never to be restored. With [...] ourselves as we then were and cannot be again, it may be partially or completely forgotten. It may almost be thought of as though it had never been. And this is what seems to happen to most of our own past, though it was once ours.”

Barth acknowledges that we try to remember and hold on to the past; but the truth is, our efforts to remember are inadequate; time moves on, and our memory is too limited to retain what’s lost. He writes, “Of course there is in the ocean of oblivion an island or two of memory. A few names, figures, events and circumstances are not entirely forgotten. [...] As well as forgetting, there is also memory—abiding or fleeting, direct or indirect, weak or vivid, natural or artificial. But [...] at best memory is limited. We can recall only a few scraps of the vanished and forgotten past [...]. And even what we [do] recall soon sinks into oblivion.” He adds, “The past has ceased to belong to us. We are no longer the people we were years ago, yesterday, or even this morning.”

And for Barth, the future is utterly uncertain. “But it may well be pure illusion,” he writes, “to suppose that we can look to [...] the world of the future. We do not even know whether we will have a future. [...] We do not know and cannot conceive” the future.

Barth points out, as we’ve all learned in one way or another, that our predictions of the future are often flat-out wrong. He writes: “We may anticipate it [...], but [...] even this anticipat[ion] of the future is very restricted [...].” as “the future when it comes may [...] totally confound our expectations. It is almost a law of nature that this should be the case. We are always poor

prophets even of what is to happen within the next hour or so, to say nothing of a year or two hence [...]. The future [...] is,” he says, “even more obscure than the past.”

So where does that leave us now, in the present? For Barth, the present is a narrow and vanishing perch—between the past that’s slipping away and the future that’s impossible to predict. “The real nature of our being in time is most obscure of all [...],” he writes, “at the very point where it ought to be clearest, namely, at the moment [of] our present. Here [...], midway between the vanished past, which we have largely forgotten or only dimly remember, and the unknown future which awaits us (or perhaps does not await us!), [...] we find that we are [...] utterly insecure. For what is our present,” he asks, “but a step from darkness to darkness, from the ‘no longer’ to the ‘not yet,’ and therefore a continual [loss] of what we were and had in favour of a continual grasping [at] what we will (perhaps) be and have? What is Now?” he asks. “What is the present? It is the time between times. And this, strictly speaking [...] is not time at all [...]. In the present [where] we think we have [time] most securely we have no time.”

And I think what Barth says about the present—as something that’s fleeting, always passing away—I think that really resonates with our experience. I mean, people today have an enormous amount of difficulty living in the present, actually experiencing the present; people even practice special techniques to try to live in the present moment. The fact is, we rarely live in the present: we spend our lives fixated on the future (which is where we keep our worries) or on the past (which is where we keep our regrets). I’m reminded of a line from a song by Canadian singer-songwriter Kathleen Edwards: “You spend half your life trying to turn the other half around.”

And yet... Though time has this unmistakable power over us; though we are powerless before time, with the past vanishing, the future uncertain, and the present impossible to hold onto... And yet, we are not alone in our experience in time, because *Christ is “the Lord of time”* (Barth).

We live under time, but God lives over time: time is a creature, part of God’s created order, something God has made for God’s purposes. God is always the God of yesterday, tomorrow, and today: as we heard in our Lesson from the Book of Revelation, “Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come [...]. ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty” (1:4, 8). Christ is Lord over the past, Lord over the future, and Lord over the present.

Christ reigns over the past: we lose so much to forgetfulness and loss, but nothing in the past is lost to God. The people we were, and are no longer; the memories that have faded, and now elude us; the ways we once knew, but can never recapture; none of this is lost to God. I’m reminded of a poem entitled “Nothing Lost” by the Welsh poet Lewis Morris, who—quite fittingly, considering this topic—is now quite obscure, largely forgotten. He asks what has become of a “glorious note” sung by a singer ages ago, or what has become of the love that was shared by those long dead. And he answers:

“Nothing that once has been,
Tho’ ages roll between
and it be no more seen,
Can perish, for the Will

Which doth our being fulfil,
Sustains and keeps it still.”

Christ reigns also over the future: the days and months and years ahead are always uncertain to us, but the future is never uncertain to God. And for us, one of the very few certainties in the future is that God awaits us: as I shared in the Word to the Children, we often worry about what might happen tomorrow, yet—no matter what happens—the love of God awaits us there. And this isn’t some naïve expectation that everything will go well and according to plan; this is a resilient hope that *even if* everything fails or fall apart, the kindness of God is always our future.

So where does that leave us now, in the present, in that fleeting perch between past and future? That leaves us with the Spirit of Christ, who remains with us in the present. The Triune God not only created time but also enters into time: God created time, and yet in Christ God lived in time; God created time, and yet—by the Spirit—God meets us in our time. The present may seem fleeting, may seem vanishingly brief; yet it only seems that way—because the present is grounded in fellowship with God by the power of the Holy Spirit. The present is the Spirit’s time with us: the present, which can seem so fleeting, is really the slow and abiding moment in which God enfolds us into God’s presence. As the hymn puts it: “but God’s power, hour by hour, is my temple and my tower” (Neander).

Christ the King is “the Lord of time”—Christ is Lord over the past, and what seems lost to us is never lost to God; Christ is Lord over the future, where God’s love always awaits us; Christ is Lord over the present, where Christ’s Spirit comes alongside us today. Thanks be to God. Amen.