

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Reign of Christ
Sunday, November 21, 2021**

**“You Are from Everlasting”
Psalm 93**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

“The LORD is king, he is robed in majesty;
the LORD is robed, he is girded with strength.
He has established the world; it shall never be moved;
your throne is established from of old;
you are from everlasting” (vv. 1-2).

We live and exist under the power and control of time. Think how often we speak of time as a controlling power, a constraining force in our lives. “I really wish I could...I just don’t have the time.” “I’m not sure what we’re going to do about this: time is running out.” “I’m afraid time is just not on our side.”

Sometimes, quite painfully, we realize that we thought we had time but simply didn’t. When the Honourable Jack Layton passed away a decade ago, then-Prime Minister Stephen Harper reflected on an opportunity sadly missed: “As you know, Jack was a musician,” he said at the time, “he was quite a natural one at that. And we always talked about getting together to jam. But it seemed we were both always too busy. I will always regret the jam session that never was,” he added. “That is a reminder that we must always *make time* for friends, family and loved ones, while we still can.” As the then-Prime Minister reflected on that day, we sometimes think we have time—but we can learn unhappily that we had less time that we hoped.

On this, I’d like to share with you some reflections by the Swiss theologian Karl Barth: in his major work entitled *The Church Dogmatics*, he offers a wonderfully insightful exploration of this phenomenon—of our creaturely existence under the power and control of time—exploring how powerless we are in the face of time *as past, future, and present*.

The past, Barth observes, is something that is continually slipping away from us: the past is something we’re losing, that we’re forgetting, that’s torn away from us more and more each 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 recognizes that we try to remember, but—as I think we all know—our efforts to remember are always inadequate: time moves, we are pulled away from what once was, and our memory is too limited to retain what was 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 [...] even at best memory is limited. We can recall only a few scraps of the vanished and forgotten past [...]. And even what we recall soon sinks into oblivion.” He concludes, “The past has ceased to belong to us. We are no longer the people we were years ago, yesterday, or even this morning.”

And the future is, as Barth explains, utterly uncertain. I think we’re in a particularly good position now to understand that: think of the future we looked toward back in 2019, all the plans we had for 2020... The future proved far more uncertain than we realized. “But it may well be pure illusion,” he writes, “to suppose that we can look to our own being of the future or 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.

As Barth very helpfully reminds us, our anticipation of the future is often entirely incorrect: think again of those 2020 plans! 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,” Barth concludes, “even more obscure than the past.” And I would add to Barth’s comments—as I tried to explore in the Word to the Children—that the uncertainty of the future is the very thing that can make us anxious, worried, afraid: the future is unwritten, and so our worried imaginations can write that future in the most worrisome of ways.

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 we can never 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 which we regard as 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 wholly and 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 deprivation of what we were and had in favour of a continual grasping of 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 yet, nevertheless, though time has this unmistakable power over us—though we experience time as utterly overpowering, with the past vanishing, the future uncertain, and the present impossible to hold onto—yet we are not alone in our experience in time, because God—the Living God—is, the psalmist declares today, the eternal one:

“your throne is established from of old,” says the psalmist.

“*you are from everlasting*” (v. 2).

We live under time, but God lives over time: time is a creature, part of the created order, something that God has made for God’s purposes. And so God is always the God of yesterday, tomorrow, and today: as we hear 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)—"who is and who was and who is to come." Even as we recognize our own powerlessness under time, we may celebrate on this Reign of Christ Sunday that Christ is, in Karl Barth's phrase, "the Lord of time."

God reigns over the past: we lose much to forgetfulness and decay and death, 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 and can never recapture; none of this is lost to the God who is "from everlasting" (v. 2). I'm reminded of a poem entitled "Nothing Lost" by the Welsh writer Lewis Morris, who—in some ways fittingly, considering this topic—has become rather obscure over the last century. He asks,

"Where are last year's snows,
Where the summer's rose,--
Who is there who knows?
Or the glorious note,
Of some singer's throat,
Heard in years remote?
Or the love they bore,
Who, in days of yore,
Loved, but are no more?"
And Lewis 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."

Today, on Reign of Christ Sunday, we may be assured that our Lord, "the Lord of time," is Lord over the past—in whom the past that seems lost is never lost at all.

God 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 indeed, for us, one of the very few certainties in the future is that God awaits us there: as I shared in the Word to the Children, we often worry so much about what might go wrong in the future, yet we can remember that—no matter what happens—the lovingkindness of God awaits us. That God is the God of tomorrow is not some naïve promise that everything will go well or that things will take shape as we hope or plan; instead, it is a resilient promise that even if much else may (and does) go wrong and fall apart, the presence and kindness of God is always part of our future.

Today, on Reign of Christ Sunday, we may be assured that our Lord, "the Lord of time," is Lord over the future—where the God of love always awaits us.

And where does that leave us 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, and yet it only seems that way—because the present is grounded in fellowship with God by the power of the Spirit. The present is the Spirit’s time with us: the present, which can seem so fleeting, is really the slow and abiding and ongoing moment in which God enfolds us in God’s presence.

Today, on Reign of Christ Sunday, we may be assured that our Lord, “the Lord of time,” is Lord over the present—where the sovereign Spirit of Christ graciously meets us.

“The LORD is king, he is robed in majesty;
the LORD is robed, he is girded with strength.
He has established the world; it shall never be moved;
your throne is established from of old;
you are from everlasting” (vv. 1-2).
Thanks be to God, the Lord of yesterday, tomorrow, and today. Amen.