



Sermon by: Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

May 18, 2025

Text: Revelation 21:1-7

Revelation Visions: The Sacrament of Time

Isaac Newton had a very straightforward understanding of time. He saw it as a cosmic grandfather clock, ticking away somewhere while the rest of the universe went about its business. Tick, tick – the past becomes the present as we await the future, all measured against a backdrop of the march of time. We divide time into segments so we can keep track of it: seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years. We tell ourselves we are measuring time, when in truth, time is measuring us – reminding us that time only flows in one direction.

Modern culture has turned time into a commodity. We are taught that time is valuable – time is money. Which is why everyone asks us: How do you spend your time? Are you saving time or wasting time or even worse, killing time? We are swept along the river of time toward the end of our lives at the unvarying rate of one second per second. Tick, tick goes Newton's grandfather clock.

But what if Newton was wrong? What if there is no master clock ticking off the movement from the past to the future? Albert Einstein knew that Newton's version of time wasn't right. Most of us, like Newton, think about time in terms of patterns that repeat themselves over and over again: hearts beating steadily, tides coming in and going out, planets circling in orbit around the sun. Because of these patterns in nature, we divide our days into 24 hours and our years into 12 months. But Einstein argued that there is no universal clock ticking away. There is no universal "now." His theory of relativity proved that every description of time depends on where you are and how fast you're moving when you try to measure time. Einstein touched on an idea that was as old as the ancient Greeks, namely that time is not a quality of reality, but one of the tools we've created to understand reality.¹

Now, before this turns into a philosophy lecture, let's explore this idea from another angle. Divisions of time – seconds, minutes, hours – are not the only way we talk about time. We also talk about large chunks of time whose boundaries are open-ended. We announce we're in the season of spring or the season of summer, less by the date on the calendar and more by how it feels outside. A long time ago, Europe went through a period called the "Middle Ages"; in the early 20th century, the U.S. endured the "Great Depression" – although the precise starting and endpoints of those events are fuzzy. Each of us talks about living through the months of Covid, even if the exact parameters of that period are hard to pinpoint. In these examples, the categories of time are not so

much quantitative and measurable as they are qualitative. It is time not so much as units you can count but as something experienced and remembered for how it felt.

Here's another example: Think about the number of meals you've eaten so far in your life. You could total up all the hours spent eating breakfast, lunch, and dinner – or better yet, you can remember specific meals that were especially memorable to you. When I ministered in Zimbabwe back in the 90s, I vividly remember the monthly ritual of a wonderful Sunday afternoon meal after preaching for a small African congregation in a mining community. We'd squeeze together in a living room, washing our hands from a shared bowl of water; and then we'd huddle in groups of two or three eating corn porridge, greens, and chicken from common bowls. There were no utensils; it was all eaten with our fingers. At the end, you'd clap your hands to show appreciation for the meal provided. In my life, I've forgotten thousands of other meals, but I can still picture those simple suppers as if they happened yesterday.

The point is this: Time can be counted and measured, or time can be something special, even holy. In the Jewish faith, they honor God by how they treat time. We have sacraments of bread and wine; they have sacraments of time. For example, every Friday night observant Jewish families note when the sun is scheduled to set. After making preparations during the day for the Sabbath about to come, they take time for Shabbat rituals. Women light two candles about 18 minutes prior to sunset. Then they cover their eyes as they say the prayer I've reprinted on the cover of the bulletin: *Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh ha-olam*. Blessed are You, O Lord, our God, Sovereign of the Universe. Then they uncover their eyes and look at the candles as if seeing the first light of creation. If children are present, a blessing is offered for them. Then after another prayer, everyone ritually washes their hands, gently pouring water two or three times on both the top and bottom of each hand. Then a loaf of challah bread is ripped into pieces, a literal breaking of bread, and handed out to all present to signify the beginning of the family meal. This Shabbat ritual is not an experience of time measured in minutes; rather it is an experience of time as something we step into – a holy ritual reminding us of the nearness of God, the in-breaking of something sacred and eternal into our temporal lives.²

It is that awareness of time that is so important when we think about eternity and the images given to us in the last book of the bible. The vision of a new heaven and a new earth as described in Revelation chapter 21 is more about the quality of heavenly life and not the measurable duration of eternal life. God is called the Alpha and the Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, signifying the beginning and the end – the one who literally encompasses all that has been and all that will be. Time is therefore not something that precedes creation, a backdrop against which the Big Bang took place. Time itself was created with creation, and God is present in every moment that passes.

Time is truly something sacramental – something holy. Now and for always, God is in our midst, wiping away tears from eyes, ending mourning and crying and pain for good, eliminating the finality of death itself. As scripture says, *The first things have passed away*. Behold, God in Christ is making all things new. Instead of building a church cathedral, Revelation invites us to imagine building a cathedral of time – a sacred eternal now – a quality of life that is vibrant and holy, one freely given by Christ to us all.

The sacrament of time is something I encourage each of you to nurture in your own lives. For observant Jewish families, it involves lighting candles at Friday sunset, speaking prayers and breaking bread before a shared meal. Maybe for you it can involve something similar. Instead of letting the clock determine your meal time, let a moment of quiet, an offered prayer of thanks, maybe a lit candle set apart your time at table. For those watching our live stream, technology allows you to stay connected with Immanuel's worship services – to hear scripture and hymns when distance or health reasons keep you away. But try to find a time, as you're able, to be here with us in church – to be beside friends and strangers alike, to step into an experience of time that is a sacrament designed to honor the risen Christ's gospel of love and justice.

On this particular day, we remember a special gift that one of our pastors, Rob Ater, is giving to all of us. After today, Rob will be on sabbatical for a few months. He described it in a recent sermon as an intentional Sabbath, a time for reflection, for reconnecting with people important in his life, and an opportunity to say “thank you” to friends, family, and colleagues across the country. Basically, the summer ahead of us has now become “Rob's Sabbatical Summer.” That's not something measured by a calendar, but rather a quality we will always associate with the summer of 2025. As happy as Rob is to have this special season ahead of him, I'm sure he'd like you to have a sabbatical as well. So why shouldn't you? What keeps you from setting apart the coming months as an intentional season of reflection, renewal, and reconnecting with loved ones? Why can't it also be a sabbatical of grace and gratitude for each of us?

What will you do differently during your sabbatical? How will you live into the sacrament of time in the days ahead? The God of all time, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end, offers you a new heaven and a new earth – a depth to life far richer than the noisy, false gospels of consumerism, nationalism, suffering and fear. The old has passed away. Christ is risen and is among us even to the end of the age, making all things new.

Psalms 118 famously says, “This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.” That is not something that only comes about when the calendar says it's Sunday. It is the eternal now – God's eternity breaking into and shining through every moment of every day. Such time is worthy of our attention – our devotion – and our gratitude and intentionality. So today, welcome to your own sabbatical. Let us rejoice and be glad in it! Amen.

¹ Jim Holt, "The Grand Illusion," *Lapham's Quarterly*, vol. VII, 4 (Fall 2014).

² Cf. Susanna Heschel, introduction to Abraham Joshua Heschel, The Sabbath, 1951.