

# “The Mystery of Time”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina

November 28, 2004

Text: “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children” (Galatians 4:4-5).

There is an expression, “The Greeks have a word for it,” and it is true. You can ask any first year seminary student trying to learn New Testament Greek and they will attest to the fact that the Greek language has nuances and meanings that are sometimes hard to translate into English. For example, in Greek there are two different words that are translated as “time.” One is the word “chronos.” It means time as we ordinarily measure it--seconds, minutes, hours, and weeks.

There is, however, another word that the New Testament uses for “time.” It is the word “kairos.” A “kairos” moment is a moment of opportunity. It is a critical moment, which if realized, can bring great opportunity, but if lost, can bring great harm.

## I.

This last meaning of time is what the writer of Hebrews is driving at when he says, “But when the fullness of time has come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law so that we might receive adoption as children” (Galatians 4:4-5). James Stewart, in his classic book *The Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ* speaks to the point that the timing of the coming of Christ was no accident. The great Roman Emperors--Julius Caesar and Augustus Caesar--had built an empire that stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to the Caspian Sea, from Britain to the Nile, and from Hadrian’s Wall to the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

There were three factors that contributed to the “rightness” of the time of the birth of Christ and allowed the gospel of the birth of Christ to be spread throughout the world. One factor was the *Pax Romana*--the Roman peace. It gave the early disciples and apostles freedom to move throughout the world. A second factor was the great roads of Rome that connected all parts of the empire. The third was the common language of Greek, which was known in all parts of the empire.

The philosophers, particularly the Stoics, taught that there was a right time and a wrong time for everything. Philosophy devoted itself to discerning the proper time.

So many things, when you think about it, are a matter of proper timing. When I consult an investment manager, I want to know whether it is a time to buy or a time to sell. A physician once told me that in diagnosing a patient timing is everything. If the patient comes in too early, the complaint may be unspecific, difficult to pinpoint, vague. But if the patient waits too long, the illness may have progressed too far, and it is too late for treatment.

In his book *Lincoln At Gettysburg* Garry Wills makes the point that timing is an important factor in the production of a great leader. Leadership is not just about great talent. It is about the use of talent at the right time. When Lincoln went to dedicate the battlefield at Gettysburg, he sensed that it was a “kairos” moment. The American people were searching for a way to get beyond the terrible war that had divided the nation. Lincoln seized that moment. With 272 words Lincoln gave the entire nation what it desperately needed, “a new birth of freedom.”

So Shakespeare was right: “There comes a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries”(Julius Caesar, Act IV, Sc.3).

### III.

But what about this Advent Season, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ. Long ago the prophet Isaiah wrote, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness on them has light shined” (Isaiah 9:1-7).

In this Advent season there is a deep division that has settled over this nation as we sort out all of the implications of the election of 2004. But it’s not just the blue state/ red state that divides us. There is something deeper. There is a sense of weariness and a lack of confidence and hope in our nation today. Thomas Friedman wrote of this in the *New York Times* recently when he pointed out some of the things that are troubling us today.

One of the things that is disturbing is that the House of Representatives has laid aside its own ethics rules to protect one of its own members. There is something disquieting, Friedman points out, about people who wear little American flags in the lapels of their jackets to show support of our fighting men and women in Iraq while undermining everything we are fighting for in that country. So where are the statesman? Where are the citizens of this great republic who stand by and do nothing while our own House of Representatives doesn’t have the courage to discipline one of its own members because they are afraid of losing patronage or even a good parking space.

And what about the terrible behavior that is taking place in professional and collegiate sports today, when players in the National Basketball Association go into the stands to attack fans. Then there is Latrell Sprewell, the guard for the Minnesota Timberwolves, who demanded from the owner of the team a three-year contract for 21 million dollars because, as he said, “I’ve got my family to feed.”

Then, too, there is the war in Iraq. One of the troubling things about the war for me is that most of us are not being asked to sacrifice anything for this war. Now, our troops have been asked to sacrifice a great deal. Over a thousand of them have been killed, and ten thousands wounded. But no one has asked the rest of us to sacrifice anything. We are free to enjoy tax cuts and drive our SUVs and Humvees--guzzling gas at an unbelievable rate without having to think that by consuming so much oil, we are making transfer payments to some of the worst Arab regimes in the world so that they can transfer money to Islamic charities that transfer money to madrasses that teach children intolerance, antipluralism and how to hate the infidels.

### IV.

That is why Advent may take on a different meaning for us this year. Advent is not about celebration; it is about preparation. The color of Advent is purple reminding us that before we can celebrate the birth of the Christ we are going to have to do some serious preparation for his coming. We are going to have to repent of our sins. We are going to have to ask for the forgiveness that only Christ can bring.

As the Italian film, "La Dolce Vita," opens, a helicopter is flying slowly through the air close to the ground. Under the helicopter hangs by a strong wire the statue of a man, dressed in a robe, with arms outstretched, as if he were flying alone. The helicopter flies over a field where men are working whereupon one looks up, takes off his hat, and yells, "Hey it's Jesus!" Then all the workers start to chase after the helicopter, but soon it gone from them. As the helicopter flies into the city of Rome, it pauses for a moment over a building where there are a group of young women by a swimming pool. The helicopter pauses for a moment while the pilots yell down at the young women.

Frederick Buechner tells in one of his books of seeing this film in a college town. At first, he said, the audience roared with laughter at the contrast between Christ and the mundane world of work, poverty and affluence, and sex. Then the helicopter proceeds to the Vatican and to St. Peter's Cathedral where the statue is to be delivered. Suddenly the camera zooms in on the face of Christ. Suddenly all laughter stopped and the theater was quiet. "For a moment," Buechner writes, "not very long to be sure, there was no sound, as if the face were their face somehow, their secret face that they had never seen before but that they knew, if only for a moment, they belonged to."

Advent is one of those moments when the camera of our lives moves in and focuses on the face of Jesus Christ, to whom in spite of everything we know we belong.

In that moment time is fulfilled and we know that we are indeed the children of God.  
Amen!