

The theme of our Christmas pageant last Sunday was TIME. Randy Orzano dramatically walked up the aisle with a metronome to symbolize our dependence upon time. Our lives are complicated by time. We have appointments to keep, things to do and we must have a way to keep track of time so that we can all end up here at the same time on Christmas eve. Life is complicated and sometimes we long for a simpler time like that when a baby was born to a man and a woman in a stable outside of Bethlehem.

Long ago, of course, people didn't have watches. The town clock or church clock told everyone when it was time to come in from the fields, or from their work to pray and to eat and to rest. Now that we have our new carillon we too can summon people to come to pray every day! Chronos is the word the Greeks gave for that sort of time which we use to regulate our days.

The ancient Israelites, Greeks and Babylonians kept a lunar calendar. Their days and festivals were governed by the phase of the moon and each new moon brought a time for offerings to the gods or God. And we still use the lunar calendar for marking Easter each year. Easter Day is always the first Sunday after the full moon that falls on or after March 21st. Things get complicated because we are trying to understand them.

In the pageant we also talked about a different sort of time, Kairos, when God breaks into ordinary time with something very different. After Julius Caesar decreed that the solar calendar be used in all Roman lands in 46 BCE, the shortest day of the year fell on December 25th. So, yes, most likely the reason that we now celebrate Christmas on that date is because early Christians, and later Constantine, wished to adopt the celebration for their use. I noticed that The Paul Winter Consort celebrated the Winter Solstice at the Cathedral of St. John the

Divine again this year. Why not continue to combine the secular and the sacred! God sent light into the world in the midst of what scientists of the day declared was the darkest day of the year.

We are complicated people with complicated ways of telling time. We want to know exactly when things occur and why. It's interesting that neither Matthew or Luke tell us when Jesus was born according to the Lunar or the Solar calendar. Maybe it was obvious to them, and they didn't need to mention it because everyone knew when the Roman census took place. Long texts have been written by learned men hypothesizing when the birth must have taken place based on whatever scraps of data they can find. We want to nail down that birth in Chronos time and with our scientific minds don't seem to be willing to accept that it is the simple act of God's stunning incarnation, a Kairos moment of grace that does not lend itself to historical or scientific examination. It is a different sort of time altogether.

It's hard for us to sometimes switch gears and find that balance between the necessary complexities of our lives and allowing God's graceful Simplicity to break in and fill us with joy and peace.

(I asked both Mr. Dakin and Mrs. Warren if I could tell this story tonight.)

One day a couple of months ago I spoke to Jeremy Dakin to tell him I'd found a great new innovation. I showed him a catalog with pictures of aisle candles. You see, Jeremy is our aisle candle guy. The beautiful aisle candles we have here tonight are due mostly to the efforts of Jeremy.

Well, I had found a way to make them better, I thought. The catalog showed a fancy little gadget that you can attach to the candle, and a bracket that you attach to the pew and it supposedly makes putting up the candles a snap. As it is Jeremy has to come with his drill and screw every candle into place before Christmas Eve.

I said, "See, Jeremy, this would make your work so much faster, and then when we want to use the candles for weddings and such I wouldn't have to bother you about it, we'd just be able to do it ourselves."

Jeremy replied, "Well, yes, but it's not that big a deal for me to come over to put up the candles, and I'm happy to do it for an occasional wedding if called for."

Well, I could tell from our conversation that Jeremy wasn't keen on an upgrade to the candles. He thought they worked just fine the way they were and there was no need to complicate matters, or mess with something that functioned just fine the way they were.

I thought to myself, well, we're just a little country church and there's no point worrying about trying to do things like a big city church.

So, time passed. In November I was sad to have to go to St. Thomas' Church in NYC for the burial of our dear friend, Bill Warren. I was honored to be asked to participate in the service and when I walked into the church I had forgotten how big and how beautiful it was. The reredos of stone is amazing, and the height of the vaults spectacular. Fr. Andrew Mead was gracious in his welcome and I tried to not just keep staring up at everything like the tourist that I was. And there in the center aisle were the aisle candles, tall majestic things. I'll have to admit to a bit of candle envy as I gazed around at the surroundings.

Well, the service was beautiful, the music uplifting, the words of the speakers lovely and comforting. Soon it was over and I went back to change back into street clothes. When I emerged into the nave again everyone was gone, and there were only a couple of ushers and the sexton cleaning things up.

I listened carefully and thought I heard a familiar sound. Was I hearing right? The sound was unmistakable though. My eyes cast around the huge building trying to see where the sound was coming from, and lo and behold, there was the sexton in the center aisle removing the grand aisle candles....with a drill!! I asked the sexton about this and he said, "Yes ma'am,

we've been putting up the candles the same way ever since the church was built." I had to laugh out loud. Even St. Thomas' Church Fifth Avenue uses a drill to put up and take down their aisle candles.

What a lesson I learned that day, in simplicity and humility. Ingenuity and invention needs to be tempered with simplicity. God made us to use our brains, and then rest them too.

I'm always trying to gild the lily. Actually, we really do have gilded lilies here in the pulpit. But you know what I mean. I automatically think that the newer, more expensive, fancier gizmo must be better. That kind of thinking always leaves us feeling as though we've got to grab for more and more of what we don't have. And we end up thinking that if we don't get all the newest, "bestest" stuff we will never be truly happy.

But, on the other hand, we are blessed to have been given brains for scientific study, invention and innovation. If we just accepted the old ways of doing things our practice of medicine would never improve, we wouldn't have smart phones, and you wouldn't be holding a full color bulletin for this service. Color copiers are complicated.

I guess we need a balance, don't we? We value the insights and inventions and discoveries of scientists. We love being able to tell time in more accurate ways. And things necessarily get complicated in life; everything from trying to get Aunt Sara here from Timbuktu in time for Christmas, to discovering a new cure for a fatal illness. Those are good and welcome complications.

But we have to be able to take a breather and live into a quiet, simple and holy moment. That's what we celebrate tonight.

This timeless the story of a simple birth in a simple place, just outside of a town where a complicated census was taking place, and Romans and Jews were vying for power and money. This story reminds us to balance our complicated lives with God's serenity and simplicity. When we hear the so familiar story from the gospel of Luke about the angels and the shepherds who are the only ones to attend the birth of the One who changes the world, we are invited to be changed too. We can learn simplicity from the holy family and the simplicity of the joy the beauty of this holy night.

Each person might be the next one to teach us a lesson in simplicity like the one I learned recently. I invite all of you tonight to ponder how God's lovingkindness, which is God's grace, came into the world bringing us light and life, teaching us about simplicity and serenity. More than teaching us, God wishes to have Jesus infuse us, inhabit us through grace and our simple sacrament which we will share. May we all share in the Holy Infant's peace.