

## **Chronos and Kairos**

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### **Invocation**

Time seems to have changed since the pandemic started – slower or faster depending.  
Or perhaps it as changed since the last presidential election – endless or too fast to bear.  
The election was coming on quickly, and now time has slowed to a crawl, and it seems like we will never get there.  
Or maybe time has stayed the same and we have changed.

Time is straightforward and its mysterious. It is part of our daily life, tick- tock, tick-tock as it moves forward relentlessly. But time also slows down and speeds up. Its all relative. As Einstein famously said –

“Put your hand on a hot stove for a minute, and it seems like an hour. Sit with a pretty girl for an hour, and it seems like a minute. That's relativity.”

Humans have always had a complex relationship with time. This morning we are going to explore two ways used by the Ancient Greeks to understand time: Chronos and Kairos. Chronos is the everyday time, the passing of the hours and days, constant and yet relative. Kairos is a moment in time - the right, critical or opportune moment when possibility is ripe and action is called for. Both versions of time have relevance for our lives today.

### **Reading #1 From Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll pg 74-75**

The Hatter was the first to break the silence. “What day of the month is it?” he said, turning to Alice : he had taken his watch out of his pocket, and was looking at it uneasily, shaking it every now and then, and holding it to his ear. Alice considered a little, and said, “The fourth.” “Two days wrong !” sighed the Hatter. “

The March Hare took the watch and looked at it gloomily: then he dipped it into his cup of tea, and looked at it again : but he could think of nothing better to say Alice had been looking over his shoulder with some curiosity. “What a funny watch !” she remarked. “ It tells the day of the month, and doesn’t tell what o’clock it is !” “Why should it ?” muttered the Hatter. “Does your watch tell you what year it is ?” “Of course not,” Alice replied very readily : “but that ’s because it stays the same year for such a long time together.”

“Which is just the case with mine,” said the Hatter. Alice felt dreadfully puzzled. The Hatter’s remark seemed to her to have no sort of meaning in it. “I don’t quite understand you,” she said, as politely as she could.

Have you guessed the riddle yet?” the Hatter said, turning to Alice again. “No, I give it up,” Alice replied: “what’s the answer?” “I haven’t the slightest idea,” said the Hatter. “Nor I,” said the March Hare. Alice sighed wearily. “I think you might do something better with the time,” she said, “than waste it in asking riddles that have no answers.”

“If you knew Time as well as I do,” said the Hatter, “you wouldn’t talk about wasting it. It’s him.” “I don’t know what you mean,” said Alice. “Of course you don’t!” the Hatter said, tossing his head contemptuously. “I dare say you never even spoke to Time!” “Perhaps not,” Alice cautiously replied: “but I know I have to beat time when I learn music.” “Ah! that accounts for it,” said the Hatter. “He won’t stand beating. Now, if you only kept on good terms with him, he’d do almost anything you liked with the clock. For instance, suppose it were nine o’clock in the morning, just time to begin lessons: you’d only have to whisper a hint to Time, and round goes the clock in a twinkling! Half-past one, time for dinner!”

“That would be grand, certainly,” said Alice thoughtfully: “but then—I shouldn’t be hungry for it, you know.”

“Not at first, perhaps,” said the Hatter: “but you could keep it to half-past one as long as you liked.” “Is that the way you manage?” Alice asked. The Hatter shook his head mournfully. “Not I!” he replied. “We quarreled last March, “And ever since that,” the Hatter went on in a mournful tone, “he won’t do a thing I ask!

It’s always six o’clock now.” A bright idea came into Alice’s head. “Is that the reason so many tea-things are put out here?” she asked. “Yes, that’s it,” said the Hatter with a sigh: “it’s always tea-time, and we’ve no time to wash the things between whiles.”

### **Sermon part 1: Chronos**

I have been struggling with time lately – I can’t seem to get my calendar right. I put down a meeting for the wrong day or the wrong week, or the wrong time on the right day! It’s all a blur.

It is a crazy time right now, and time seems crazy as well. It’s as if we have all gone down the rabbit hole with Alice. It’s always six o’clock now the hatter said – or maybe it always 10 AM. I can’t really tell. It does seem to be teatime all the time, I do know that! After 8 months of

sheltering in place with the added stress about the future our sense of time is seriously muddled.

And we are all not having the same experience of time. If you are an emergency room doctor you might want time to slow down do you can take a breath, but if you are an elder alone, you want time to speed up. Every week seems endless, but it seems that time has passed quickly since the pandemic started and we can't remember much of anything in particular.

[Dean Buonomano](#), a professor of behavioral neuroscience at the University of California at Los Angeles explains that our loss of the sense of time is because of the sameness of each day. "The running joke is, you know, we used to have Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and now we just have Day, Day, Day, Day, Day," said "We've sort of lost our mental landmarks or temporal boundaries for days." our memory focuses on, to a large extent, novel events. If you're not doing novel things, you're less likely to have those temporal mental landmarks."

Humans used to have a vastly different relationship with time than we do now. For most of human existence we measured time by the natural world – the rotation of the earth, the cycles of the moon. These created structure to time, days, months, years.

Hours came into our awareness with the invention of the sun dial and the water clocks. And then came mechanical clocks in 1275 – their primary function was to ring the bells on the hour. Italians get credit for the clock face introduced in 1344– believe it or not the minute hand was not added to clocks until 1657 more than 300 years later.

And of course you know where it went from there, to seconds and now nanoseconds, to alarm clocks and productivity measures and multi- tasking. Our culture has become time obsessed.

Then the pandemic came and our relationship to time changed again. A recent series in the Washington post had daily suggestions for coping with time challenges during the pandemic. Their suggestions centered around weekly anchors that help mark the days and give structure to time. Some of these you likely already have – work meetings, family calls or visits, but the suggestions is to schedule them at the same time each week. To give added structure. For example, some of you have told me that Sunday and Tuesday services help anchor your week and give you something to look forward to in a week of sameness. There's a start. My spouse Nancy and I have lunch together every day – something that we rarely did in pre-pandemic times and it has become an anchor in our days.

Once you have your regular life anchors down, add a few special items - add a do nothing time where you take a break from worry and stress. Such as 30 minutes of deep breathing on Sunday with nothing else going on. Or schedule a walk every Friday morning, or sit in the

garden and watch the birds for an hour on Tuesday. Intentionally take time more slowly.  
Keep the negativity at bay

Add to these anchors something new each week- for example make Thursday afternoon the time to do something new – doesn't have to be a big deal, it could be a new food, or walk in a different neighborhood or different TV show or podcast. It gives you something to look forward to.

While the pandemic has caused is to cope with our changing relationship to time, our challenges is with time are not new. Time has been an enigma for humans throughout our history. Is it linear, is it cyclical? It is everywhere and nowhere - does it even exist or did we make it up?

As humans, as far as we know, our lives are bounded by our birth and our death with all the seconds, minutes, hours days and years in between. Like sands in the hourglass. These are the days of our lives.

But despite these limits we have an awareness of the time before we existed and that which will come after us. This allows us to see our own lives in perspective. One of the ways that I have been coping with the double whammy of the pandemic and the crisis in our democracy is to keep in mind the long arc of time. We are but a blip in human existence, let alone the planets life span. I read recently that the Supreme court in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was very conservative and ruled against many cases that would have protected workers and given them more rights. And yet later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century many of those rights were won. I found this strangely comforting – we have survived this before, and the arc of the universe does bend toward justice – eventually and with many twists and turns, but it gets there at least with workers' rights. This give me hope.

Joanna Macy – Buddhist author and wise woman, helped me understand this perspective of time in her book Active Hope. I preached on her ideas a couple of years ago - some of you may remember the dandelion spiral that I shared. She suggests that widening our time frame to both the past and the future can open a sense of possibility. Many of the things we take for granted today were considered impossible in the past – think of our smart phone or self-driving cars. Can you image with might be possible in the future?

She suggests that as we go about our daily lives we consider the hosts of ancestors and future beings that surround us like a cloud of witnesses. Our ancestors are our allies, what gifts and wisdom to they offer? And we can see ourselves as the ancestors of future generations. How

does that change how we act now? Taking a long view of time helps us to see that we are a part of this link of time through the ages and into the future.

So as you go through these challenging times, do what you need to do to anchor yourself, and try to take the long view to help gain perspective on where we have come from and where we are going. This pandemic will end, and the world will move on.

Make friends with time, it's going to be with you for as long as you live. I don't want you to end up like the Mad Hatter who quarreled with time and for him its always 6 O' clock.

### **Reading #2 by Leslie Dwight**

What if 2020 isn't cancelled?

What if 2020 is the year we've been waiting for?

A year so uncomfortable, so painful, so scary, so raw --  
that it finally *forces* us to grow.

A year that screams so loud, finally awakening us  
from our ignorant slumber.

A year we finally accept the need for change.

Declare change. Work for change. Become the change.

A year we finally band together, instead of  
pushing each other further apart.

What if 2020 isn't cancelled, but rather  
the most important year of them all.

### **Sermon part 2: Kairos**

We now turn to the other form of time as considered by the Ancient Greeks – Kairos – or the opportune time – the “moment” of possibility and transformation.

The word has been traced back to two primary roots - one with archery and the other with weaving. In archery, Kairos denotes the moment in which an arrow may be fired with sufficient force to penetrate a target. You can image that even if you don't shoot arrows – it's a moment when everything is in place – all the preparation and the awareness and the energies needed to make the mark.

In weaving, Kairos denotes the moment in which the shuttle – the piece that pushed the threads together - could be passed through threads on the loom. That creates a lovely image – all the threads are in place and ready for the clunk of the shuttle bringing all the treads together, creating the beautiful patterns and textures of the weave. A Kairos.

Thinking of Kairos reminded me of a definition I have heard of luck – when preparation and opportunity come together. Luck is not a passive event – its when you have done the preparation and when you opened your awareness to the opportunity. When these come together a Kairos can occur.

I hope you have all had Kairos moments in your life – when everything came together into a way that changed things. A Kairos can be an epiphany – a time when an idea shifted to a new awareness, or it can be when an opportunity arose, and you met it in just the right way. An example I think of is in our justice work. One of the challenges is knowing when and how to speak up when you hear someone make an intentional or unintentional racist comment. It's hard for many of us. A Kairos would be when the opportunity arises, and you know just what to say and you say it. Preparation and opportunity and a bit of courage create that Kairos moment.

On a grander scale the big bang was a Kairos moment for the universe and so was the creation story – where God got the urge to get up from his chair and say – let there be light. In Christianity, the concept of Kairos means "the time when God acts". The word is used 86 times in the New Testament.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century Christian Theologian Paul Tillich considered Kairos to be a crisis in history which creates an opportunity – even a demand for human action.

In the spirit of Tillich I believe that the death of George Floyd under the knee of the policeman – gruesome as it was - was a Kairos moment where something shifted – when many white people saw institutional racism clearly for the first time. A moment of awakening and call to action.

In the larger sense I believe that our world is poised for a Kairos right now. One with the possibility of great transformation. The reading that Frances shared asked the question What if 2020 is the year we've been waiting for?

What if? Joanna Macy calls our Kairos moment a great turning – just like the agricultural revolution ten thousand years ago. So much as in play now, so much possibility, so much crisis and brokenness. So much so that a transformation in consciousness is possible, and the creative possibility for a new way of living together on this planet.

Fine words you say – but I am stuck inside- how can I participate in this Kairos when I can't leave the house.

You already are participating. For Kairos to happen there must be preparation. You must strengthen your arm, draw the bow, and set your site, before releasing the arrow. This preparation is the postcard that you write to voters, the time you name your truth about the election to a conservative friend, your own increased awareness of what it means to have privilege as a white person. Macy says that if you look around you will find evidence that our civilization is being reinvented all around us.

What if 2020 is the year we've been waiting for? A powerful Kairos for our world.

A year so uncomfortable, so painful, so scary, so raw --  
that it finally forces us to grow.

A year that screams so loud, finally awakening us  
from our ignorant slumber.

A year we finally accept the need for change.

Declare change. Work for change. Become the change.

Chronos marches on, but Kairos transcends - a time out of time. A time for possibility and transformation. Perhaps we are not living in the worst of time, but the best.