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Living Between the Times
Luke 21:31

Dawn and dusk are special times in the Celtic tradition. These are moments which Celtic people have called the time between the times. It is the time between what is dying and what is being born (Leonard Beechy, *Christian Century*, November 17, 2009, page 21).

What is dying and what is being born is a central concern of the 21st chapter of Luke. This gospel is written to a people who have endured an event that was deeply traumatic. The destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 AD was a catastrophic development for Christians and Jews alike. The temple was more than a focal point for worship. It was also the place where God's presence was seen to be directed in a special way. The destruction of the temple challenged their understanding of God's activity in the world. They were living between the times, painfully aware of what had been lost and having no idea of what was to come.

Luke invites his readers to come to grips with this event by underlining Jesus' perspective of such catastrophes. Jesus announces that God is at work in what is dying and what is being born. The signs of God's presence in these events are always abundant. They are not that hard to read. Everyone knows that the leafing of the fig tree is a sign that Spring is dying and Summer is being born. Those who pay attention will also be able to see that God no longer needs a temple as a special dwelling place. The God who came in Christ now lives in the hearts of believers. Luke wanted his readers to set aside their grief so that they can celebrate what God is doing in the midst of what is dying and what is being born. The God who shakes things up is working for our redemption. Knowing that is the key to living between the times.

During my recent trip to Germany I had an opportunity to observe the transition that is underway in the former Communist East Germany. I was mostly traveling by train, but in order to reach the small village where my great-grandfather was born, I needed to rent a car. I had reserved a car through Hertz in the nearby town of Bitterfeld. I got off the train at the Bitterfeld station and walked about half a mile to the rental car location. My arrival at the Hertz office in Bitterfeld clearly shook things up. The women behind the counter had never dealt with a customer in English. My presence created for them a major crisis.

The solution to the crisis came from an unexpected source. Another customer was at the counter. He announced that his 19 year old son, standing next to him, had been studying English in school. The Hertz employees were delighted to receive this news. They brought him over to their side of the counter and placed him in a seat of authority. They deputized him as their official translator. Then they paid him for his services by giving him a cigarette and lighting it up on the spot. He was obviously not practiced as a translator and struggled to complete the task. His father had to hang around for thirty minutes watching this process unfold. When the checkout procedure was finally concluded I thanked them both and was on my way.

This experience must have shown this father and son that they were living between the times. An old world was dying and a new world was being born. If the father had studied a foreign language in school it would have been Russian not English. If a stranger had appeared in their town in those days it would not have been an American. That his son was learning English and helping an American in their hometown was a powerful sign of what had died and what was being born. I wonder what they talked about as they went home together that day.

In the 33rd chapter of Jeremiah we encounter a prophet who was especially attuned to what was dying and what was being born. Jeremiah ministered to a city that was under siege and would soon fall to the army of Nebuchadnezzar. The destruction of Jerusalem would be a painful death and Jeremiah does not sugarcoat what is about to happen. But he chooses to live between the times sustained by a vision of the new birth which he believes will follow the tragedy. From the dead stump of the failed Davidic kings a shoot will spring up. From this shoot will grow a righteous branch which will bring justice and redemption to humanity. Jeremiah takes action in the present to affirm this vision of hope. He buys real estate which will be worthless for years to come. It is his way of making his life a sign of the new world that God will bring into being.

In the Autumn of 1939, C. S. Lewis spoke at a service of worship at Oxford University attended by students and faculty who could see their world coming apart at the seams. They were deeply worried about the survival of Western Civilization in the face of the brutal invasion of Poland by the German army. With war breaking out students were worried about what the coming weeks would bring. They correctly assumed that their academic plans would soon be set aside. What was dying in 1939 was all too clear. But no one could yet envision the contours of the new world that would be born in the years ahead. Lewis' words that evening were particularly directed to the anxieties of the students:

You would be surprised if you knew how soon one begins to feel the shortness of the tether: of how many things even in middle life, we have to say, 'No time for that,' 'Too late now,' and 'Not for me.' A more Christian attitude, which can be attained at any age, is that of leaving futurity in God's hands. We may as well, for God will certainly retain it whether we leave it to Him or not. Never, in peace or war, commit your virtue or your happiness to the future. Happy work is best done by the one who takes his long-term plans somewhat lightly and works from moment to moment 'as to the Lord.' It is only our daily bread that we are encouraged to ask for. The present is the only time in which any duty can be done or any grace received (quoted by Earl Palmer, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, November 23, 2009, page 23).

Lewis wanted his young listeners to understand that God is always with us in the midst of what is dying and what is being born. We can live in hope between the times because we can always trust our times to God.