

## The fullness of the present moment

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15; 1 Corinthians 13:9-12

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Contrary to what you might guess, the screens that shield from view the cluttered attic of our awaiting Rummage Sale aren't a special touch just for my final Sunday. (Though they do work nicely, don't they?) They're from yesterday's wedding. To my peculiar bend of mind, though, they're reminiscent of the big blue curtain that hangs in the Metrodome during Twins games. No, we won't be retiring any numbers today. But after so many references to my love of baseball at the lovely Coffee Hour you gave Robin and me last Sunday, I figured I couldn't get out of here without at least one ballgame reference. And that, right there, might have been the only time I've spoken of baseball in a sermon in my entire career.

That's not to say I didn't think of it from time to time. I fantasized about peeling off my robe to reveal my baseball uniform underneath. (I don't have it on today, but I do sleep in it every night, you know—through the years Robin has been very patient, but she does think the helmet and the spikes are a bit much.) So I thought about it, but I just couldn't see myself preaching one of those “Life is like a game of baseball” homilies. Or you standing for it.

I think that big blue curtain in the Metrodome isn't just a display space for the canonized—Puckett and Hrbek, Oliva, Killebrew, and Carew. No, I think it's actually there to make the crowd look bigger, the space less cavernous. The first time I stood in this sanctuary it felt very empty. It was a Friday night in May, and Greg and Lisa Hubinger had just picked me at the airport for a weekend interview with the search committee. They wanted to show me the building, and I wanted to see it. I remember us driving up. The building dark, stony, and Victorian, even a bit spooky-looking from the outside. Inside, to a newcomer's eyes (though I didn't say it at the time), this room felt ... unoccupied. At that time the lighting fixtures overhead were heavier and dim, and there were no sconces on the walls. The room didn't shine at night. Over the years I have come to know its radiance. It's the radiance of a loving community. Each year this room has gotten fuller and fuller, with memories and associations if not with people in attendance. In seasons like this, when the turning of the autumn leaves and chosen turns of events put us in a reflective mind, we might deeply know the truth of that line from Ecclesiastes, “God seeks out what has gone by.” God has indeed put a sense of past and future into the human mind, and sometimes the present brims to overflowing.

There are moments like this in the life of a community. And there are also texts and images that brim full. Words and pictures that are so replete with suggestion that you shouldn't even try to capture their fullness. Sally read two of them to you. A third is projected on the screen. Don Portwood (a minister at Lyndale UCC) emailed the photo to friends back in August, after the birth of his granddaughters Asata and Aima.

I opened the email, and for a moment, time stopped.



*Photograph by Barbara Portwood. Used by Permission.*

Sometimes an image arrests you like that, and you're not quite sure why. There's something in it, something extraordinary, that speaks with wordless eloquence of a truth glimpsed. Like a Russian icon, it's a window onto another world.

When Don's partner Barb took this picture, her granddaughters were just an hour old. Perhaps they weren't even named yet, which would explain the silly A and B signs the nurses put on their caps. Asata is Baby A; Aima is Baby B. Look at it on the projection screen if you can. There's something about the impossibly dark eyes of Aima, about the sense of exploration and intimacy in the way her left hand rests on her sister's cheek. Something about the way her index finger is poised near her sister's eye and how her own impossibly dark eyes gaze. Her hand's position is reminiscent of a sign of blessing, but the moment speaks to me primarily of the way a child completely and un-self-consciously drinks in the world. It's as if she's seeing her sister both fully and for the first time. These two had been together from the onset of their life's potential. They had grown together, floated timelessly in the darkness of their mother's womb as their bodies slowly differentiated. Eventually as they grew, they must have crowded up against one another, perhaps literally cheek by jowl, in a floating environment where—if one can be said to see at all—sight is surely secondary, where there is a unity of being, and the rhythmic whoosh of blood, the muffled sounds of voices from outside the womb, and the warm wet world within all combine in one unified experience where nothing is separate from anything else. And then here, having emerged into a new world, an hour after birth, what sense of discovery, of wonder, of simple direct taking-it-all-in must go through a child's mind? It's surely beyond wonder and beneath amazement. It all just is, complete and timeless, the fullness of the present moment.

Probably none of us can recapture that oneness of mind and being, but at times we're privileged to glimpse those moments again. Sounds fade away, time stops its ticking, and all is focused, present, and now...

When we were a child, we thought like a child, we spoke like a child, we reasoned like a child. ... We intuited like a child. ... We drank it all in like a child. ... And now that we have become adults, we

have put away our childish ways. That passage from Paul's writings is supposed to be read positively: we have transcended the ways of being that we knew before and have lived into a more mature way. Yes, there is some good in that. But, eccentric Bible interpreter that I am, I also want to suggest that there is beauty and merit in reading it backwards, from the perspective of those who are dismissed and can't speak for themselves.

For it is true that we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part. Too often, in our very adult way of living in the world, we take the partial for the whole. And confusing maturity with truth and power with wisdom, we can even, as the hymn says, justify some terror with an antiquated creed.<sup>1</sup> But when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end, and we will see like children again.

... For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now we know only in part. Then, as before, we will know fully, even as we are fully known.

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Permit me one last sermonic moment. Whether you've been with me for a few months or 16 years, you know that I seem to go off on these tangents. Hopefully it all comes home in the end.

I must admit that I was deeply disappointed that we couldn't reproduce the photo of Aima and Asata better than we could. And I appreciate Gary Burns's quick responsiveness in getting the photo projectable on such short notice. Always one to do things on the cheap, it simply didn't occur to me to have the photo taken to a print shop and color copied there. But the way this has happened spurred a good closing thought.

If there is any human fault in the way this reproduction turned out, it is mine. But really it's a mechanical failure. Our equipment simply can't do any better than this.

In an overachieving community like this one, I have no doubt that the ghost of what we weren't able to do frequently taps us on the shoulder. This ghost has stood before me time and again. Maybe that's why I've fit into this community so well for so long. But we do the best we can, and even God can't require more of us than that. The amazing thing is that when we accept who we are and our limitations—if we can make peace with that—then somehow, sometimes, we end up transcending what we weren't able to do. At the risk of sounding overly preachy, I see that reflected in a central episode in the foundational Christian story. Remember that part about the garden of Gethemane? "Take this cup away from me." I just can't get this done. It's more than I can handle. I believe, I *hope*, that there is more than resignation in what comes after—the "not my will, but yours" part. Dearly I hope there's a having come to peace with one's own limitations and a trust that it doesn't all rest with what we can or can't do by ourselves. I've always preached better by suggestion than by proclamation, so I'll leave it to you to put into words what is the source of our Easter transcendences. Because as always, what will eventually guide you is how you understand your faith, not how I understand mine.

Being more of a suggester than a proclaimer, I just want to leave you with this image of the twins (and not the ones who play in the 'Dome). There is a being who knows us as closely as Baby B knows Baby A. Who sees as only she can see, through eyes so dark and timeless that they are ever beyond our knowing, but in whom we are fully known, and with whom in the fullness of our being, we can finally find peace.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas H. Troeger, "Praise the Source of Faith and Learning."