

## Time Lords and the Lord of Time

In the month that I've returned to active duty as your pastor, I've shared a number of stories and reflections from my Sabbatical time away. Some of these have gotten a little heavy. As a result of my experiences and my reflections on them, I've suggested that we consider some changes in our style of worship and in the décor of our building and proposed a whole new outreach program, even adding to our ministry staff. We'll continue to explore these ideas together. Dale Sutton has called for a new worship taskforce and some of you have already responded. I'm looking at the calendar for opportunities to gather us in small groups to talk about the possibilities of a ministry to our Korean brothers and sisters in the area. I'm excited about what the future can be here at Good Shepherd Baptist.

But this morning, I think it's time for a little fun. What I've prepared is a far more lighthearted look back at my Sabbatical and a little personal history. I'm going to tell you about a TV show I loved as a child which has been, dare I say, resurrected in the last few years and about a day that Connie and I spent in London indulging in silly fun things. And, of course, since this is me and it's Sunday morning at Good Shepherd Baptist, I'm going to talk about God and art and stuff. The name Jesus is likely to be mentioned and I may even throw in some theologians that nobody cares about but the seminary graduates in the room. But mostly, this is just for fun.

*[Watch this clip of 1<sup>st</sup> Doctor Opening](#)*

That odd and rather ominous music and psychedelic graphics were my introduction as a five-year old in 1966 to the British television phenomenon, "Doctor Who." Already immensely popular in the U.K., "Doctor Who" had debuted in 1963 as an imaginative program for children. The original concept was to use the growing popularity of science fiction to entertain the kiddies while teaching them a bit about history and science and good solid English virtues. The hero was never actually known as "Doctor Who," that was really more of a question. He was simply ["The Doctor," played by William Hartnell...](#) as an eccentric, rather crotchety traveler in space and time. [He and his granddaughter, Susan, were not from Earth nor from our time but they were quickly joined by two school teachers, Barbara and Ian,](#) who provided the contemporary human point of view on their adventures. They travelled in a craft known as the [TARDIS...](#)...an acronym for "Time and Relative Dimension in Space." On the outside, it looked like a Police Call Box of the type that were ubiquitous in London in the early '60s but were later phased out. Incidentally, the City of Glasgow restored some of these in recent years and put them back into service. [Connie and I saw several while we were there.](#) But the TARDIS, famously, is bigger on the inside than on the outside because it exists outside of the dimensions of normal space. Inside is not only the [famous control room](#), but also an ever-changing number of other rooms – accommodations for the Doctor and his friends, an extensive wardrobe room to accommodate their historical journeys, a lab, an infirmary, a library, a swimming pool, and many, many others.

By the time my family moved to England in 1966 and I began watching, changes had already come to the program. The Doctor's companions had become an ever-shifting roster. The first to leave was Susan, the Doctor's granddaughter, in love with a young man who'd helped them defeat (not for the last time) the villainous robotic Daleks, and eager to settle down with him. Here's a clip of the Doctor's farewell to her, which to my mind borrows from... well, watch this and see if any of it sounds familiar.

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### [Watch The Doctor bids Farwell](#)

The promise of return and the encouragement against anxiety sounds quite New Testament, doesn't it? The Doctor continued to bring aboard surrogate granddaughters and sturdy young assistants and when I caught up with his adventures he was accompanied by two young people from Swingin' Sixties London – pretty secretary Polly and stout young merchant marine Ben.

But the biggest change was yet to come. At the end of an adventure in which the Doctor had defeated the half-human, half-robot Cybermen, he complained of feeling tired, remarked that “*this* body is wearing thin,” and collapsed on the floor of the TARDIS. Here's what happened next...

### [Watch The Doctor Regenerate](#)

Suddenly, the Doctor had a new body, a new voice and even a slightly different personality! As a six-year old boy, I was horrified and indignant! They'd ruined my favorite program! Of course, I was quite wrong. In the event, I was quite won over by the new man, Patrick Troughton, who was a more whimsical, avuncular Doctor. The in-show explanation was that the Doctor's race, later revealed to be the Time Lords of the planet Gallifrey, had the ability to regenerate when their bodies wore out or were damaged. Their memories and essential character remained the same but the body was new and the personalities showed different quirks. The reality was that Hartnell suffered from a number of health problems and this science fiction expedient gave the producers to recast their main character at will.

Over the years, during the show's original run from 1963 to 1989, its one-off appearance as an American made-for-TV movie in 1996, and the current revival which began in 2005, there have been a total of eleven Doctors.

The Doctor has morphed from [iron-willed grandfather \(Hartnell\)](#) to [cosmic hobo \(Troughton\)](#). [Jon Pertwee's Doctor](#) was a man of action, dressed very *a la mode* for the end of the '60s. The best known [Doctor here in the States is undoubtedly Tom Baker](#) by virtue of his unprecedented and unsurpassed seven-year run as the Doctor and by the popularity of his adventures in syndication on public television stations in this country. The Fourth Doctor was a madcap alien who was only predictable in being on the side of justice. Baker's successor, [Peter Davison](#), was a sweet, earnest, young sportsman, while the [Sixth Doctor, played by Colin Baker](#), appeared to be slightly deranged and not always pleasant. [Sylvester McCoy played the Seventh Doctor](#) rather like the Second, as a brilliant and good man whose motives and intellect were generally kept disguised by clownish behavior. The [Eighth Doctor, Paul McCann](#), didn't leave much of an impression as the star of that ill-fated TV-movie, which had been meant as the pilot for a U.S. based series. Among the new men, [Christopher Eccleston's Tenth Doctor](#) was a war-weary refugee, [David Tennant](#) was a romantic leading man-type and the [current Doctor, played by Matt Smith](#), has returned to the rather madcap eccentric. Smith admits to being heavily influenced by watching the few surviving episodes of the Patrick Troughton era.

On that fun day that Connie and I spent in London, we did a couple of Doctor Who-related things. That evening, we saw David Tennant on stage in Shakespeare's “Much Ado About

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Nothing.” Even when he was playing The Doctor, Tennant was building his reputation of one of this generation’s finest Shakespearean actors, including with a new Royal Shakespeare Company production of Hamlet in which his co-star as Claudius was Sir Patrick Stewart, also well-known for his science fiction exploits as Professor X in the X-Men movies and as Captain Jean-Luc Picard in Star Trek: The Next Generation. Tennant lived up to expectations for us in “Much Ado...” We also went that day to a new exhibit in London called “The Doctor Who Experience,” in which audience members are treated to a 3-D, interactive adventure with The Doctor versus the Daleks and the Cybermen, and which has an extensive exhibit of props and costumes from the TV series.

But even with all the changes, The Doctor has remained, at core, a kindly being, concerned for the welfare of not only his companions but for all those with whom he comes in contact. He has a finely honed sense of justice and, although he does not carry weapons and is essentially a pacifist, he is not averse to manipulating those who would harm others into harming themselves instead. But he always gives them a chance to repent of their evil, even when they are threatening Earth, which for mysterious reasons is his favorite planet. Here’s one last clip of Matt Smith telling off a baddy, beloved by Who fans because it shows all eleven Doctors.

### [Watch The Doctor with the Atraxi](#)

So, what does all this have to do with our normal focus on Sunday mornings at Good Shepherd Baptist Church? No mention so far of God or of Jesus or of building the Beloved Community. And what of the whole “Time Lords and the Lord of Time” aspect? To begin with, as I told the children earlier, we can learn positive things from television, books and films. And one of the reasons that I’ve been a science fiction fan all of my life is because it seems to me that most science fiction begins with the essentially positive message that humankind will survive. We may be in a mess right now and we may not come out of it entirely unscathed but we will come out of it. “Doctor Who” provides us with a frankly optimistic view of the future for humankind and while God, indeed, is never mentioned, those of us with faith look ahead to the future of our species and see the hand of Providence subtly guiding all things.

As I mentioned before, “Doctor Who” was initially envisioned as a way to teach children in a positive way. The virtues that the Doctor displays, compassion, courage, a commitment to find non-violent solutions, care for the ecology of the planets he visits, all of these virtues can be traced through the good Anglican schooling that his creators received to their basis in the Bible. Just as with “The Lord of the Rings” or Harry Potter, it doesn’t matter if God is explicitly mentioned or not. God’s fingerprints are all over the work of Tolkien and Rowling and they are in Doctor Who as well.

“Doctor Who” was also meant to teach children about history and the Doctor’s adventures have taken him and his companions to the dawn of civilization, to the Trojan War and Imperial Rome, to Marco Polo’s China and to pre-conquest Mexico as well as to a number of important moments and figures in British history. I’m quite sure that being a fan of the Doctor’s exploits all these years helped me develop my own interest in history. Why is this important? There is of course the general notion that learning history helps us avoid the mistakes of our forebears but there is a more specific importance for Christians and for Jews. Ours are historical faiths, grounded in the

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very real deeds that history records and that we ascribe to our God. As Christians, Gentiles grafted onto the stock of Israel, we point to Abraham and say that we, too, are his spiritual heirs. We claim the history of Hebrews, led out of captivity in Egypt by God, as our own. We, too, remember with gratitude to God the Kingdom of David; we grieve over the exile in Babylon; we rejoice in the return to Jerusalem. In the Louvre, this summer, I saw household idols of the kind that Abram would have abandoned in Ur to follow his mysterious God and the monumental art of the Assyrians and Babylonians who destroyed the Hebrew kingdoms of Israel and Judah. I saw the seal of Omri, King of Israel, whose story is told in I Kings 16. I saw columns from the palace of Darius, one of the Persian kings who supported the Jews in their return to Jerusalem. And while there are no undisputed relics of the carpenter from Nazareth, we see his impact and that of his teaching throughout history. Ours is an historical faith and I'm glad that Doctor Who continues to inspire children to learn about history. We are surrounded, as the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews said, by a great cloud of witnesses to the glory of our God and of God's Christ. From them, we learn to run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

I also credit the Doctor and the science fiction that I continued to enjoy with helping me to think in flexible, even theological ways about time. One of the lasting impacts of Hebrew thought on our world is the concept of linear time. Humans in other cultures were accustomed to thinking of time as a series of never-ending cycles – spring followed by summer followed by autumn followed by winter followed by spring, over and over again without end. But the Jews said, no, there was a beginning and there will be an end and God's plan rules over all. They studied their history to learn more of God's plan and they speculated about how that plan would unfold in the future. But to God, they said, time is different. "A thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it passes," said the Psalmist in praise to God. In the great Revelation given to John on the island of Patmos, God tells him, "I am the Alpha and the Omega," the first of all and the last of all. God is both now and then, the one who is and was and is to come.

That's pretty trippy stuff, when you really think about it. And by the time I was old enough to really think about it, I had a fictional friend named the Doctor, who swooped backwards and forwards across time like I ran back and forth across my yard. Unlike God, the Doctor did not experience all time at once – even Time Lords are mortal beings, living life one moment at a time. But that fictional perspective helped me get my head around what it might be like to be outside of time – to get a glimpse of how God can know every moment of our lives before we come into existence and yet still lovingly grant us the free will to shape our lives into what God knows they will be. This is a concept almost impossible for our finite minds to grasp and yet, with the imaginative help of the writers of science fiction, I think we can catch just a glimpse of eternity.

Jesus said (remember, I promised I'd mention Jesus), "the hour is coming and now is, when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth... the hour is coming and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and they that hear shall live." Jesus spoke as if the past, the present and the future were all one to him and, indeed, if he was the self-revelation of God, they were. Jesus often spoke as if the future reality of the Kingdom of God, the fulfillment of the Beloved Community, was breaking into the present through him and his work. Theologians like my teacher Frank Tupper and his theological hero, Wolfhart Pannenberg, have referred to this as "proleptic eschatology," a fancy way of saying that the end of time is intruding

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into the present. The Kingdom, as they would say, is both now and not yet. We believers, the Church, the Beloved Community in all its manifestations, we are actually the future of humankind, envisioned from the beginning by God, shoving its way, lovingly, into the mess of the current age. It makes me feel like I'm riding into my own life in the TARDIS!

So, what's it all mean, this timey-wimey, wibbley-wobbley stuff? Like our fictional friend The Doctor, I look into the past and I see magnificent stories, stories of courage and compassion that inspire me with hope for the future and with awe for the great works of our God. I look to the future and I see... possibilities. I don't know exactly what God has in store for me or for us as Good Shepherd or for the human race in general but I have faith that our Loving Creator is the endpoint, the Omega to which we are all drawn. I look around today, at our present together, and I see that I am surrounded by friends, by people who are dear to me and I hear the promise of Jesus that whenever we gather together, whenever we break the bread and share the cup, that he is here with us, even to the end of the world. Not even The Doctor can claim that – even Time Lords are mortal, though long-lived. But while we enjoy the exploits of the Time Lord known as The Doctor, we serve the Lord of all Time and all Space, our Loving Creator who made all things and who makes all things new. Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost! As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end! Amen.