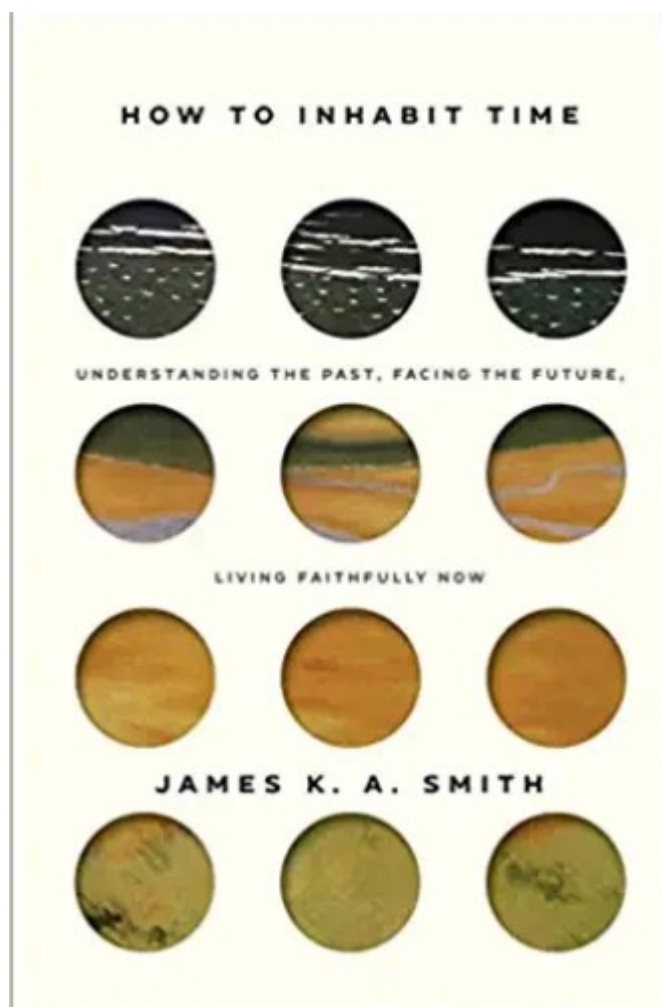


“When are we?” asks James K. A. Smith

The philosopher diagnoses the temporal tone deafness of Christians, our inability to attend to time.

by [Amar D. Peterman](#) in the [November 2022](#) issue

In Review



How to Inhabit Time

the Past, Facing the Future, Living Faithfully Now

By James K. A. Smith

Brazos Press

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James K. A. Smith believes that temporal life is not a curse but a gift. *How to Inhabit Time* calls Christians to embrace our experience as socially conditioned and temporarily situated beings through *memento tempori*—a discipline of “spiritual timekeeping.” Acting as a seasoned guide, Smith offers a six-chapter journey that seeks to stir up our attunement to the world around us through practices of contemplation, observation, and questioning. The end of this embrace is not an apocalyptic-driven fear but a “new recognition of ourselves, our world, and our relation to the God who encounters us in the fullness of time.”

In typical Smith fashion, this book is richly interdisciplinary. In one section, Smith explores the medical condition of dyschronometria, the inability to measure the passing of time; in another, the lyrics from a Fleet Foxes tune drive his point home. He intersperses his own reflections on Ecclesiastes with material from a plethora of writers, from Kierkegaard to Shakespeare to Wendell Berry. He also ventures deep into his own life experience—including a painful struggle with fatherlessness, depression, and doubt—to show the personal stakes of his intervention in our understanding of time. All of this is confined within 200 lively pages.

The book’s guiding question—“*When* are we?”—is a prescription for what Smith diagnoses as a temporal tone deafness, our inability to attend to time. The church today, he observes, is conditioned by a perspective of “nowhen,” wherein we regard a particular practice of Christian faith and biblical interpretation as a timeless truth to be practiced and applied across all time and space. Because the church does not recognize how it is a product of history, Christians cannot properly understand the present. To ask “*When* are we?” is to wipe the mud from our eyes and see the way we are located within God’s particular presence in our world today.

As Smith guides readers through the Spirit’s movement in history, he invokes the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, Heidegger’s concept of “thrownness,” the Hegelian concept of *aufheben* (taking up), and theological reflections from Reinhold Niebuhr. To make sense of ourselves, Smith argues, we must first collectively recognize and bear witness to our past and how it shapes our perspectives today.

Our bodies are situated within time, and temporality is a paradoxical blessing. But we need not bury the past or live in shame because of the histories that live deep in us. The grace of God can overcome these histories, leading us toward a hopeful future.

Smith approaches the future in conversation with Gustavo Gutiérrez, Elizabeth Bishop, Yoshida Kenkō, and others. He challenges visions of futurist escapism and encourages readers to cultivate a “time-bending imagination” that is oriented by eternity bent toward us. The “curvature of time,” he notes, witnesses to eternity in history: the presence of God in the world today. Leaning on a Kierkegaardian understanding of contemporaneity, he writes that God grants the conditions by which we might see Jesus Christ as reconciler across all time.

To make sense of endings, Smith turns to the ephemeral. He is powerfully clear that embracing our finitude is “not only conceding to our mortality as a condition but receiving our mortality as a gift.” When we accept this gift, we are free to find joy in the passing of time rather than desperately attempting to hold on to each moment.

The closing chapters of *How to Inhabit Time* offer wisdom for the present. Smith observes how gifts often arrive at the end of seasons. The plentiful harvests of the gardens and fields we spend months cultivating are plucked from plants that are journeying toward their end. “To ask ‘When are we’ isn’t a question of counting years as much as discerning a season, knowing what to expect, remembering that, in every season, we revolve around the Son.” Smith admonishes readers to cultivate a practical eschatology oriented to the proclamations “How long, O Lord?” and “Maranatha” in the saeculum. These two organizing and time-inhabiting proclamations are refrains of hope, promises that we need not panic because God is surely at work in our world today.

How to Inhabit Time is a beautifully written book that is both uplifting and challenging. Smith never lacks an illustration. He welcomes us into his garden; he offers us an earbud to listen to something with him; he invites us to sit down next to him at the old family piano. He allows us to look over his shoulder as he reads James Baldwin, Augustine, and Marcel Proust. He moves in and out of prose to engage our minds and hearts. His provocative questions unfold in a disarming and compassionate manner, with the potential to tear down the walls that have been hardened by the debates and struggles of recent years.

If there is one space where Smith's discourse could be refined, it is in his rather binary discussion of race. He rightly acknowledges our current moment as "a time for a white majority to listen and a Black minority to speak," but he makes little mention of communities that do not fit within the space of this bifurcation, such as Asian Americans.

Smith's humility and gentle guidance through the text leave little else to critique. In affirming and celebrating God's attunement to the particular histories of our lives, he offers a good, pastoral word to Christians today. To discuss concepts of time and encourage an embrace of our ephemerality in our current moment of mass shootings, systemic oppression, and a global pandemic is daring. Smith is deeply invested in this work. He rejoices in the truth that the God of eternity knows the suffering and pain we have endured and promises to lovingly gather up the broken fragments of life and make it whole again.