

Opening the Gift of Time

Psalm 90

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¹ Lord, you have been our dwelling-place
in all generations.

² Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

³ You turn us back to dust,
and say, 'Turn back, you mortals.'

⁴ For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past,
or like a watch in the night.

⁵ You sweep them away; they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning;

⁶ in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers.

¹⁰ The days of our life are seventy years,
or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;
even then their span is only toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.

¹² So teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart.

¹³ Turn, O LORD! How long?

Have compassion on your servants!

¹⁴ Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

¹⁵ Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,
and for as many years as we have seen evil.

¹⁶ Let your work be manifest to your servants,
and your glorious power to their children.

¹⁷ Let the favour of the Lord our God be upon us,
and prosper for us the work of our hands—
O prosper the work of our hands!

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

I'm not a fan of New Year's resolutions. Because most of us usually end up disappointed with ourselves for not keeping them. Resolutions are made, and sometimes begun, with great enthusiasm and resolve, and then, well, life sets in.

While I'm not a fan of new year's resolutions, I *am* a fan of taking inventory each year:

Looking back, with gratitude and with curiosity at the previous year: what good things happened? Where did I meet God? Where did God surprise me? What did I learn? How did I grow? I know, this year, most people would prefer to NOT look back; want to put *this year, 2020*, in the rearview mirror as fast as possible. Because it was an awful year. Meme: "2020 gets a one-star rating; I don't recommend it." That's funny. But let's look back in a different way: what *good* things came out of this year? What good things *got started* this year? We may not see the outcome yet, but we know good will come of them.

And as we take year-end inventory, we can look forward, perhaps with some planning in mind, but mostly with open hands, open heart and mind to what the new year may hold. What blessings God may have in store.

Now, as far as the earth is concerned, Jan.1st is just another day in its rotation, and orbit around the sun. But on our Gregorian calendars it does mark a transition. Turning the calendar will be a good, symbolic, thing to do. We are excited to turn the calendar, and look forward to a new year. We look forward to good things taking place in 2021.

As I've been doing my own pondering at the turn of the year, all of this got me thinking about the nature of time and how we, in our culture in particular, perceive time.

Have you ever noticed how many ways we talk about time? We 'keep time,' we 'lose time;' we 'spend time', we 'borrow time' (or we describe something or someone as 'living on borrowed time'), we try to 'make the most of time;' we even kill it (on purpose--"I'm just killing time"). There is a right time, and a wrong time. Some people, we think, have too much time on their hands, and many feel like they have too little of it, because 'time flies.' 'Time is up!' Many people say they need 'down' time. We are told to make time for certain

things, we give children a time out, and (esp. in my house growing up) *be on time*—it's the 8th deadly sin if you're not! And above all, don't **waste** time! Because time is... money! Somehow if you're wasting time, you're wasting money. Thank you for that, Benjamin Franklin.

Time isn't money. Time is a gift, just like everything else. That's stewardship! Everything we have is a gift from God, including our time, each day, each week, each year. And when we can receive time as a *gift*, rather than see it as a scarce commodity to manage or use, or let pass, if we can receive time as a gift, we find that windows to eternity are opened up to us.

When God created the world, as Genesis tells us, we are given a rhythm of time: Evening, and morning. Evening, and morning for six days, and then a Sabbath day of rest. Genesis describes creation in terms of a rhythm of time—here's day one, then day two, then day three... It doesn't just say that God spoke everything into existence and there, that's it. Rather, God arranged creation so there would be times and seasons throughout the days, the years... *and throughout our lives*. And Moses reflects on that in the psalm for this morning—the span of our mortal life's journey in light of God's eternity, and in light of days and seasons.

Life is meant to be lived in a rhythm of time. That's the significance of the church year (or as some call it, the liturgical year)—to live rhythmically according to the times and seasons that God has established. And especially at this time, as we celebrate the movement from darkness to light at the birth of Christ, and in the hope of Christ's coming again. In a couple months, Lent will be upon us as we prepare for Easter, and so forth. It's that rhythm throughout the year that helps us understand our story in light of the gospel.

The New Testament has two words translated from Greek as "time."

1. **Chronos.** This is *linear* time, *sequential* time. This is where we get the word "chronology"—the sequential passage of time. This is clock time and calendar time.
2. **Kairos.** This is *meaning-filled* time. *Quality* of time. This is when time seems to stand still when you're looking at an amazing sunset, or at spectacular fall colors. Or the awe and wonder we experience in those moments holding our newborn child and it seems like nothing else in the world matters. Or the quiet moments of reflection and memory after attending the funeral of a loved one. Kairos happens when we become lost gazing at a Vincent van Gogh painting at the museum, completely unaware

that 30 minutes has just passed by when it seemed like 2 (which is what happened to me at the NY metropolitan museum of art years ago).

In the New Testament, Kairos also means “God’s appointed time” and this is what the apostle Paul is talking about when he says, “*When the fullness of time had come, God sent Jesus...*” (Gal.4:4) This is the kind of time that is described in that famous passage in Ecclesiastes 3: *for everything there is a time and a season, and every matter under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die, and so on.* At the end of that passage, the writer says, “*God makes everything beautiful in his time.*” In other words, at the right time. Not a specific date on God’s calendar app on his smart phone, but a moment in time that is appropriate and filled with meaning.

And this is the kind of time that we need as God’s people because kairos time opens up eternity to us. It’s where we meet God. It’s in kairos moments that we hear the still small voice of our Maker, and remember that we are not consumers whose job it is to stimulate the economy at this time of year. We are beloved children of the heavenly Father, whom Jesus came to love.

But this is the kind of time—kairos time—that is beginning to erode in this busy and anxious age. As we are becoming more and more driven by chronos

time, moving from one scheduled activity to another (or thinking we are supposed to, and feel guilty if we aren't); and the still small voice of God is easily silenced by busyness and distraction and monkey brain, and people are losing their true selves in the busyness and distraction and anxiety.

Time is losing shape with round the clock shopping, round the clock entertainment, and round the clock television— blurring the boundaries between days and weeks and seasons. We can hop onto the internet at any time, and the internet doesn't care if it's Saturday or Monday or Wednesday or winter or summer or 3:00p.m. or 3:00a.m. It just is. I'm **not** saying the internet is bad. I am saying that we need to guard our souls. If time is all *chronos*, linear and sequential, then the gift of time, and all that's meaningful, will elude us. Including genuine and deep encounter with the living God.

Again, it's *kairos* moments that we're after. And it doesn't matter if your days are filled with scheduled activity and you're busy, or if your days have little scheduled activity. There is nothing particularly bad, or virtuous, about either. The issue is **attentiveness**. Attentiveness to God and to the eternal, and to ourselves.

Attentiveness is less about our schedules than with the disposition of our heart. “Let every heart prepare him room” the Christmas carol says. Not “let every daily planner prepare him room.” Though that might be a necessary thing too, to get us going; to carve out some time, set aside for attentive reflection and prayer.

Indira Gandhi (former prime minister of India) has said: “*You must learn to be still in the midst of activity, and vibrantly alive in repose.*” That’s a very Jesus-like saying. “*You must learn to be still in the midst of activity, and vibrantly alive in repose.*” It sounds like Psalm 46: “Be still and know that I am God.” So the issue isn’t as much our schedules, as it is the disposition of our heart.

When I began seminary (in 1987!), one of my first classes was actually not a class, but a spiritual formation/disciplines cohort group. As one of the exercises for our spiritual formation, our mentor/professor challenged us to take off our watches for one week, and pay attention to two things: One, how many places there are around you to tell the time (they’re everywhere, and especially today!). And second, pay attention to how you feel not wearing a watch, and what it does to you. Does it make you anxious? How many times do you find that you reflexively look at your wrist when you don’t really need to?

Whether we're busy or not, whether we need to know what time it is or not, it's easy to become slaves to that thing we wear on our wrists.

Even before the Industrial Revolution in America, in the early 1700's, before we began to make the shift from being an agriculturally-oriented society to becoming a manufacturing and factory-oriented society—when workers started being paid by clocking in and clocking out rather than by daylight hours and seasons—before that shift, writer Jonathan Swift was observing that a new and fascinating instrument had arisen. In his fable *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) Jonathan Swift records Gulliver's capture by the Lilliputians. Fascinated by the various aspects of Gulliver's clothing, the Lilliputians note one particular item that hung from a chain in his pocket:

Out of his pocket hung a great silver chain, with a wonderful kind of engine at the bottom. We directed him to draw out whatever was at the end of that chain; which appeared to be a globe, half silver, and half of some transparent metal (he's talking about glass): for on the transparent side we saw certain strange figures circularly drawn, and thought we could touch them, until we found our fingers stopped with that lucid substance. He put this engine to our ears, which made an incessant noise like that of a watermill: and conjecture it is either some unknown animal, or the god that he worships: but we are more inclined to the latter opinion, because he assured us that he seldom did anything without consulting it. He called it his oracle, and said it pointed the time for every action of his life. (1726)

There's a little early social commentary from Jonathan Swift. I'm not saying that watches are evil. I'm just that we need to *watch* out (pun intended) for our souls.

My week at a glance: I have a love-hate relationship with this thing. I love it because I can be forgetful, and it helps me remember what I need to do, who I need to see, what I need to plan for, and all of those good and necessary things. I hate it sometimes because I begin to visualize time as a sequence of flat little boxes waiting to be filled. And fill them we do. The average American calendar abhors a vacuum. ("Don't waste time!") And living fully in the present moment, which is what opening the gift of time is all about, becomes increasingly difficult.

A former parishoner, an executive for a tech company, once joked that all he needed was another box on the weekly page. But realistically, those boxes would likely just fill up like the others.

A school teacher I knew who lovingly observed a Sabbath day once a week said: "Show me a person who can't get their work done in six days, and I'll show you the person who can't get it done in seven." Her point: even if we were given another box, we'd just fill it up like the rest. Because... the average American calendar abhors a vacuum.

What we need is not more boxes in our calendars, but a renewal of spirit and a practice of Sabbath (little daily Sabbaths and a weekly Sabbath observance).

We try things like “time management,” but time is not something that can be managed. We can only manage *ourselves*. I’d rather talk about attentiveness management. Where we strive to become more and more attentive to God’s movements of grace and mercy throughout our days, and attentive to our souls. I guess this is what the mindfulness movement is about these days. It’s a huge and popular movement, which tells us how busy and frazzled people feel.

Again, for those who are busy with a full schedule, the issue is not necessarily to clear the decks—sometimes we can’t help our busy schedule, especially if we have children who need us consistently and who have school and various activities, and if we work full time—the issue isn’t to clear the decks, but to dig a little deeper and identify the impediments in life that prevent me from living in the present moment day by day and finding meeting times and places with God. Little Sabbaths, we could call them. When we can do *that*, we may find that things naturally start to drop off our calendar because they seem less urgent, or important.

And for those who have less or little scheduled activity and whose lives aren't that busy, the issue is, how do I meet God in the stillness, in the quiet moments, and let God lead us to meaningful *activity* and encounter with others, and with God. It's so tempting to fill our time with distractions. Again, *we must learn to be still in the midst of activity, and vibrantly alive in repose.*

This is why the people of God were commanded, right away after deliverance from Egypt, to observe the Sabbath. Six days you shall work, and one day you shall rest. Sabbath was a God-ordained, God-blessed waste of time built into the rhythm of the week so that God's people would have *kairos* time to reflect, take stock, be grateful, to play and have fun, and be renewed so we can pay attention to God better—and so we can pay attention to ourselves better and remember who we are, even as we remember who God is. And that Sabbath day then informs the other six days and teaches me how to pay attention to God in the daily happenings of life.

A young mother cultivates this attentiveness with her child over time when, each night as she tucks her child into bed asks, "Where did you meet God today?" Not "What did you *do* today?" In other words, "How did you fill your little squares today?" Rather, "Where did you meet God today?" And this child and

mother look back over the day and sift through all the places and encounters: “A teacher helped me today and I felt God’s help; I saw flowers and trees and that showed me how beautiful and creative God is; a friend in class was sad and I helped cheer her up and I think that made God happy. I climbed a tree and built a fort in the back yard; God is making me strong.”

And over time the stuff of the day becomes the substance for gratitude and encounter with God. And as they grow, with that type of practice, children learn to see God in everything, and in all moments.

And this isn’t just for kids, of course! Ask yourself at the end of the day, where did I meet God today? In the morning, ask God to give you open eyes and ears to see and hear him throughout the day—claim his promise that he is Emmanuel, God with you, as you prayerfully set aside distractions and ask God to meet you in the ordinary places and circumstances of your day.

As you know, I love the Psalms, and I especially love Psalm 90. It’s big and magisterial and one of the oldest psalms in the book.

Here is Moses, who takes time out from his job leading the people in the wilderness after deliverance from Egypt, likely toward the end of that 40 year journey, to contemplate the eternal. “Lord, *you* have been our dwelling place,

our home, from the beginning; we are a wandering people. From everlasting to everlasting, you are God.” You can picture him out in the desert, perhaps off by himself, gazing at the night stars, or perhaps during a daytime reflection looking across a vast landscape, or even looking from a distance at the people of Israel and all they’ve been through. And he reflects on the temporal nature of human life, in light of God’s eternal nature. “Teach us to number our days aright,” he says, “that we might gain a heart of wisdom.”

He doesn’t mean to literally number them. But in saying this he asks, “Teach us what’s really important in life; what really matters. Give us a larger, even eternal perspective on things.” Help us to know our right place, with an awareness of our mortality, and our frailty; then with wise and joyful hearts, to live with contentment and peace. And, oh by the way, make our lives and our efforts meaningful, he says at the end. Look at his petitions: Satisfy us with your love, so that we might rejoice. Make us glad. Show us your power. Let your favor be upon us. These are magnificent prayers.

And they’re our prayers, aren’t they? We want our days and lives to matter—to know that we are loved and graced and empowered by the eternal

God. We need to know that our lives and our actions count for something. And these are prayers prayed, and there are answers heard, in *kairos* moments.

So, as we enter 2021, for a little while longer in quarantine, and then embracing a new normal, may God grant us meaning-filled time, windows into the eternal. Hearts open to the movements of God's spirit throughout our days. And then see what happens!

I'll end with a great quote from Karl Barth (one of the most influential theologians of the 20th century that you've never heard of). He wrote this in his commentary on Genesis, specifically about Sabbath:

"Perhaps one of the most important contributions which Christianity has to make toward the conquest—or at least the mitigation—of the unrest which threatens the world and the church today, is to produce here and there a few quiet people who simply by their existence can give others the chance also to find rest."

May God grant you rest, and peace, and a blessed New Year.
May the grace of Christ attend you,
the love of God surround you,
and the Holy Spirit keep you,
that you might live in faith,
abound in hope,
and grow in love,
now and forevermore.