

The Psalms and Songs of Our Lives: Receiving the Gift of Time

Ecclesiastes 3:1-14 Psalm 90

The oldest song/Psalm in the book. Attributed to Moses, so this was written somewhere around 1,400 BC. In other words, this is 3,400 years old! This is as ancient as it gets!

With that in mind, when I read this, I'm going to be leaving out a few verses where Moses reflects on God's anger, or wrath. The reason being: many parts of the Old Testament, and even some of the New Testament, reveal the ancient belief that if something bad happened, like a natural disaster, or some kind of calamity, it was because the gods were angry, and were punishing humans for their misdeeds, or, because people weren't appeasing the gods enough.

We don't believe that any more (I hope!). Every time a tornado strikes, or an earthquake, or lightning causes a fire, it isn't because God is angry and bringing wrath to people. It's because we now know that certain kinds of weather happen in certain parts of the world, and, because the earth is a dynamic, organic, changing system. Rapidly changing these days in particular.

Same with human made disasters and calamity. Those aren't a sign of God's wrath. They're probably more a sign of *human* wrath. And our inability to live in peace with creation and with one another.

When we get to the New Testament, Jesus works hard to change our mind about all of this, and reveals that God isn't mad at the world, and doesn't visit the earth with wrath. The central message of the gospel, is summarized in John 3:16, which states "For God so *loved* the world..." And we can therefore go back and read the Psalms, and other parts of the Old Testament, with that in mind. And actually, the Old Testament speaks as much about God's love and compassion and mercy (as we see in our liturgy this morning) as it does about judgment and all that. We just haven't been taught to see it.

Same with Jesus, and the New Testament. Jesus is trying to change peoples' minds about the ancient belief that if something bad happens it's because God is angry and he's punishing people. Rather, Jesus tells us, God wants to give good gifts to his children, who he loves. The apostle Paul, in his letters, also, *mostly* understood this. We still read hints of the ancient beliefs, but the vast majority of Paul's letters reflect the understanding of God as gracious and compassionate and set a new trajectory of faith in that direction.

That's a long introduction to this Psalm, and the parts I'm *not* reading. Because I don't want anyone to get sidetracked by them. I want us to hear the gospel in this Psalm, and the invitation to receive the gift of time that Moses reflects upon. Now you're curious... read it at home with a new set of glasses...

Psalm 90

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 favor 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!

Bulletin cover: “What day is it? It’s today. My favorite day.” Similarly, we could ask, “What time is it?” Answer: “It’s now. My favorite time.”

It’s interesting how our view of time changes—or rather, our experience of time changes—sometimes from day to day. Some days the time flies by; some days, time grinds along slowly. I’ve heard some people wish that time would move a little faster right now so we can get past all of the turmoil and things we dislike about this “time” in our country; and others are working hard to slow themselves down in order to be more present to the now.

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.’ When the little Jeopardy jingle is done, ‘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. Everything we have is a gift from God, including 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—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 and 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. This is a big, grand, sweeping Psalm in that regard. Moses isn't responding in prayer to a specific event or occasion, like most of the Psalms. He's pausing to ponder... life! The vast mystery of this human journey, lived out in God's eternal presence.

Life is meant to be lived in a rhythm of time.

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 summer blooms of flowers. Or the awe and wonder we experience in those moments holding our newborn child/grandchild 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....* Toward the end of that passage, as we heard, the writer says, “*God makes everything beautiful in its time.*” In other words, at

the right time—the appointed time. Not a specific date on God’s calendar, but a moment in time that is appropriate and filled with meaning.

And this is the kind of time that we mortals need 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 Creator, and remember that we are not consumers whose job it is to stimulate the economy. We are beloved children of the heavenly Father, who Jesus came to love and serve.

But this is the kind of time—kairos time—that is beginning to erode in this busy and anxious season of history. 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 human 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 our days are filled with scheduled activity and we're busy, or if our 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.

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 and it reflects the beauty and paradox of Eastern thinking and spirituality.

"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.

Living fully in the present moment, which is what receiving the gift of time is all about, has become increasingly difficult for many people.

A former parishioner, an executive for a tech company, once joked that all he needed was another box on the weekly page in his planning calendar. But

realistically, those extra boxes would likely just fill up like the others. Because, the average American calendar abhors a vacuum.

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.

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 popular movement, which tells us how busy and frazzled people feel, and how much people want to slow down and find peace and deep rest.

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, because of work, and especially those who have children who need parental presence and who have school and various activities—the issue isn’t to clear the

decks, but to dig a little deeper and identify the impediments in life that prevent us 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 us 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?” The adult version of that might be: “Were you productive today?” Or, “How did you fill your little calendar square today?” Rather, the question is, “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.

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 Jesus’ 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.

It's no secret that I love the Psalms, and I especially love Psalm 90. It's big and magisterial and reflective in ways that most of the other Psalms aren't.

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 wilderness, perhaps by himself, taking time to pray and reflect, maybe looking across a vast landscape, or looking from a distance at the people of Israel and all they've been through together over the years. And he reflects on the temporal nature of human life, in light of God's eternal nature. "Teach us to count our days," he says, "that we might gain wise hearts."

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; so we can then *do* what 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, please 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.

We need kairos moments, individually and collectively. Where we remove ourselves occasionally from the bombardment—or the *assault* as someone put it—of everything going on. And we pause to reflect, to laugh, tell stories, to receive peace and be at peace. And then to be persons of peace in the world.

Here is 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."

I couldn't agree more with Karl Barth. May God grant us meaning-filled time, windows into the eternal. Hearts open to the movements of God's spirit

throughout our days, so that we may experience rest, and be people of rest for the sake of others.

God of Our Life