

The awareness of time weighs heavily upon us as a new year begins. Samuel Miller, who, before his death in 1968, was the Dean at Harvard Divinity School, said: “Time is now! The past is present, and all the future we shall ever know is present. The narrow alley in which we live may seem uncomfortably small and precarious, but it is also impenetrably deep and precious.”ⁱ

“The narrow alley in which we live”—what a strange and wonderful image for our times, or any time.

Our time is accessible only to us—neither those who came before nor those who follow encounter the distinct opportunities and challenges that we face.

We begin to sense the connection between time and our own finitude. We do well, then, to pray with the Psalmist: “Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom.”

Now this psalm is said to be a prayer of Moses. And although we today might not think that this psalm originated with Moses, his story helps us understand the psalm and maybe even gives us a better understanding of time.

It has been pointed out that the problem Moses had was time—that is, his time was too short. After leading the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt, after putting up with them and chastising them and giving them the Torah in the wilderness, Moses died before entering the Promised Land. And so his story is the human story; his story is our story. As one person put it, “We always come up short, in terms of time, intentions, and accomplishments.”

And yet, if we listen we will hear encouragement for our own lives in this story. Clint McCann, who teaches at the UCC Eden Seminary down in St. Louis asks: If even Moses came up short, should we be surprised or lament when we do? The death of Moses was a reminder that God, not Moses would lead the people into the land. *Our* time is not all there is to measure. *God’s* time is primary and...our time must be measured finally by God’s time.

So Moses or the unknown psalmist or *we ourselves* do not ask that God teach us how tragic and oppressive life is. We would ask with the psalmist to learn how to *accept* the *gift* of our days, however many or few.ⁱⁱ It is in these days that come to us as a gift that we would work and would pray that our work might prosper.

And this brings us to those surprising words from the Letter to the Ephesians: “Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people, but as wise, making the most of time, because the days are evil.”

Two things are clear in these words. First, following in the way of Jesus Christ requires that we use the time we have to the best of our ability. We receive our life, our time, from God, and we should be guided by the wisdom that each day is of eternal value and eternal meaning.

Second, we are encouraged to make the most of time, not because everything is going so well and it’s an opportune moment. We are encouraged to make the most of time—*because the days are evil*.

Our time, like all times, is filled with threats, with dangers, and yes, with what we would call “evil.” We may feel that we are in a vast wilderness with no Promised Land in sight. In just such

circumstances we are called to live fully, doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. Our task in these days is to give God those works that might prosper—to create beauty, to be agents of healing, to raise children who can love as they have been loved, to teach, to generate wealth and share wealth. All such works matter now in time and will matter continuing into God’s eternity.

So in these final hours of 2023—and as 2024 comes quickly to meet us, perhaps we can understand the wisdom of linking Christmas with the coming of the New Year. No one, of course, knows when Jesus was born, neither the year nor the date. And the “New Year” comes at different times in different calendars.

But early Christians began marking his birthday on the 25th of December because of the winter solstice. The days are beginning to get just a little longer once more. The light has triumphed over the darkness. What better time to celebrate God with us in Jesus? What better time to mark the advent of the one we call the light of the world?

And now, just a week later, we mark the start of a new year.

Without our yearly celebration of incarnation—which continues until Epiphany—that’s always on January 6, but we’ll celebrate it next Sunday, January 7—without our yearly celebration of the incarnation, we would be reluctant to go into another year. Each year the weight of the past gets heavier—the things done that should not have been done, the things left undone that should have been done. Each year the weight of the past gets heavier—and so we continue to follow Jesus who tells us his yoke is easy, his burden is light.

Of course, you know that we don’t just leave this fading year behind. We can’t. We bring it along as we continue down this narrow alley. The days pass, one after another, and no clutching will keep them. Yet they leave their marks upon us, upon our hands and faces, upon the spirit most of all, and our heart is filled with their voices, laughing and weeping.

To lighten our burden, God calls us always into the living present. Each year, each *day* is a gift to us from our Creator.

This is the time in which we are called to live fully. Perhaps another time would have been easier. But that is not a choice we have been given.

So as the New Year begins ask yourself the big questions: What am I doing right in my life? How can I keep that going? What have I done wrong in my life? What must I now do to make that right? What have we doing right as a society, as a congregation, as a family? How do we increase that? And what new good are we called toward in the coming year?

God gives us life—and time, the stuff that life is made of. Let us make good use of the time of our lives.

The days are evil—although sometimes, you know this, don’t you—sometimes they can seem pretty good. Let us make the most of time, the stuff of life.

ⁱ Samuel Miller, *What Child Is This?*, pg. 58.

ⁱⁱ Clinton McCann, Psalm 90, NIB