

“The Living of These Days”
January 1, 2023

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15
Ephesians 5:15-20

I said at the beginning of my Christmas Eve sermon that one of the problems with Christmas is that you never know who’s going to show up.

And that’s also the case with this Sunday *after* Christmas. Who will show up once the Christmas pageant shepherds and angels have turned in their bathrobes and wings, once the choir has sung all that they can, once the warm candles of the silent night have been extinguished?

Anyone?

Many ministers take this day off—either because they are wiser than I am, or more fearful of preaching on a day when few might be in attendance and when we might be more cognizant that “the calendar condemns us,” as one prayer of confession admits.

But you *are* here. And—courageously or foolishly—I am here.

As we wrapped up 2022 and entered the first hours of this New Year, I’ve been thinking about the living of these days and the stuff of life.

That’s how Benjamin Franklin described time, asking and then answering his own question: “Do you love life? Then do not squander time, for that’s the stuff life is made of.”

Now, long ago, George Carlin had that long routine about the “stuff” that we had, saying that a house is actually just a little place for your stuff, just a pile of stuff with a cover on it. And when you leave your house, Carlin pointed out, you gotta lock it up. Wouldn’t want somebody to come by and take some of your stuff.

What Carlin didn’t tell us, what might be *painfully* obvious, is that for all our security, we cannot hold onto the stuff of life—time.

The awareness of time weighs heavily upon us as a new year begins. Samuel Miller, the American Baptist minister who, before his death in 1968, was the Dean at Harvard Divinity School, told us: “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.”¹

“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.

If we are going to live in these days, we need to accept the invitation of author of Ecclesiastes and open our eyes and look around. To everything there is a season—a time to rend, to sew, to plant, to reap, a time to be born; and a time to die, yes, for birth and death allow everything else

to happen and fill us with an urgency to do our work, and love others, and live our lives in this narrow alley.

Sensing the connection between time and our own finitude, if we are going to live in these days, we will do well 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 even gives us a better understanding of time.

It has been said 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, as we listen, we will hear encouragement for the living of these days 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 and unfair life is. We would instead ask with the psalmist to learn how to *accept* the *gift* of our days, however many or few.² It is in these days that come to us as a gift that we would work and would pray that our work might prosper.

Here, of course, we come back again to Ecclesiastes, which helps us by telling us that we should *take pleasure* in all our toil, that we should be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we live. Isn’t this what all the celebrating on New Year’s Eve and on this New Year’s Day points to—the simple enjoyment of being alive in these days, however challenging they might be.

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 to 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 first hours of 2023, 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.

Early Christians began marking the birth of Jesus on the 25th of December because of the winter solstice. The days were—and are—beginning to get just a little longer once more. The light has triumphed. What better time to celebrate God with us? 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 8—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 gladly accept the offer 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, no grasping allows us to hold onto the stuff of life. Yet the days leave their marks upon us, upon our hands and faces, upon the spirit most of all, and our hearts are filled with the laughing and weeping of the living of these days.

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. It is ours to live in *this* narrow alley.

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?

There is a time for every purpose under heaven. I am convinced that the year ahead—the *years* ahead, really—will be a time of rebuilding and a time of renewal.

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

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

² Clinton McCann, Psalm 90, NIB