

Getting the Time Right

sermon digest

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Ecclesiastes 3:1-11; Acts 17:21-31

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Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made:
Our times are in His hand Who saith "A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid!"

Robert Browning's famous poem "Rabbi Ben Ezra" is about growing old gracefully, an ideal that most folks in the sunset years of life would like to think is mirrored in their life. One day I asked my Louisville friend Rabbi Herb Waller if he found Browning's poem useful in his ministry. He quickly answered, "No, I have never met anyone who measures up to Browning's ideal." At the time, I was in my forties and Herb was retired, around seventy. I was asking more than a question of ministry; I wanted to get a glimpse of life from the other end. Is it possible to grow old gracefully, positively, thinking of the sunset years as the time for which we were created? Or does life dwindle down to meaningless futility, proving in the final analysis the opening word of Ecclesiastes, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."

Although the Hebrew poetry on time, "For everything there is a season," has become a classic biblical passage for funerals and New Years readings, Ecclesiastes has not held a high level of respect in biblical formation. The message seems to contradict Hebrew theology found in the rest of the Old Testament. The Jews pioneered the linear view of time that runs from beginning to end without repetition, but Ecclesiastes seems to adopt the circular view of the Greeks, "nothing new under the sun." The author Qoheleth, the teacher, the leader of the congregation, has been dismissed by readers as a starry-eyed optimist or rejected as a grumpy old cynic. But his cry of "vanity," meaninglessness, may not be as negative as it sounds. C. L. Seow (*Interpretation*, July, 2001, 237ff) believes that Qoheleth recognized that the real meaning of life is beyond human understanding. Rather than hopelessness, he declares that life offers no fail-safe rules, no formulas that guarantee success, nothing that we can hold onto. "Vanity" means vapor. The warning is that our high-toned philosophies and profound theologies may be little more than mist. Like time, God always eludes our grasp.

The tyranny of time haunts our lives. Seow calls Ecclesiastes "Theology When Everything is Out of Control." Qoheleth probably lived during the Persian period of Jewish history, when the nation had become a pawn of a super-power; but he seems to have the insight of someone living in the modern age of industrial domination, terrorist threat, and nuclear fear. At the height of World War II, in 1944, George Woodcock wrote, "The Tyranny of the Clock." He judged that the invention of the clock had more radical influence on the social life of humanity than any other machine in history. A tool invented to manage our days gradually became a harsh taskmaster overpowering our lives and chaining us in slavery to minutes and minutia.

Theologian Paul Tillich observed the distinction in the New Testament between two Greek words for time. *Chronos* was a word for the *mechanics* of time, measuring a point on the scale of history. Chronological time was typical of the Greek mind concerned with an abstract measure superimposed on the movement of history. Like modern science, the Greek mind viewed time in one-dimension with little concern about the depth of meaning or purpose. *Chronos* was a part of the vocabulary long before the clock was invented, but it had the same basic understanding that time is a ribbon, miles long with no width and no depth.

A recent survey of American workers revealed that they are taking the least number of vacation days in four decades (CNN, Oct 23, 2014). American workers turned their backs on a total of 169 million days of paid time off, in effect providing free labor for their employers at an average of \$504 per employee. The primary reason is obvious: In an era of high unemployment, people fear the loss of their jobs, so they go to work early, stay late, work weekends, and forfeit paid time off to increase their value to the employer. The sad conclusion of the study shows, however, that the forfeiture of paid time off makes little or no difference in job security.

Another significant issue is the busyness of life in the modern era. Worker stress is not only a product of a driving corporate work ethic; it is a virtue that has developed with the philosophy that every minute of every day has to be productive. "Time is money" has become the maxim of the

modern workplace. Relaxation, rest, even sleep have increasingly become waste products.

Since it began operations in 1973, Federal Express has become an icon of American business efficiency. Their 1979 ad campaign began a series of advertisements that promised deliveries that are "Absolutely, Positively Overnight." FedEx is likely to conjure up images of a business that is measured by its ability to match the clock, second for second, tick for tock. The popular press heralded Federal Express for its abilities to establish and keep schedules, in 1984 publicizing the record that FedEx had sorted a half a million packages in a single night. (Carol Kaufman-Scarborough, *Journal of American Culture*, March, 2003)

We need to ask the right questions of time. A more profound idea of time in the Bible was in the word *Kairos*. *Kairos* was concerned with the *meaning* of time, a question of depth and meaning that could not be measured by the calendar or the clock. *Kairos* reflected the Hebrew idea that God is involved in the progression of history, that the timing of events ought to be concerned with the purpose of God for the creation. *Kairos* weighed the meaning of time in light of the purpose of God and the decision and action that the present moment requires of us.

The tyranny of the clock in our world of maximum productivity has blinded us to the value of the days of our lives. When we only know how to measure time by length, by *chronos*, we lose sight of the dimension of depth. I think that Browning caught on when he wrote "Our times are in his hands." The quality of life is far more important than how many years we can count. *Qoheleth* seems to have leaped over the years in his poem to time. The question of time was not about setting your clock back one hour or checking how many birthdays you can count. It was a question of depth. The poetic meditation on time in Ecclesiastes is a classic example of the Jewish mind: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven." The question, "What time is it?" posed alternatives, not numbers: time for birth or death, seedtime or harvest, killing or healing, destruction or construction, weeping or laughter, mourning or dancing. The Jewish God of history is a God of timing. Time concerns concrete events in which God is involved, the fulfillment events of our lives, the turning points where we see the presence of God.

The gospel of Christ identifies the central *kairos* in history with the life and ministry of Jesus. He came preaching: "The time [*kairos*] is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:15) The *kairos* of the Christ looks to the final *kairos* of history, the crisis of judgment: "Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time [*kairos*], before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart" (1 Cor. 4:5). In Paul's sermon to the Athenians in Acts 17:26, he identified the Creator as the God who "allotted the times [*kairos*] of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live."

As you look back over your life, I would dare to guess that you have already experienced *kairos* moments. You already know how to measure the value of your days. Your mind is seldom drawn to the quantity of time, how long you have lived or the time of day or the day on the calendar. You remember your life in terms of meaningful experiences. You remember great successes and terrible tragedies with the recognition that they have been equally influential in shaping your character. They are turning points, meaning posts along the way that have come to expose and define the character within.

Do you know what time it is? The question causes eyes to start searching for a clock or watch, and we quickly calculate the hour and minute on the clock. In the time it takes to find the clock, register the numbers in our heads and convert them to words on our lips, we have already moved beyond the moment the question was asked. In the scientific world that measures time in nanoseconds, the question is concerned with a precise mark on the abstract scale of time. Even if our clocks were perfect, and they are not, we never get an exact answer to our question; and we are seldom involved in the question behind the question that calls for a personal decision or human action.

With the wisdom of Ecclesiastes or the revolution of the gospel, the question "what time is it?" is not measured by the clock. Real time is measured by its meaning and depth and impact, and every time in our lives is an opportunity for opening our lives to new depth in the work of God. How long shall we live? Maybe it does not matter so much as we think. The real question is what we do with the time that we have. Are our eyes open and our souls exposed to the purpose of God in this opportunity of life?

The *kairos* moments of life may occur at twenty, forty, or sixty; but they are just as likely to occur at eighty or ninety. Come on: "Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be."