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## “A Time To...”

Colossians 1:15, 20a From The Message 11 We pray that you'll have the strength to stick it out over the long haul - not the grim strength of gritting your teeth but the glory-strength God gives. It is strength that endures the unendurable and spills over into joy, 12 thanking the Father who makes us strong enough to take part in everything bright and beautiful that he has for us. 13 God rescued us from dead-end alleys and dark dungeons. He's set us up in the kingdom of the Son he loves so much, 14 the Son who got us out of the pit we were in, got rid of the sins we were doomed to keep repeating. 15 We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. 20 Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe - people and things, animals and atoms - get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies....

Proverbs 4:5-8 NRSV Get wisdom; get insight: do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth. Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you. The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever else you get, get insight. Prize her highly, and she will exalt you; she will honor you if you embrace her.

If you are a baby boomer, who grew up on the rock-and-roll music of the '60s and early '70s, and you hear the phrase *“Does anybody really know what time it is?”* something deeply imprinted in your brain may well supply the next line from the song by the same name by the band, Chicago; say it with me: *“Does anybody really care?”* Well, actually, most of us care a lot. I have been thinking about time, as I suspect some of you have, in the last week or so. The ending of one calendar year and the beginning of a new one puts us in a mood to reflect on time, particularly if you, like me, know that you now have many more birthdays behind you than ahead of you. The making of New Year's resolutions can, in fact, be seen as a way to exert some control over time – that is, by force of will your resolutions show that you intend that time in the new year will be marked by fewer sweets, fewer pounds, more patience, or whatever your particular hope and resolve might be for what time will be like in 2015.

At the risk of being a little too abstract, let me suggest that the nature of time is both cyclical and linear. What do I mean? Well, what's called the Christian year or the

“liturgical year” – that annual progression from Advent through Christmas and Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost is a way of affirming that time for those who are Christians indeed has a certain cyclical character. But, on the other hand, the fact that this year is now 2015 and that 2014 will never come again also reminds us that even in the midst of our repetitive religious rituals there is also an ongoing character to time, and that no matter the repetition of events mortality and change are our constant companions. It is in this sense that my mother’s remark, often said before she died, is one that more and more resonates with me: *“I get up in the morning, look in the mirror, and say ‘Who IS that old lady and when did that happen?!?’”*

Let’s see, though, if we can make this idea of time being both cyclical and linear a bit less abstract. Both of these understandings can be found in the hymn that is our opening and closing song today, *“O God Our Help in Ages Past.”* For, on the one hand, the repeating cycle of Advent, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost remind us that there is indeed a constancy and consistency to life lived under the care and keeping of God, that as the scripture puts it, God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. The third verse of *“O God Our Help in Ages Past”* expresses this constancy amidst change; sing it again together as Carol plays; the words are on the screen. [*Sing verse:*

*Before the hills in order stood,  
Or earth received her frame,  
From everlasting Thou art God,  
To endless years the same.]*

But the hymn also acknowledges that there is nonetheless a “linear” dimension to life lived with God as well. Again, this hymn expresses that idea as well in verse number five; again sing it together: [*Sing verse:*

*Time, like an ever-rolling stream,  
Bears all of us away;  
We fly forgotten, as a dream  
Dies at the opening day.]*

For an ever starker depiction of this “linear” nature of life lived with God, sing now the opening verse of “To Us All, to Every Nation,” and notice, particularly, that sobering last line: *[Sing verse:*

To us all, to every nation, comes the moment to decide,  
in the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side;  
some great cause, God's new endeavor, offering each the bloom or blight,  
and the choice goes by forever; 'twixt that darkness and that light.]

What's the point of all these ruminations about time? Just this: true Christian faith holds together **both** the linear **and** the cyclical views of time, and if either is lost, so is the gospel and the opportunity to live a life of the fullest faithfulness.. For example, consider first those who would tend to see life and time as **only** one-directional, purely and only “linear.” It is indeed the idea, so well expressed in that last hymn's line: “*And the choice goes by forever, 'twixt [the] darkness and that light.*” The time goes by forever. That's sober and stark. And if that is all that there is, such a view leads inevitably to a kind of bitterness or at least a kind of stoicism in the face of time's ravages. It can lead to seeing everything as only getting worse. It's been my observation that the folks who believe that time simply goes in one direction are also the ones who indeed find that the state of the world is just getting worse and worse. Not long ago I came across these lines that someone said about the state of the world, a world which he saw as heading in just one direction: downhill:

*“Young people have bad manners, contempt for older people, and talk nonsense when they should work. Young people do not stand up any longer when adults enter the room. They contradict their parents, talk too much in company, guzzle their food... and tyrannize their elders.”*

You know who spoke those words? The philosopher Socrates around the year 400 B.C.E. Of course one doesn't have to go back 2400 years to find folks whose understanding of time leads them to think that things are just getting worse and worse and worse. And here's the thing: IF time were only one-directional, only “linear,” then a very good case can be made that cynicism and despair is warranted. In the opening

years of the 1900s, many Christian leaders proclaimed that the 20<sup>th</sup> century would be “the Christian century” and that wars would cease. A hundred-and-fifteen years later, that belief seems so impossibly naive concerning a century that saw the more people killed in wars than any other century. If one sees time as only moving in one direction, where indeed “time like an ever flowing stream bears all of us away,” it is very hard to find any reason to hope.

But, on the other hand, what of those who see time as purely and only **cyclical**? They too will end up in despair, seeing little hope. There are times that even some of the biblical writers got caught up in this feeling and this sense that life is an endless round of the same thing over and over again. For example, the writer of Ecclesiastes said *“everything is unutterably weary and tiresome. No matter how much we see, we are never satisfied; no matter how much we hear, we are not content. History merely repeats itself. Nothing is truly new; it has all been done or said before”* (Ecclesiastes 1:8-9, *The Living Bible*). We also know that there are religions which say that life is in fact an endlessly series of repetition; the doctrine of reincarnation is one way of expressing the belief that life and history are nothing, indeed, but an endless cycle. And, as I said, that often leads to despair and even hopelessness and cynicism. Such a conviction can make it harder to try to truly address and change the ills and hurts and injustices of this world – after all, if everything is just going to repeat itself in some fashion, why bother?

But, as I say, neither view all by itself of time is can comprise a full Christian understanding. For the Gospel of Jesus Christ reminds us that God’s work is both “linear” and it is “cyclical” – although I prefer the word “constant.” That is, God is indeed at work in our lives and in our times. And those lives and times indeed move relentlessly forward. They bring joy and they bring deep sorrow. God weeps when folks miss an opportunity to do good and to confront injustice because that chance, in just that form,

will indeed never come again. But at the same time, the cycle and seasons of the Christian year are the way of affirming that God's presence and Christ's care is also constant, through every season and every time. It is the assurance that God is never, ever absent. It is the assurance that in the most important ways, God is indeed changeless, that amidst all the circumstances of life and history and time, God is love, God is power: *"From everlasting Thou art God; to endless years the same."*

One way to think about the difference between the calendar we use every day and the Christian or "liturgical" calendar that moves through the cycles of the Christian years is this: Our everyday calendar is about how we order our days, but the Christian or liturgical calendar is about the meaning of those days. Put another way, our everyday calendar tells us how to count our days, but the Christian or liturgical calendar tells us how the days count. And on this first Sunday of the new year, as the everyday calendar counts it, and on this second Sunday of Christmas, as the liturgical calendar names it, one of the things that we can affirm is that one of the keys to having our days count, of having our days be meaningful, is to always seek to be folks who try to learn and grow and become ever more wise. Do you remember what the gospel of Luke says about Jesus when it tells of his boyhood visit to the Temple where he engaged the rabbis in discussion? It says Jesus grew in both stature and in wisdom. And our scripture from the prophet Jeremiah also is one of many I could have selected that affirms that for God's people information is not enough, instinct is not enough, prejudice or bias is certainly not enough – no, the goal is to have our days be ever more meaningful, and to grow, as did Jesus, in wisdom. "Get wisdom [and] get insight" is the way that Jeremiah puts it and it is a worthy goal indeed for all of us.

And this morning such a goal particularly connects to the way that both you and I are going to be spending a good bit of our time in the next two months: both you and I are indeed going to be seeking after more insight and more wisdom in relation to the subject

of how we as a congregation continue to successfully, fruitfully, faithfully grow in our “numbers,” in our spiritual depth, in our mission-mindedness. In the mid-60s, the average worship attendance here at First Christian Church was over 600 persons. Now, the era of the 1960s was different from our era in dozens of ways, but what we have in common is the fact that our beloved congregation has yet much, much more room to continue to attract new people into our worship and mission life, not simply for the sake of “the numbers” but so that we can do more and more for the sake of mission and so that more and more people will have the opportunity to come to know the God we know – a God of grace and gentleness and unconditional love, not, as so many of them have been told, a God of joyless judgmentalism. The topic of my educational leave and sabbatical will be to study - through reading and research and interviews with pastors – how it is that we can indeed continue our pattern of growth that has seen us move from 140 in worship five years ago to 200 today. For every church consultant whom I’ve studied for the last 30 years points out that this in fact the most difficult size transition for any church to make, to become solidly “program-sized” with 250-300 in worship. There are habits and practices that either a congregation or pastor may unwittingly have that will work against such growth happening and that’s what I want to study so that we avoid that!

But, as you have seen from the bulletin, The Visitor, my weekly emails, and the letter you received last week, this is not just MY educational leave/sabbatical; it is also yours too! For during January and February, you too will be invited to read and study and pray and discuss and discern how we as a congregation will indeed continue to grow. You’ll learn about the dynamics and personality common to churches of various sizes. Pastor Katherine will be making those materials available and you’ll have opportunities in Sunday School classes and at two town hall meetings to delve more deeply into what all of this means for how First Christian would continue to grow in being

even more welcoming. And then upon my return, I'm planning a Fellowship Dinner in which we can do mutual show and tell of what we've learned, and share our excitement for how that learning will enable us to have what Paul calls in our first scripture this morning "the glory strength" that indeed will equip us for the long haul and for making our days count ever more deeply.

Do you remember those very sad lines about the nature of time in Shakespeare's play Macbeth?

*Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, Creeps in this petty pace from day to day*

*To the last syllable of recorded time, ...Out, out, brief candle!*

*Life's but a walking shadow... That struts and frets his hour upon the stage*

*And then is heard no more: it is a tale... full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.*<sup>1</sup>

We who count ourselves as Christians thankfully know differently, though, don't we? For we know, as Paul put in our scripture, that God's intention for time, for the living of our days, is so very different: "...all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe - people and things, animals and atoms - get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies..." Now, we know that is not yet the case, but the glorious good news is that we are not pawns in a play, but actors whom God has endowed with free will and the ability to indeed "get wisdom" that our days and the days of all creation might become ever more what God hopes. It is our opportunity and challenge to be co-creators with God, privileged to learn more, love more as together we seek to live out the gospel together, inviting more and more people to know of it, doing more and more to make that cosmic vision of God's a ever more true. That, my friends, is a very fit New Year's resolution for this or any new year or any new day. Let us therefore do so with joy!

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<sup>1</sup><http://shakespeare.mit.edu/macbeth/macbeth.5.5.html>