

“Making the Most of the Time”
Ephesians 5:15-20; I Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14; John 6:54-58

John 6:54-58

⁵⁴“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; ⁵⁵for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.”

I Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14

¹⁰Then David slept with his ancestors, and was buried in the city of David. ¹¹The time that David reigned over Israel was forty years; he reigned seven years in Hebron, and thirty-three years in Jerusalem.

¹²So Solomon sat on the throne of his father David; and his kingdom was firmly established.

^{3:3}Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he [Solomon] sacrificed and offered incense at the high places.

⁴The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the principal high place; Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar.

⁵At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, “Ask what I should give you.”

⁶And Solomon said,
“You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today.

⁷And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in.

⁸And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted.

⁹Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people,
able to discern between good and evil;
for who can govern this your great people?"

¹⁰It pleased the LORD that Solomon had asked this.

¹¹God said to him, "Because you have asked this,
and have not asked for yourself long life or riches,
or for the life of your enemies,
but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right,
¹²I now do according to your word.

Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind;
no one like you has been before you
and no one like you shall arise after you.

¹³I give you also what you have not asked,
both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you.

¹⁴If you will walk in my ways,
keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked,
then I will lengthen your life."

Ephesians 5:15-20

¹⁵Be careful then how you live,
not as unwise people but as wise,
¹⁶making the most of the time,
because the days are evil.

¹⁷So do not be foolish,
but understand what the will of the Lord is.

¹⁸Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery;
but be filled with the Spirit,

¹⁹as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves,
singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts,

²⁰giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything
in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ■

The Sermon

What does God want to do with your time?

You go up Lookout Mountain and see the vast expanse of God's creation all around. Far below, nestled in the surrounding green, you see the full expanse of Assembly Inn, in all its venerable splendor—so imposing when you're on the ground, and from up way up high, still magisterial but seen in the context of the endless mountains surrounding it.

Some people visit Montreat every year and never fail to trek up the mountain path to get to that view at the summit.

Some people go there and have a prayer service.

For some decades it was well known that if you tried to go up there at night, you would be eaten—if not by wildlife, then by Bob Tuttle.ⁱ

But the lure of that high place is not just a refreshing walk. It is a spiritual place, and a breathtaking view.

One of the annual traditions for the delegation we send to Bayonnais in Haiti is, on the last night, to celebrate communion on the flat rooftop of one of the school buildings. I can still clearly remember my home church pastor, 35 years ago, coming back from Haiti, overwhelmed by spirituality, by compassion, by what he had witnessed; and ten years later, he was still saying in sermons, "I wish I could take you there at night" so that we could all see a glimmer of the magnitude of God's splendor in the stars.ⁱⁱ

Solomon used to sacrifice and worship at the "high places," hilltop shrines in the land of Canaan that were left over from Canaanite worship of Canaanite gods and which he now used to worship the God of all creation; the God of his father, David.

One of those high places with a colorful and multilayered past was at Gibeon.ⁱⁱⁱ

If you go up to the "high place" in Gibeon now, you have a commanding view to the Southeast of Jerusalem, and the site of the Temple, and just a bit further back, the Mount of Olives.^{iv}

Solomon had just succeeded his father, gone to sleep with his ancestors.

And, as was his practice, Solomon went up to one of the high places that apparently meant so much to him, where he could offer sacrificial worship to God.

And for this occasion, he went to the principal high place, the one at Gibeon.

Do you have a “high place”? I have a new one: as of the Service for Wholeness we held the other night, the Swannanoa Room has now been inaugurated as a chapel, with sacred furnishings brought over from the Swannanoa Church; and if you ever need access to a chapel, please call or just come over, because it is wonderful.

Where are your high places,
where you go to worship God in a way that feels especially intimate,
where your prayers are lifted up as sighs too deep for words,
where you can allow yourself to stop reciting liturgies or reading off requests,
and just let God do the talking for a while?

Those are the places where we open ourselves up to the holy encounter, where we listen for God’s directing word, where we wait for the wind of the Spirit to blow into our minds and hearts—

the places where we can consider:

What does God want to do with your time?

Ted Loder prays: Lord, grant me your peace,
for I have made peace
with what does not give peace
and I am afraid.

Drive me deep, now,
to face myself so I may see
that what I truly need to fear is
my capacity to deceive
and willingness to be deceived,

my loving of things
and using of people,
my struggle for power
and shrinking of soul,

my addiction to comfort
and sedation of conscience,
my readiness to criticize
and reluctance to create,
my clamor for privilege
and silence at injustice,
my seeking for security
and forsaking the kingdom.

Lord, grant me your peace.
Instill in me such fear of you
as will begin to make me wise,
and such quiet courage
as will enable me to begin
to make hope visible,
forgiving delightful,
loving contagious,
faith liberating,
peace-making joyful
and myself open
and present
to other people
and your kingdom.^v

At night, in a dream, God said to Solomon, “Ask what I should give you.”

And Solomon said, “An understanding mind, able to discern between good and evil.”

And it pleased the LORD that Solomon had asked this.

And God said to him,

Because you didn't ask for selfish, self-centered things,
but to have understanding to discern what is right,
I give you a wise and discerning mind.
And not only that, but I'll give you kingly things as well.

Just a few years ago, J. Herbert Nelson was preaching the first night of a youth conference here, and at the end of a great sermon, he said to more than a thousand

young people a charge and blessing I wish I could deliver in the same tone of voice, just as convincingly.

He said, in that gorgeous, resonant voice of his, “You have an opportunity for something very special here this week. *Don’t you blow it.*”

Solomon, I’ll give you the best of what you have asked for, and I’ll give you even more than that—as long as you walk in my ways, and keep my commandments.

Now don’t blow it.

What do you think God wants to do with the time you have been given?

The letter to the Ephesians says, “Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil.” That’s according to the New Revised Standard Version: “Making the most of the time.”

The Greek words from which they derived “making the most of the time” are perhaps more literally translated, “redeeming the time,” in other words, “buying it back”—suggesting, as the editors of the Norton commentary on the New Testament have written, “that believers’ righteous behavior actually redeems the evil present.”^{vi}

Do you believe that’s possible?

That what you and I do, in the name of Christ—
the way we comport ourselves,
the things we say or the times we hold our tongue;
the justice that we speak for and stand for;
the *αγαπε* love we demonstrate in the face of
spitefulness and malice and woundedness—

Do you believe that it is possible that by speaking, acting, and loving, in the way of disciples of Jesus Christ, that we could actually play a role in redeeming the painful days in which we are living?

There is at least one church—namely, Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston—that seems to believe that.

And by believing it, and doing it, they have already—no, God has already demonstrated that it is real.

They took the most repugnant act of a diseased mind and a loaded gun;
they lost their beautiful friends and family members
in a way that no one ever, ever, ever, anywhere,
should ever have to know their precious, beautiful loved ones
have been taken,

And the next day—*the next day*—their stance toward the public, toward their
community, toward all people of every color, *toward the taker of life*, was still:
arms open wide. We embrace you. We risk loving *all the time*.

Do you believe that your actions—that the Church's actions—can redeem the
time?

What happens, if you and I risk being the God-centered people we were made to
be—not only in spite of, but *because of* the conditions around us that often appear
hopeless?

John O'Donohue, in that beautiful book of blessings with which he graced the
world as an unintentional last will and testament, wrote a short blessing for those
who have arrived at retirement:

This is where your life has arrived,
After all the years of effort and toil;
Look back with graciousness and thanks
On all your great and quiet achievements

You stand on the shore of new invitation
To open your life to what is left undone;
Let your heart enjoy a different rhythm
When drawn to the wonder of other horizons.

Have the courage for a new approach to time;
Allow it to slow until you find freedom
To draw alongside the mystery you hold
And befriend your own beauty of soul.

Now is the time to enjoy your heart's desire,
To live the dreams you've waited for,
To awaken the depths beyond your work
And enter into your infinite source.^{vii}

What do you think God wants to do with your time?

Erma Bombeck was a brilliant writer, humorist, essayist; also a mother, and a wife, and a beautiful, witty chronicler of the everyday life in the latter half of the 20th century. In 1979, she wrote:

Someone asked me the other day: if I had my life to live over, would I change anything?

My answer was no, but then I thought about it and changed my mind.

If I had my life to live over again, I would have waxed [the floor] less, and listened more.

Instead of wishing away nine months of pregnancy and complaining about the shadow over my feet, I'd have cherished every minute of it and realized that the wonderment growing inside me was to be my only chance in life to assist God in a miracle.

I would never have insisted the car windows be rolled up on a summer day because my hair had just been teased and sprayed.

I would have invited friends over to dinner even if the carpet was stained and the sofa faded.

I would have eaten popcorn in the "good" living room and worried less about the dirt when you lit the fireplace.

I would have taken the time to listen to my grandfather ramble about his youth.

I would have burnt the pink candle that was sculptured like a rose before it melted while being stored.

I would have sat cross-legged on the lawn with my children and never worried about grass stains.

I would have cried and laughed less while watching television ... and more while watching real life.

~~I would have shared more of the responsibility carried by my husband which I took for granted.~~

I would have eaten less cottage cheese and more ice cream.

I would have gone to bed when I was sick, instead of pretending the Earth would go into a holding pattern if I weren't there for a day.

~~I would never have bought ANYTHING just because it was practical/wouldn't show soil/ guaranteed to last a lifetime.~~

When my child kissed me impetuously, I would never have said, "Later. Now, go get washed up for dinner."

There would have been more I love yous,
more I'm sorrys,
more I'm listenings,

but mostly, given another shot at life, I would seize every minute of it,
look at it and really see it
try it on,
live it,
exhaust it,
and never give that minute back until there was nothing left of it.^{viii}

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise,
making the most of the time.

What does God want to do with your time?

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ⁱ Bob retired in 2014 as the Vice President for the Center for Youth and Young Adult Ministry at Montreat Conference Center, where he had headed up youth conferences for 26 years—including being responsible for the safety of the thousands of visitors and conferees coming to Montreat each summer.

ⁱⁱ Philip D. Queen, at Second Presbyterian Church, Bloomington, Illinois, c. 1990, preaching the sermon “He Comes to Us as One Unknown.”

ⁱⁱⁱ See Herbert Marks, ed., *The English Bible Volume One: The Old Testament and Apocrypha (Norton Critical Edition)*. New York: Norton, 2012; p. 622ff.

^{iv} <http://www.generationword.com/Israel/gibeon.html>

^v Ted Loder, *Guerillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle*. LuraMedia, 1984; p. 47.

^{vi} Hammond & Busch, eds., *The English Bible Volume Two: The New Testament and Apocrypha (Norton Critical Edition)*. New York: Norton, 2012; p. 415.

^{vii} John O’Donohue, “For Retirement,” in *To Bless the Space Between Us*. New York: Doubleday, 2008.

^{viii} Erma Bombeck, “If I Had My Life to Live Over,” a column originally published in 1979 and later collected in *Eat Less Cottage Cheese and More Ice Cream: Thoughts on Life from Erma Bombeck*. Source: <http://www.snopes.com/glurge/bombeck.asp#ub2QZsYXrLc8VPgs.99>