

## **Whether the Time is Favorable or Unfavorable II Timothy 3:14-4:5; Jeremiah 31:31-34**

### **Jeremiah 31:31-34**

<sup>31</sup>The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. <sup>32</sup>It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD.

<sup>33</sup>But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. <sup>34</sup>No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

### **II Timothy 3:14-4:5**

<sup>14</sup>But as for you,  
continue in what you have learned and firmly believed,  
knowing from whom you learned it,  
<sup>15</sup>and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings  
that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

<sup>16</sup>All scripture is inspired by God and is useful  
for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,  
<sup>17</sup>so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient,  
equipped for every good work.

<sup>4:1</sup>In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus,  
who is to judge the living and the dead,  
and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you:

<sup>2</sup>proclaim the message;  
be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable;  
convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.

<sup>3</sup>For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine,  
but having itching ears,

they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires,  
<sup>4</sup>and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.

<sup>5</sup>As for you, always  
be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist,  
carry out your ministry fully.

### Prayer

God of eternity, God of our life, God in this moment,  
You have a claim on our past, and on our present, and on our future.

You cradle us in the arms of eternity,  
placing us in this life, in this world, at this time,  
to make whatever positive difference we can make  
with what we have, and who we are,  
and what we can dream for the world  
with the imaginations of our minds  
for feeding hungry people  
and restoring our siblinghood with all humanity,  
and with the desires of our hearts  
for justice and mercy  
and peace among nations.

God of eternity, God of our life, God of this moment,  
You have a claim on our past, our present, and our future.

And so we pray with Katrina Crosby:

God of autumn,  
help us to be more like nature,  
accepting the changing seasons;  
like the changing of the trees:  
not a dying as life sometimes feels,  
but a stripping bare in preparation for inner growth,  
knowing that to shed the outer layers  
will reveal the strength that is hidden underneath.

God of autumn,  
it's so hard to let things go:

the shields,  
the camouflage,  
the flimsy covers ...

We cannot hide from you;  
you are our strength,  
you see our inner beauty.  
You see beyond the human dressings  
and wish to clothe us in your love.

God of autumn,  
help us to be more like nature,  
accepting the changing seasons  
not because they are out of our control,  
but because they are in your hands.<sup>1</sup>

### The Sermon

God is eternal, and God is love,  
and our Christian witness is that God has a claim  
on your past, your present, and your future.

In the years that have led up to this moment, some have known God. They have sensed or felt or related to God. Others are not convinced.

In all the time of your life leading to this moment, have there been times when you have known or suspected or wondered about the possibility of God's presence and love for you?

What do you think God wants with you in this moment?

And what do you and your Creator want to do with your future?

Each of us brings with us an individual story that is astonishing in its epic scope.

First of all, the fact that any of us here is amazing. "Consider the fact," wrote Bill Bryson, "that for 3.8 billion years...every one of your forebears on both sides has been attractive enough to find a mate, healthy enough to reproduce, and sufficiently blessed by fate and circumstances to live long enough to do so."

“Not one of your pertinent ancestors was squashed, devoured, drowned, starved, stranded, stuck fast, untimely wounded, or otherwise deflected from its life’s quest of delivering a tiny charge of genetic material to the right partner at the right moment in order to perpetuate the only possible sequence of hereditary combinations that could result—eventually, astoundingly, and all too briefly—in you.”<sup>ii</sup>

Then, having been brought into this life, you set sail into the world.

I have, for several years, been entranced by the story of some 28,800 bath toys that were swept from a container ship in a storm at sea about 25 years ago.<sup>iii</sup> Nobody was hurt, thank heaven; but buffeted by 30-foot waves, two columns of giant containers were swept over the deck and tumbled into the raging water.

One of the containers burst open, and out came its contents, which included those 28,800 items listed as “bath toys”—specifically, 7200 each of red beavers, blue turtles, green frogs, and yellow rubber duckies.<sup>iv</sup>

Carried by the tides, they floated in all directions. Some traversed the Arctic Ocean, and floated thousands of miles down into the north Atlantic. A quarter of a century later, they still turn up in places all over the Northern Hemisphere.

I find myself fascinated to consider, for each one of those little rubber duckies that has turned up, and the thousands more that are still out there: What epic journeys have they been on?

Each one has traveled thousands of miles, endured astounding environments, weathered unfathomable storms, existed day in and day out under the vast sky of God’s infinite and awesome creation. Each one has its own breathtaking story, has been on a voyage of unimaginable proportion, an almost cosmic odyssey. And it has arrived where it is, weathered, faded, but somehow whole.

Which is exactly the way you could describe the epic story of being one human being alive on the earth.

So there is the amazement of having been given the gift of being alive,  
and the epic story of being who you are, one tiny organism  
floating, enduring, your integrity intact,  
in this vast cosmos.

And then there is the astonishing encounter.

Friedrich Schleiermacher in the late 18th century called it the “feeling of absolute dependence”—the recognition, when you strip away all the stuff of religion, of a sense, like a tiny kernel planted deep within each of us, that there is something vastly greater than all of us, upon which our existence and that of the whole universe depend.

How we get to that encounter is different for each of us.

“There is a story in the *Russian Primary Chronicle*,” wrote Timothy Ware, “of how [shortly before the year 1000 A.D.], Vladimir, prince of Kiev, while still a pagan, desired to know which was the one true religion, and therefore sent his followers to visit the various countries of the world in turn.

“They went first to the Muslim Bulgars of the Volga,” but felt uncomfortable with the way they “gazed around them like men possessed”<sup>v</sup> when they prayed.

“Traveling next to Germany and to Rome, they found the worship more satisfactory, but complained that here too it was without beauty.

“Finally they journeyed to Constantinople, and here at last, as they attended the divine liturgy in the great Church of the Holy Wisdom, they discovered what they desired.

[And they wrote back to the prince,] ‘We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth, for surely there is no such splendor or beauty anywhere upon earth. We cannot describe it to you; only this we know, that God dwells there among humans, and that their service surpasses the worship of all other places. For we cannot forget that beauty.’<sup>vi</sup>

What nourishes your soul? What does it feel like to you, what do you experience, as Miller Williams has said, “down there where the spirit meets the bone”?<sup>vii</sup>

Everyone who identifies with this man, Jesus—whether you’re a fully committed, entirely dedicated disciple, or just standing at the edge of the pond with a big toe uncertainly touching the thinnest layer of water—every Christian and every Jesus fan has had people, or at least some one person, who led us in the faith, as “Paul” to “Timothy” in the New Testament letters, whether or not it was really the well-known “Paul” writing to an actual “Timothy.”<sup>viii</sup>

“Every Christian,” says Thomas Oden, “can remember the name of at least one person through whom the faith was delivered. Faith became refracted through the personal experience of that witness. Retain that name in memory,” he says. “Hold that name up in prayer with gratitude. We know how earnestly that one prayed for us, labored for us, patiently bore with us, enjoyed our presence.”<sup>ix</sup>

And, somehow, we entered, or at the very least have heard the invitation to enter, into the recognition of the astounding presence of God, creating and defining and sustaining and redeeming our past, our present, and our future.

To be in this room, in this company, in this communion of saints, is to be part of an unfolding story and a holy mystery, a cosmic tapestry that God has been weaving since the origin of all things.

“I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with,” says the Teacher in Ecclesiastes. “God has made everything suitable for its time; and, moreover, has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” (Ecclesiastes 3:10-11).

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;  
he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.  
Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil;  
for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.  
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long (Psalm 23).

The God of love has a claim on your past, your present, and your future.

How have you known God in the years that have led up to this moment?

What do you think God wants with you in this moment?

And what do you and your Creator want to do with your future?

Prayer

O God, searching for signs of you in our past  
(and rarely coming up empty handed),  
and trusting you to lead us into our future,  
today we pray for the present.

We pray for the people in Haiti, in Lumberton,  
and in all areas traumatized by raging and rising waters.  
Help them, O God, and help us help them,  
we pray fervently and with tears of sympathy and urgency.

God of this time and all time,  
Sometimes, we don't know what's right.  
We want to know what is right, but sometimes we struggle.

Our community and our nation are deep in difficult reflection:  
reflection on ideas of race, and complicity, and white supremacy;  
reflection on personal and institutional lament and hope,  
woundedness and healing;  
reflection on the nature, and the use and misuse and abuse  
of humanity, sexuality, authority, language, resources,  
and politics global, national, local and interpersonal.

We want to know what is right, to do what is right,  
to live, and to worship, and to offer ourselves in service  
of the world you created  
in ways that are appropriate, and faithful, and adequate  
to the time we live in and the needs you equip us to meet.

Great and gracious God,  
We know that you love all your creatures,  
especially when we do not deserve it.  
We know that we are all siblings.  
We know that in Leonard Cohen's words,  
"There is a crack in everything.  
That's how the light gets in."<sup>x</sup>

And if we may dare offence  
by once again appropriating for our own prayers  
from the most aggrieved members of our own family:

God of our weary years,  
God of our silent tears,  
Thou who has brought us thus far on the way;  
Thou who has, by thy might, led us into the light,  
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.  
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met thee,  
Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget thee,  
Shadowed beneath thy hand,  
May we forever stand,  
True to our God,  
True to our native land.<sup>xi</sup>

We need you all of the time.  
All the time.  
Whether the time is favorable or unfavorable.  
We need you, all of our time.

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<sup>i</sup> Katrina Crosby, "God of Autumn," in *Acorns and Archangels*. Wild Goose Publications, 2009; p. 150.

<sup>ii</sup> Bill Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*. New York: Broadway Books, 2004.

<sup>iii</sup> Donovan Hohn, *Moby-Duck: The True Story of 28,800 Bath Toys Lost at Sea & of the Beachcombers, Oceanographers, Environmentalists & Fools Including the Author Who Went in Search of Them*. New York: Penguin, 2011.

<sup>iv</sup> Hohn, 2011, p. 10.

<sup>v</sup> Timothy (Kallistos) Ware, "The Earthly Heaven," in Daniel B. Clendenin, ed., *Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995; p. 12.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>bvii</sup> Miller Williams, *Some Jazz a While: Collected Poems*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999; p. 254.

<sup>viii</sup> Thomas Oden, in opposition to the majority of modern (i.e., Schleiermacher and subsequent) interpreters, is convinced that I and II Timothy and Titus are genuine letters of Paul; see his *Interpretation* commentary, pp. 10-15.

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<sup>ix</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *First and Second Timothy and Titus (Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1989, p. 23.

<sup>x</sup> Leonard Cohen, "Anthem." © Songs for Rebecca 1992 from *The Present*.

<sup>xi</sup> James Weldon Johnson, "Lift Every Voice and Sing." In *Glory to God*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013; Hymn #339.