

It's Time

[Ecclesiastes 3:1-8](#)

We are in one of those unusual years where Christmas Day and New Year's Day fall on a Sunday. I've done my share of grumbling about this in the last few weeks, but today it feels very appropriate—to start a new year not by lazing around in my pajamas, but by being in church, here, with you. It gives me a slightly better chance of getting through at least the first day of my new year's resolutions without saying, “Well, you know, tomorrow's Monday. I'll start then.”

You could say that the idea of New Year's resolutions is biblical—in the way that many things in our culture can trace their way back to Christianity. Starting over, changing something about the way you've been living up until now starts with those wise men who came to visit the baby Jesus. They were astrologers. One bright star in the sky guided them from their home in the east, all the way to the palace of King Herod in Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem, where they found this special baby and brought him the most valuable gifts they could think of—gold, frankincense, myrrh. It would have made sense for them to go back home the same way they came—back through Jerusalem, to stop in at Herod's palace where they'd already been treated royally, back along the same camel trail that had brought them west. But, Matthew's Gospel says, a dream came to them, a warning dream. And so, they went “home by another way.” They changed their route, the path that was familiar to them. They went home different from the way they had come.

There is something kind of wonderful about turning to a new, fresh calendar. A wide open, fresh space opens up, an opportunity to be our better selves, different from what we were before. We may have tried and failed at this before, but now everything is possible! We get a new start. And so we tend to make big resolutions—right? This is a moment to overhaul my whole life: Lose ten pounds, exercise every day, never again speak sharply to that person in my life who drives me crazy.

You know what usually happens with New Year's resolutions. There's actually been scientific study on why we as humans are so unable to keep our new year's promises to ourselves. Here's what they've found: When you make a New Year's resolution, you feel good about it at that moment, so you predict—you expect—that you're going to feel good about this change as you're making it, too. But when you actually go to do the thing you resolved to do, the action itself doesn't make you feel good (or at least not as good as sitting on the couch makes you feel). So instinctively, we look for what does feel good, or at least comfortable—which is our old habits. The same things we did last year, before we made the resolution. At least one set of scientists who study these things say that the way to make a resolution stick is to break it down into small, concrete actions, make all the decisions before you start, so that when you get there the action is more automatic. On Monday I will exercise after work. On Tuesday I will get rid of all that leftover Christmas candy. Good luck.

What I really want to do today is to invite you to another New Year's resolution you might make for yourself. It's about time.

We all have something like a relationship with time. An uneasy relationship, often. Sometimes it feels like time doesn't treat us well. It goes too fast; it runs away from us too soon. There isn't enough—we need more than each day gives to us. For some of us there's too much time. Maybe you wish for a different time, a time that's already past, or a time in the future you wish would come sooner.

And we don't always treat time well ourselves. We waste it. We lose it. We let it slip away, often without even noticing.

It's hard to get our relationship with time right. I don't know if that's true everywhere, but I really see it here. Since I've living in the South Bay these last couple of years, what I notice most is how pressed people feel for time. What a scarce and precious resource time seems to be. How little time it feels like we have to do too much. You know where I see it most clearly? Driving. My whole life, I thought yellow lights were supposed to signal "Slow down; get ready to stop." Apparently I was wrong. Yellow lights here mean "Drive faster. Danger, danger; your drive might get two minutes longer if you don't get through this intersection before the light turns red."

Don't get me wrong; I drive too fast too, just like I do everything too fast. My relationship with time is not any healthier or less conflicted than anyone else's. I have sincerely mixed feelings about whether I should be reminding myself—and you—that the work of bringing the kingdom of God on earth is urgent, that there's an endless need for love-in-action in front of us all the time if we just lift our heads up to see it. On the other hand, I want, for you and for myself, to slow down, to leave space for God to act as only God can. As God can only do if we are not rushing by too fast to see, or to come alongside.

A few years ago Dick Corson sent me to a book called *Three Mile an Hour God*. The speed of love, that author said, is the speed of walking—roughly three miles an hour. This is the speed at which God moves through the world. God will not be rushed. When God led his people out of slavery in Egypt—where they had worked long hours seven days a week to get done the pressing work of building those pyramids—they walked. Three miles an hour they walked, even when people were chasing them. God walked with them, giving them the food and water they needed, directions, light to travel by. They stopped to observe the Sabbath. God did not hurry to get them to the promised land; there were important lessons to be learned at every moment along the way—about faith and trust and getting along with one another, about remembering who you are.

There are other lessons to be learned about time from that chapter of our history as well. Time is like *manna*, the food that appeared on the ground every morning for those traveling Israelites to eat. There was never more than enough for one day; it couldn't be stored up or preserved as leftovers. One day's food only; they had to trust that the next day God would come again and bring them what they needed for that day too. That's exactly how time comes to us. Only enough for one day. The same number of minutes for each of us. There is no saving it up or setting it aside for later use. No stretching it out or making it go faster. No way to live in yesterday's time, or to make tomorrow's come more quickly. *This* is the day that God has given us. *This* is the moment that we must be fully present to, or else it will be gone.

I have a feeling that if Jesus were here improvising the Sermon on the Mount with us, he might say, "Don't worry about what you will eat or wear or whether there will be enough time to get everything done. If God had time to create the universe, don't you think there will be enough time to do all the things you need to do too?"

In the year ahead, I'd like to learn how it feels to let God set my pace. To have more than one speed, to be attentive enough to hear God saying, "Slow down," or "Now. Go now." I want to watch for when it's "time to throw away stones or time to gather stones together; time to seek or time to lose; time to

keep silence or time to speak. I'd like to live as though God is right here, coaching me. Listen for what God needs me (and us) to do. Not be afraid to wait, or to move when the time is *now*.

I think I've made this resolution before. I know I've broken it before. No matter how sure I am that I want to change, I will fall down again, no doubt. I will keep falling back into the patterns that are mine, comfortable as old shoes. Like those behavioral scientists suggest, the key might be to put in place some concrete actions that I can practice until they become habits, the things I do over and over again without even thinking. Schedule in time to sit and pray and pay attention to something other than my own agenda. Begin each day by asking, of God, of my life, even of another person, "What is it you need from me today?" And to be OK on the days when God says, "I've got this one."

This is the day that the Lord has made.
This is the moment the Lord has made.
Let us rejoice and be glad in it.