

“The Time of our Lives, Part 1”

Scripture: Psalm 127

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Psalm 127 has often been a puzzle to readers...the first half of the psalm seems a reflection on God's provision. The second half of the psalm seems a celebration of children. Many have suggested that we simply have 2 separate psalms that were joined together. And then there is a translation question with the final line of the first part, as I will indicate in my reading of the Psalm. Listen now to Psalm 127:

A Song of Ascents. Of Solomon.

- ¹ Unless the LORD builds the house,
those who build it labor in vain.
Unless the LORD guards the city,
the guard keeps watch in vain.
- ² It is in vain that you rise up early
and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil;
for he gives sleep to his beloved.
(for he provides for his beloved in sleep.)
- ³ Sons are indeed a heritage from the LORD,
the fruit of the womb a reward.
- ⁴ Like arrows in the hand of a warrior
are the sons of one's youth.
- ⁵ Happy is the man who has
his quiver full of them.
He shall not be put to shame
when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.

Two distinct sections makes up this psalm...a reflection on God's provision in the midst our daily tasks—building, watching, laboring...then God's provision of the blessing of children. And perhaps you immediately see the connection when it is put that way: children are a primary example of the provision of God. As God provides in building, watching, and working, how much more so God provides in the blessing of family. Remember that in ancient times, in a day before there was any in-depth understanding of human conception, the gift of children was a divine occurrence. Conception was a miracle, a fairly repeatedly miracle...in most cases. But a childless wife was spoken of as “barren” and under “God's shadow”—it was somehow the woman's fault. So, conception was an amazing gift of God...in most cases.

Twenty years ago, when the word got out in my former congregation that we were going to adopt a child, after having two birth children, there was quite a buzz in the congregation. People were interested—caring people wanted to keep up with us. But there was also a curiosity that went beyond friendly interest. One woman, a church member, happen to be in the office one day when I was out so she began to “fish” for information...why were the Penders adopting, and so forth. But her most direct attempt to ferret information from the office staff was to comment with a sigh,

“Isn’t it a shame that Sheri cannot have anymore children?” implying somehow there was a female problem. My church administrator wanted to say: “How do you know the problem isn’t William in that equation?” However, like our current office staff, this administrator knew when it was best just to keep silent, though she enjoyed telling me about later.

Today, we will not approach Psalm 127 with those questions about “barrenness” and the “shadow of God” over our lives, whether male or female. Our perspective is set by our theme for today and for the next several Sundays—“time,” God’s amazing gift of time. We have spent the month of October talking about stewardship, which often can become a “code word” for money. Money is important theme...but time is even more so! God’s provision of time is more valuable than any amount of money. Some of you remember the old routine of Jack Benny, a comedian who had the persona of being a “real-tight wad,” frugal to the nth degree. Jack Benny, the penny pincher, is accosted by a thug with a gun. The thug says: “Your money or your life?” There’s a pause. Then the thug says with exasperation: “Look, bud, I said, ‘Your money or your life!’” And Jack Benny shrugs and says, “I am thinking it over..” Money or life...which would he give up? The humor in the scene is the recognition that often we get confused about really is life; we confuse money or other concerns with what is really vital.

Our text today addresses what is really important. After all, surely our house is important...got have a house, don’t we? But the people of Israel spend centuries in tents. The text says: Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain. Surely security is important...so we lock our doors, install our alarm systems, build better bombs, but we do not feel any more secure. And as for security, we call stocks and bonds “securities”—are they really our security? The text says: Unless the Lord watches over the city, those who watch are vigilant in vain. And then there is work...can’t work bring us what we want? Can’t we work it out? Do I really have to point at all the ways that work fails us?

- The person whose dream it is to have a craft shop and make homemade dolls follows her dream and then she goes bankrupt in an economy that no longer values such handcrafts.
- A well-established company simply closes the door...and loyal employees are just “out of luck.”
- A person works for 40 years to make it to the golden age of retirement only to hear, “The tests came back; the tumor is malignant; get your affairs in order because you will not see another Christmas.”

The text says: It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for God gives sleep to his beloved...or God gives to his beloved in sleep (the translation question to which I will return). The text says: Work is finally not the answer either.

What is really important? Not our house, not our efforts at security, not our work. What is really important is this provision by God. And the greatest gift of God is time. God gives time. Here is what is going on in this text: God gives while we are sleeping... while we are not working, watching, and building. God gives beforehand...before all that frantic activity.

To understand what I am saying, it would be helpful for you to recall the Hebrew conception of time. You and I typically speak of our day beginning in the morning. We even call dawn, “day break”...day breaking in. However, the Hebrew conception of a day does not begin in the

morning. Day begins at sunset. So, when do our Jewish friends begin Sabbath? Not on Saturday but on Friday evening. The Sabbath day begins at sundown on Friday. And, likewise, remember the creation story in Genesis--recall the refrain, "and it was evening and morning the first day...it was evening and morning, the second day" and so on. We would say, morning and evening, the first day. But, no, the Hebrew day begins with evening...when no human work can be done.

Remember this is day before any electric lights and very few oil lamps. Night means stopping everything. Everything stops...except God. God works through the night. When we start early in the morning we already hours behind God! None of us is on the job before God is. And remember the question about translation—both alternatives apply here. The first: God gives his beloved sleep. [and some God's beloved are right here the sanctuary now!] What a gift it is to be able to sleep! To realize what a gift sleep is, all you have to do is go without sleep for awhile! But I think the more likely translation is this: God gives to his beloved in sleep. While we were sleeping, God was building, watching, working, creating, sustaining.

Here's the faith point today: God's gift of time always comes with what the theologians call the "prevenient grace" of God. "Prevenient" simply means "coming before." Our work of building, our work of protecting, our work of forming families...all that depends on the prevenient grace of God. While we were sleeping...while we were unaware...while we had no responsibility...God was at work. The great misunderstanding of life is that it is all up to us, when God has been working beforehand.

Listen carefully here: faith is not about being irresponsible; but it is not all up to us: "Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain." Build...watch...work...form relationships—but it is not all up to us.

All too often, we live our lives in what the writer Parker Palmer describes as "functional atheism." Functional atheism—we give lip service to faith, but then make decisions based on what we really want to happen. Even when we say we believe in God...even trust in God, we really know it all depends on me. You want something done? You got to do yourself! Here is what Palmer says about functional atheism:

This is the belief that ultimate responsibility for everything rests with me. It is a belief held even among people whose theology affirms a higher power than the human self, people who do not understand themselves as atheists but whose behavior belies their belief.

Functional atheism is an unconscious belief that leads to workaholic behavior, to burn-out, to stressed and strained and broken relationships, to unhealthy priorities. Functional atheism is the unexamined conviction within us that if anything decent is going to happen here, I am the one who needs to make it happen. Functional atheism is the reason why the average group (according to studies) can tolerate only 15 seconds of silence; people believe that if they are not making noise, nothing is happening.¹

God's greatest gift is time...and before any of us began using time, wasting time, filling time, enjoying time, God was at work.

¹ <http://www.mid-attc.org/pdf/Leading%20from%20Within.pdf> on 11/5/09

Prevenient grace...the coming beforehand work of God...the handiwork of God upon all our building, watching, laboring, family-raising depends.

Let me give you a parable of what I am addressing: Old man Mr. Ferry Gettys was a beloved member of the congregation. He just saw things and took care of them. If light bulb was out at the church building, he just replaced it. If a hinge squeaked, he oiled it. If lights were left on, he turned them off. After worship, he checked doors to make sure they were locked. He did the things which that nobody paid any attention to...unless they were not done. Do we really notice that the light came on when we turn the switch, or that doors that supposed be locked are so or on cold morning the heat was already on? Ferry just did things.

One Sunday, after worship, when I was one of the last ones to leave,, I saw Ferry trying to get his car started. I knew he was trying to start his car because Ferry had the driver side door open with his left foot on the ground. Ferry drove an old car...none of these automatic transmissions but a manual transmission...a clutch and gear shifter. Clearly the battery in Ferry's car would not crank the engine and Ferry was trying to roll start his car. If you have any experience with a manual transmission, you will know that if you can get the get the car rolling with the clutch engaged, you can pop the clutch and crank the car. So here was old man Ferry Gettys, one foot on the ground, and one foot on the clutch, trying to get his car rolling on a flat surface. He did not hear me calling to him that I had jumper cables and I could help him crank the engine. He was just pushing away for all he was worth but on the flat surface, nothing was happening. So I just got behind his car and began to push as hard as I could. The car started rolling. Ferry was pushing his foot on the ground to keep up with movement. Then he pulled his left foot into the car, pop the clutch and the car cranked. And Ferry drove off. He never knew that I was pushing the car. He thought he did it all with his left foot.

Friends, too often we think our time is all up to us. And we put so much into that left foot on the ground that is pushing and pushing and pushing, unaware of God's great push. That's why our time in worship in never wasted. Whether we sing the right hymns or not...whether we finish on time or not...whether it goes our way or not. Worship is when we pause and remember the words of Psalm 127:

¹ Unless the LORD builds the house,
those who build it labor in vain.

Unless the LORD guards the city,
the guard keeps watch in vain.

² It is in vain that you rise up early
and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil;
for God provides for his beloved in sleep.