

Musty Calendars and Trusty Clocks

a sermon

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Trinity Reformed Church

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Psalm 90:1–6, 12–17

It's getting near the end of 2017, which means that soon Tammi will be ordering a new calendar.

This is a "Mom's Family Calendar" designed by Sandra Boynton, who is known for her adorable and funny cartoons of animals, like cats and horses and pigs and cows. (She's really good at cows.) Ms. Boynton is the author and illustrator of *Moo, Baah, La la la!*, a favorite in my house when our children were little.

Anyway, Tammi has been using "Mom's Family Calendar" for many years now. It was very helpful for her in keeping track of what all her kids were doing, and me, too: games and practices and competitions and exams and trips and meetings. Just like all of Ms. Boynton's work, "Mom's Family Calendar" is decorated with lots of cute and funny animals, all in the Boynton style. Tammi keeps it right next to her desk, so she can keep on top of the many things going on in her life and in the lives of her kids. And in mine, too.

I'm sure she'll order a new one. Maybe she already has. And she'll start filling it in with stuff coming up: her work schedule, my meetings, when the boys have college breaks, when Bethany is coming home and flying out again, vacations, trips to see her mom and dad and brother.

I mostly use an electronic calendar kept on the cloud, one I can access from my computer and my cell phone. (That's what all the cool kids do, you know.) It's how I keep track of my things. For my purposes it's much easier than paper calendars.

But even so, I sometimes do put up, on a wall or a bulletin board, a printed calendar. Usually, these are decorative calendars given to me by friends. They'll usually have the calendar on the bottom portion, and on the top part will be artistic photographs or prints of fine paintings. Sometimes they will have inspirational sayings.

I like these calendars. They add beauty to my surroundings. We sure could all use a little more beauty in our lives. So I like the paper calendars because they look nice and add to the aesthetic environment.

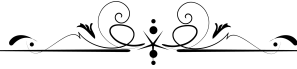
But I have a problem with paper calendars. The problem is, I so often forget to flip them forward when the month changes. Just the other day, as I was rushing out of my office for one thing or another, I noticed that the calendar I have on the wall was still set for September.

(I suppose that's not so bad. My DVD player at home has been flashing 12:00 for maybe 7 years.)

Usually, a calendar is helpful only if it's used. Sure, it can provide decoration. But if it isn't flipped forward month-by-month, then it just hangs there on the wall visually accusing its owner of forgetfulness and inattention to the responsibilities of life, as if it were saying, "Hey there! Get with it!"

But once the year is over, all those months having slipped their course from future to past, then there is little point in keeping the calendar. You might as well toss it into the recycling bin. Unless there is really great artwork in it, why bother holding onto it? Years from now, are you really going to flip through that dusty old calendar, reminiscing about the things you did that day, that week, that month? I don't think so.

Unlike a working clock, calendars, once their months have passed, especially when they are dusty from long misuse, are not so trusty anymore, except to remind us of how fragile our days really are.



The psalm from which I just read speaks to me about the fragility of life. And in contrast to all that, it also speaks to me about the unending strength and goodness of God.

And this is something that has been on my mind a lot lately.

Michael Bush is my best friend from seminary. The Rev. Dr. Michael Bush (although he's not big on titles). We met in 1987 in Richmond, Virginia, as we began classes for the degree we needed to be ministers. We shared so much in common, musical tastes and academic interests and theological outlook (although that eventually changed a bit over the years).

Michael was a pastor, then he was a professor for awhile, then he was a pastor again. Because he lived in Kentucky, and before that Alabama and South Carolina, I hadn't seen him for almost 10 years, but still we managed to talk on the phone a few times each year. He had just moved back to his home state of Kentucky in the spring, to pastor a church there. In July he officiated at his daughter's wedding.

On Monday night I got the message from his wife, Janellyn. "Dan, I don't know a good way to say this, but I want you to know that Michael died suddenly this afternoon. I was told that he was apparently walking outside in the church yard. The secretary was looking for him and found him."



*You turn us back to dust,
and say, "Turn back, you mortals."
For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past,
or like a watch in the night.
You sweep them away; they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning;
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers.*



Life is so fragile. We know that. We all know that so well, some of us better than the rest of us. Life is so fragile.

And being a devoted servant of God offers no immunity from life's fragility:

heart attacks,
strokes,
car crashes,
cancers,
random violence,

as well as the less fatal yet still painful assaults:

betrayal,
loneliness,
uncertainty,
unemployment,
separation from loved ones,

all of these signs of our mortality, old calendars musty from irrelevance and disuse.

The psalm laments this transience, and it pushes back in faith against life's frailty. Yes, *in faith*. This is not an atheist's rage against the meaninglessness of life, nor a Buddhist's meditation on the suffering that is inherent to all experience. Instead, this psalm, the whole thing, is a prayer to God, a prayer that speaks from a life that has painfully suffered, a prayer that nonetheless in faith seeks God through that pain.

It so happens that the suffering of those who first sang this psalm was a suffering that came on them because of their own misdeeds. We find that in the middle verses, which I did not read. The transience of life is noted, and it is contrasted with God's eternity, because the people had sinned, and they were suffering for their sin, punished for it.

And we can acknowledge that there are times when human suffering is made worse because of human iniquity, when fragile life is made even more fragile because people have acted foolishly, wickedly, contrary to God's will. Sometimes, people do bring it on themselves.

Yet this note of responsibility in the psalm must not be taken as some universal law. The psalm doesn't teach us that all (or even most) instances of human suffering are direct punishment by God for human sin. That is the wrong thing to take from these verses.

Instead, I think a big thing to take from this psalm is that it *prays*. It prays confessing human weakness, and it prays glorifying God's strength. It prays to be relieved from suffering, and it prays to be blessed in one's labor. It prays that God will show mercy and love to the one who prays. This is what it prays.

And *how* it prays is also important. This psalm prays out of a deep trust in God's compassion and strength. It prays with a sacred humility, knowing that the contrast between us and God is not a curse but is, somehow, in some way, a gift. It prays with hope, knowing that God's steadfast love will renew the faithful who have suffered and yet cast their cares upon the Lord.

*Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.*

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*Let your work be manifest to your servants,
and your glorious power to their children.
Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,*

*and prosper for us the work of our hands—
O prosper the work of our hands!*



The dusty calendars of our lives might accuse us: of misspent days, of missed opportunities. Musty and of little lasting use, they may cause us to yearn for the return of days long past. Yet no matter how great our yearning, they will never come back. And the clocks of our lives, though trusty, may serve only to assault us with the *tick-tock* of passing time, raising our anxiety, deepening our dread.

But God's love endures, even as our calendars gather dust and fall apart, as our clocks fail from rust or from empty or corroded batteries. And in response to the certainty of God's everlasting love and enduring power, we who have faith will dive deep into the comfort of these, and seek wisdom.

So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.

How do we count our days? With calendars, I suppose, and with clocks, too. Of course, the psalm is getting at something deeper than merely marking time.

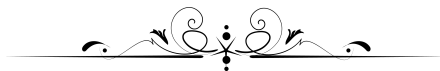
Today we mark the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. There is much for which I am thankful because of the Reformation. The way I understand and express my Christian faith is deeply, profoundly influenced by Protestant ministers and theologians: some from the 16th century, like Luther and Calvin; from the 18th century, especially Jonathan Edwards; and then, Friedrich Schleiermacher from the 19th century; Barth and Brunner and the Niebuhrs from the 20th.

But there is also much in the heritage of the Reformation that I regret. Some things I even mourn.

I think what I might mourn the most is how our Protestant traditions so often have become

untouchable museum pieces,
an ossified traditionalism that serves only to separate and exclude
by labeling insiders and outsiders,
a religious tribalism enforced by rules little understood,
even (or especially) by those most eager to uphold them.

For some people, it feels like they're working off of dusty calendars that have long remained on the very same month for decades, or more. The ways of worship and theology they have embraced were meant to point to the Lord God, who has indeed "been our dwelling place in all generations," and secondarily (but blessedly) to point to flesh-and-blood people whose flourishing God intends and for which we should be working. But their forms of theological inheritance have become a distraction, or a primary focus, so that time is no longer marked with the trusty clock of God's ever-enlivening word.



So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.

There is wisdom in learning to be attentive to the passing of days. There is a godly and God-honoring wisdom in meditating on how fleeting our lives are and how unending is God's own living.

There is wisdom in marking time, not by ourselves, not by looking inward, but rather by marking it and exploring it and living it

with the rhythms of the blessing of God,
with the phrasing of the word of God,
with the tempo of the presence of God,
with the pace of walking with God,

our God, the Lord God,

maker of heaven and earth;
creator and redeemer and sustainer;
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit;
who walks with us, and guides us, and molds us;
who refreshes and restores us;
who calls us to lives of humility and bravery,
of justice and mercy,

Christlike lives and cross-shaped lives,

that comfort as we have been comforted,
that bless as we have been blessed,
that challenge as we have been challenged.

There is wisdom in such living, a wisdom not of dusty calendars that once marked the days of old traditions whose value today is far from certain and whose meaning is little understood, but rather a wisdom of trusty clocks powered by and continually calibrated to God's enduring word and God's abiding love.

Dear friends, people of the Protestant Reformation, or of the Catholic Counter-Reformation, or of no reformation by any name: may our prayer ever be that God would teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.