

Chapter 1

SHAPED BY TIME

My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle.¹ So says the prophet Job in his description of the human condition. There is no cessation of the passage of time. There are good days and bad ones, times of plenty and times of desperation, seasons of agony and seasons of delight. Eventually, we presume, the weaver runs out of thread, a sign that things are coming to an end. But in the meantime, the passage of time is relentless. It cannot be made to go more slowly. It will not pass any faster than it already does. It is impossible to tame it. Our only hope is to mark it, sanctify it, relax into it, enjoy it, and allow life to be shaped by the inevitability of its passage.

In our earliest records of ancient peoples, there is evidence of a strong sense of awareness with respect to the passage of time. A large part of this was rooted in the simple observation of natural phenomena. The daily rhythm of the sun's coming and going is hard to miss. The sun's "rising" brings light and warmth, makes work possible, and seems to energize the body and lift the spirit. The sun's "setting" steals the light and chills the air. It slows the body, pulls us toward rest, and tempts us with the fear of the unknown. The shadows come, they lengthen, they go, and, as if by promise, they return.

The light and darkness that come with the sun's rising and setting are shaped into seasons, and gradually the cold days will give way to warmer ones.

1. Job 7:6.

In time, the gentle warmth of the morning will give way to the sweltering heat of the afternoon sun. But sooner or later the cold will come again. As time passes the rains come and the crops grow. In other years the rains come again, but this time in such abundance that floods destroy even the sturdiest plantings. If next year, or the year after, the rains do not come, there will be no water to drink. When everything is dry and everyone is thirsty, death lurks in the background. Days, night, weeks, months, seasons, cycles, years, feast, famine, flood, and drought—human beings have always been fascinated by the passage of time and all that it brings with it. Longing and hope, anticipation and expectation, so vital to human thriving, are anchored in time. Ecstasy and delight are experienced as moments in time. And when deep disappointment, profound grief, and excruciating pain are our companions, we comfort one another by saying that “time heals.” Often it does; sometimes it doesn’t.

As time unfolded, ancient peoples began to organize their thinking about its movement and organization. Some conceived of the passage of time as a cycle, visualized often by a circle. The relentless return of the sun and the moon, hot and cold, rain and dry, appeared to them as cyclical patterns with a certain consistency about them. In due course they began to conceive of larger blocks of time, and were often great observers of how these cycles of nature appeared to give a predictable, if uncontrollable, shape to their lives.

There were also the linear thinkers. They conceived of the movement of time more like points on a line, from one sunrise to the next, in endless succession. For many linear thinkers, time had no beginning and no end, just measurable moments in the meantime. What to others seemed like repetition, linear thinkers viewed as a never-ending procession of new moments relentlessly unfolding.

Naturally there were those for whom the previous two modes of organizing time were inadequate. Instead of limiting their mode of thinking to either the cyclical or the linear, they proposed a more spiral visualization of the progress of time, i.e., a line that gradually moves forward while at the same time constantly circling back upon itself, living constantly in the tension between

renewing those things that constantly “return” to us (the cyclical), while reaching toward the promise of what is to come (the linear).

As time passes, it will require the capacity of each kind of thinking—the cyclical, the linear, and the spiral—to develop calendars based on days, weeks, lunar phases, and solar years. Keeping watch throughout the day and night by means of sundials, hourglasses, watchmen, and eventually mechanical (and now digital) timepieces, was the result of patterns of timekeeping that plotted the relentlessness of time’s forward movement against the inevitable recurrence of observable patterns. However it was conceived, and by whatever means it was organized, it was an effort to gain some understanding, some control, of one of those things in life that was, and is, very much beyond human control: the passage of time.

The implications of this are many for people of faith. It’s not just old Job who reflects a consciousness about time and God’s role in it. The charter narrative of creation in the opening pages of Genesis is time-centered in the way it tells the story. The saga of Abraham and Sarah and the stories of the early ancestries of Israel are carefully set in time. The writers of lament use time as their principal point of reference. Nearly every psalm has a direct or oblique reference to God’s work-in-time, and without a strong intuition about God’s desire being wrought in time, the prophets’ words would have made little sense.

The New Testament as well is replete with references to time. The annunciation and birth narratives in the gospels are careful to place the coming of Jesus in time. The reign of God that Jesus has come to inaugurate is expressed in relation to time: it is at once both here and not yet. A goodly portion of the content of Jesus’ teaching is expressed in terms of time and eternity. The resurrection of Jesus causes a seismic shift in time because the future is no longer captive to the past: the way things have always been need not be the way they always will be. This “new age” is the gift of resurrection.

Time itself is neither holy nor unholy. Everyone who lives does so in time, whether or not they profess any faith convictions or claim any manner of

religious affections. Even the most non-religious person will be sensitive to the natural passages of time, to moments of grief and feasts of celebration, and surely to the inevitability of aging. The rate of time's passage is the same for everyone. No one is immune from the trap of the present moment, the agony of being caught between yesterday and tomorrow, that unsettling sense of living between memory and hope. Only one who remembers dares to hope. Only one with hope dares to remember.

In Christian practice, and that of our Jewish forebears, time is ritualized—marked—by prayer. It is by prayer, both public and personal, that time is made holy, set apart for divine purposes. The effect of such prayer is not to change time, but to more clearly recognize God at work within it. We praise God in time, for time, in recognition that the short space of eternity we inhabit is a gift of God's mercy and grace. We bless God for all that has been even as we anticipate all that will be, both in the long narrative of redemption and in the glimpse of that short story that is our own lives. We glorify God in the full confidence that the only future worth betting on is God's future and that our only hope to share that future is to be in relationship with God, a relationship that is nurtured daily by prayer.

Time and prayer go together. All prayer is *in time*.

For the friends of God, prayer is like breathing. It is essential for good health. All other systems of the body depend upon it. Regular, deep cleansing breaths free the body from carrying unnecessary pain. Frequent moments of deep breathing nourish the heart and brain, lower blood pressure, and help to control anxiety. Heavy breathing after vigorous activity heightens the senses and stimulates the capacity to risk. Quick, shallow, labored breathing is better than being dead. The moment-by-moment relentlessness of breathing is a living reminder of the love and grace of God. All aspects of Christian practice depend upon prayer no less than the body depends upon breathing.

God's people throughout the ages have been people of prayer. We pray alone, we pray in small groups, we pray in great congregations. We pray silently.

We pray without words. We pray with our senses. We pray with the postures of our bodies. We pray internally, within ourselves. We pray externally with our arms reaching toward God. We pray before, during, and after math tests. We pray for ourselves. We pray for those we love. We pray for those whose names we do not know. We pray for rain and we pray for it to stop. We pray for victory and peace in the same breath. We pray when babies are born and when their grandmothers die. God's people are praying all the time, everywhere, for everything. All prayer takes place *in time*. Time and prayer are inseparable.

Because God's people pray at all times and in all places, many and various are the ways we do it. This is good. Like so much in the life of faith, we will need to enter into prayer in different ways as we move through life. Our ways of praying shift and change as we move through different stages of faith. The practices that fed us as children or teenagers looking forward no longer sustain us when we are older and more inclined to look back over the way we have come. Constant, however, among the many modes and various disciplines of prayer, the daily prayer of the church—the daily offices in Anglican terminology, and the liturgy of the hours in Roman Catholic—has been a strong anchor in the midst of great variety that ties those who pray now to those of every time and every place. It is the tether that joins us to the great tradition. The daily prayer of the church has often been referred to as the church's "school of prayer," acknowledging that the daily round of psalms, canticles, readings, and prayers have long fed the variable, more individual, modes of prayer.

Through the centuries, those who prayed shaped their prayer by the passing of the day to night, the rising and setting of the sun. But their experience was dramatically different from our own. In the ancient world life was framed more powerfully by light and darkness, summer and winter, rain and drought, and other natural phenomena. In our day, the onset of darkness means flipping a switch, turning on the furnace when there is chill in the air, or hooking up to a public water system that hypothetically never runs dry. In days of yore we ate a diet that was "in season," with much of our produce being available only

in the narrow window of its ripeness. The list of those commodities that could be stored in the cellar for consumption during the long months of winter was a short one. Food preservation and “shelf life” are matters of time. The year-round availability of many fruits and vegetables is a result of modern transportation overcoming seasonal limitations. Such modern conveniences have diminished our sensitivity to the relentless rhythm of days and seasons that our forebears would have said controlled their lives. Technology appears to have given us control. It is an illusion.

It is no wonder, then, that as days and seasons shaped people’s lives, so it shaped their prayer. The church will come to call this process the sanctification of time, i.e., offering prayers of thanksgiving and praise to God at the beginning and end of the day and at various points in between, thus making holy by prayer the passage of time, blessing God for life and labor, for food and rest. For those who shape time by prayer, the first word upon our lips, in all circumstances, is a word of gratitude: praise and thanksgiving. All other words of prayer—confession, intercession, lament, pleading, offering—are possible only when they spring from a rich matrix of thanksgiving. Even solitude—residing gently in God’s presence without words or activity—is generated only by a deep sense of thanksgiving.

There is a particular pattern of prayer that seems almost to transcend time. In its most basic shape, it has three simple, but essential parts: thanksgiving, supplication, and doxology. The three parts are interdependent and inseparable. Together they form a syntax for prayer that is profoundly theological and a dependable approach in prayer, public and personal, for nearly every circumstance.

When we pray, our first instinct is nearly always to ask God for something. Fair enough, since the Scriptures bid us to ask, seek, and knock.² Supplication—asking something of God on behalf of ourselves and others—is often the primary motivation for entering into prayer. But on what possible basis might

2. Matthew 7:7.

we dare to approach God in prayer? Given that God is Creator and we are creature, what emboldens us to ask something of God? Since Jesus is Redeemer and we are the redeemed, why would we think that something beyond redemption could perhaps be in the offing for us? Painted with a broad brush, the answer of the tradition is thanksgiving. We dare to approach God in supplication because we first rendered to God our “humble thanks for all of God’s goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all that God has made.”³ Thanksgiving makes supplication possible.

This is not a quantitative idea. Longer and more complex acts of thanksgiving do not increase the length of our laundry list of supplications. This is a theological matter. We bless God for the simple fact that God is God. We bless God “for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life.” We give thanks to God for “the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ, for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.” We give God thanks—not as we ought, but as we are able—and it is on *that basis alone* that we dare to supplicate God for our own needs and those of others.

We do not stop, however, with supplication. Supplication quite naturally draws us toward doxology. When we pray we do not seek guarantees, but we confidently pursue the will of God. When we supplicate, we place before God the hopes and needs of our hearts and minds, our souls and bodies, but we do so fully cognizant that all that we are or hope to be will be caught up in God’s desire for us. Earnestly offering our supplications as an act of faith, then letting go of them and allowing them to take their place in the matrix of God’s goodness and loving-kindness towards us, quite naturally releases within us an outburst of doxology. It is as though we have prayed our supplications and now say to God, “come what may, we praise you, we bless you, and we give thanks to you, Lord our God.”

The purpose and effect of such prayer—thanksgiving, supplication, doxology—is to make holy, to set apart for God’s use, to sanctify. Table

3. Adapted from the General Thanksgiving from Morning Prayer, 101.

prayer, both in our homes and at the board of God's gracious hospitality, will nearly always take the form of thanksgiving, supplication, and doxology. The prayer at the birth of a child or at the death of a grandparent will likewise be shaped. In every conceivable circumstance of life, from the pinnacle of ecstasy to the depths of despair, our prayer is shaped by thanksgiving, supplication, and doxology. As this pattern shapes our life, it likewise shapes our time, and conversely, as it shapes our time, it gives shape to our lives. All prayer takes place in time.

Time is relentless. Our attempts to tame it by organizing it into days and weeks, seasons and years, decades and centuries, still fail to control it. As people of faith we enter into time's relentlessness by keeping fasts and feasts, by creating holy days to interrupt its predictability, and by marking each day with unceasing prayer and praise. Getting our arms around God's time, even in a ritual sense, is largely impossible.

Our inability to control time, however, does not mean we are without reference points to guide our way. The tradition shapes our lives and the practice of our prayer by giving shape to our days and weeks, our seasons and years. Our days are framed by light and darkness, our weeks by the steady drumbeat of Sunday after Sunday. We shape the seasons of our prayer around two principal foci: incarnation and resurrection. All together these days and weeks and seasons comprise the church's year of grace, the annual telling of the church's story of Jesus together with generous reminders of what it means to follow him, share his moral vision, engage his mission, and demand from ourselves a passion for holy justice that he would recognize.

At the heart of the church's year of grace, there is a great tradition of timeless narratives that give us glimpses into God's activity in the past and offer a vision for the future that shapes the present moment. As the people of God, our engagement with those timeless narratives—the days and weeks and seasons of our prayer—is as relentless as the time those stories embody. When we ritualize these narratives we sometimes do so in great, magnificent edifices that

invite our imaginations to soar. We fill these vast spaces with rich music and carefully prepared ceremonial actions and we are moved to our core. We do these same rituals in simple settings, with no music and little, if any, ceremonial. These same rites are simplified still further at the bedside of the ill and infirm, around a makeshift altar on a battlefield, or by the river with a group of teenagers, wet and restless, from a day on the whitewater. Rich and complex or rudimentary and simple, in these moments God is blessed, lives are changed, and time is tamed, if only for a fleeting instant. The time of our lives finds its anchor in the time-laden ritual practices of the great tradition that are the habitation of a God who was before time, is now, and will be forever.

Christianity celebrates the actions of God in history. What that means is that those of us who claim the faith of Jesus and devote ourselves to the practice of Christian believing are called to be serious about time. The God we know does not listlessly float around in some sort of spatially undefined and timeless void. While not constrained to the limitations of human experience, God chose quite clearly to invade our space and time, crawl up under our skin, walk our journeys with us, and be present in us as the time of our lives unfolds, whatever shape that takes.

God may enter upon our lives at will, when we least expect it, perhaps when we least desire it. Knowing and being loved by God comes always with an element of surprise. But what the church knows—and practices faithfully—is that God’s serendipitous presence may be sought in prayer, discovered in word and sacrament, and celebrated, quite literally, *time and again*, in the days and weeks, in the seasons and years, each precious moment of which is a holy gift.

Keeping time is not about controlling or escaping the relentless tempo of its passage. Nor is keeping time about engaging in some sort of “off-the-clock” denial by which we pretend to salve the guilty conscience of our self-imposed busyness. Keeping time is about seeking God at those times and in those places where God promises to be. Keeping time is about going where God is and being present to the very One whose nature is to be present with us. The time we keep is thus made holy, deepening our prayer, quickening our desire for God, and preparing us for just one more surprise.