

A homily preached at the Community of Saint John Baptist
By the Rt. Rev. Mary D. Glasspool
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When I was a parish rector in Maryland, I led a group of parishioners to a Monastery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for a weekend retreat. The purpose of the retreat, especially since it seemed very brief over a short weekend, was to offer retreatants some guided, quiet time in a setting which practices *living* that kind of time as a way of life. To my delight, two or three of the parishioners went back to the Monastery later on to spend a longer period of time in quiet reflection and prayer. One of them generously described her experience to me when she returned - and in doing so, said something that I will never forget. She said, "*They have so much more time up there!*" At the time, I laughed, and asked her, "Do you mean they have something *more* than 24 hours in the day and seven days in the week?" And she laughed, too. But since that time, I've come back again and again to what she said, realizing that what she meant was that the *quality* of the time spent there, at the Monastery, was somehow *different* than the way in which she usually experienced time.

In a certain sense, she's onto something. A few weeks ago I spent over an hour in a traffic stand-still on the George Washington Bridge - tantalizingly close to the exit for home. When I finally arrived home, I spent an hour on the phone with an old friend and colleague I hadn't talked with in years. 60 measurable minutes passed during each event; but in the case of talking to my friend on the phone - the time flew. When I was in my car on the George Washington Bridge, time came to a grinding halt. So, parents: Has the time during which all the kids were home from school because of the pandemic progress at the same chronological time as a week's vacation at the beach? The heart surgeon who slips into a super-concentrated "flow" state of consciousness never realizes she has been on her feet for eight hours. But that same surgeon looks at her watch every three minutes during an hour-long dinner banquet. A football player gets on the field and is able to sustain peak physical performance for four, fifteen-minute quarters. But that same athlete can't keep himself from falling asleep at a half hour organizational meeting. I could go on. No matter what anyone says, some days are just longer than others!

"Teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom." (Psalm 90:12) What does this mean? Our Psalm for today: Psalm 90 - is a theological reflection on the relationship between God and time; the relationship between mortals and time; and what these two relationships say about the relationship between God and mortals. Psalm 90 is also a traditional reading at funerals - so it is heard regularly on an occasion when our minds and hearts are particularly open and sensitive because of grief and memory, perhaps guilt and regret. At a funeral we are likely to meditate on our own mortality, our own condition and destiny.

What is the relationship between God and time? Scripture articulates it as well as, if not better than, anything else I have read or attempted to understand. "Before the mountains were brought forth, or the land and the earth were born, from age to age you are God." (Verse 2) says today's Psalm. "For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is passed, and like a watch in the night." (Verse 4) The writer of Second Peter echoes this when he says, "...with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day." (2 Peter 3:8) But ever since it was born, Christianity has wrestled with the "problem" of time. At the center of the Gospel is the assertion that the time is fulfilled - God's act of deliverance has been brought about in Jesus Christ. As Christians, we look both ways: backwards, from the coming of Christ; and forwards to the future. We proclaim that God the Creator, created time and space; and that God exists both outside of, and apart from, time and space. Yet God immersed Godself in time by means of the Incarnation. God has *participated*, as it were, with us, in time.

While there is no finally definitive statement about the relationship between God and time, Scholastic thinkers represented God as knowing and experiencing all points of time simultaneously; and this response to the problem of time is still quite commonly held today. So imagine, if you can, our God experiencing all time: past, present, and future, *at once*. God is. And God is apart from time. Yet God is also *involved* in time. God lives, we say, in *eternity*. And for us, as Christians, *time* and *eternity overlap*, or *intersect* in Jesus, the Christ.

Believe me when I say, all of this boggles *my* mind. But it also makes me see that the biblical writers have expressed the relationship between God and time as clearly as anyone can. It leaves me thinking that the author of Second Peter had it about as right as anything: that *God's time is not like ours*.

So what *is* the relationship between us and time - between mortals and time? Good question, right?! We seem never to have enough time. We hardly are aware of time, but we need to do everything faster and faster. Time-saving devices, fast food, transportation at greater and greater speeds, instant gratification - we can't wait for any *natural* cycle - it takes too long for anything to mature at its own rhythm. We are really trying to *abolish* time because our relationship to it has become one of fear. We are *afraid* of time, as if it is somehow pursuing us to destroy us. We want to hurry and grow up. But then we want to stay as young as we can. We must not allow old age to have any real place in our society. As time passes, we get older and older; and as we get older and older, we get nearer and nearer death. Death, too, seems to be the enemy; and time is our natural escort to it.

"You turn us back to the dust and say, "Go back, O child of earth." You sweep us away like a dream; we fade away suddenly like the grass. In the morning it is green and flourishes; in the evening it is dried up and withered." (Psalm 90:3,5-6) In part, Psalm 90 is a *lament*. It is a communal lament to God. And it is a lament not over any particular calamity or crisis; not about plague, pestilence, or famine. This communal lament is simply over the fact that human life is *finite*; and that fact is taken to be *tragic*. We live. We die. Our life is so evanescent that it is like the grass that flourishes in the morning and withers during the heat of the day. *If* we are fortunate enough to reach the ripe age of seventy, or the unusual age of eighty, the years we *do* have are full of toil and trouble. The years slip by quickly, and life is over. In fact, the theological account of the human predicament offered by this psalm is the wrath of God at human sinfulness. Death is not a natural part of life. Death is the result of *God's anger*. "For we consume away in your displeasure; we are afraid because of your wrathful indignation. Our iniquities you have set before you, and our secret sins in the light of your countenance." (Psalm 90:7-8) The *wrath of God* is a linguistic symbol for the divine limits and pressure placed against human resistance to divine sovereignty. Death is the final and ultimate "No" that cancels any pretension to autonomy from the human side. This is biblical faith. The relationship between mortals and time is finite, limited. The relationship between God and time is not limited.

And what that says about the relationship between God and mortals is that, ultimately, *we are dependent upon God*. We think we know that. And when the going gets tough, we *really* know it. It was William Thomas Cummings, an Army Chaplain, who said in a sermon preached at Bataan in 1942, "There are no atheists in the foxholes." So then, why do we have this fear of time, which is, after all, simply the measure of change? Why do we attempt to control time, to fight it instead of taking part in it? What is it that we fear?

When all is said and done, it is death that we fear. You can go ahead and *say* that it's not really death that we fear; it's *pain*. But I think underneath all of that, it really *is* death that we fear. The Gospel is *for* life, and *against* death. At the center of the Christian Gospel is our Lord's triumph over death. In fact, one of the things Jesus demonstrated to us in his mortal being was a complete *trust in God and his relationship with God*. And while the gospel is *for* life and *against* death, it is still the case that death is a fact of life. It does not fall outside God's design.

I sometimes wonder what life without death would be like. Would we stop aging, and become prisoners of an everlasting present? Would we go on aging, sinking deeper and deeper into senility? Would we go from body to body, on a merry-go-round of haunted restlessness? Thinking like this makes me realize that life without death could well be a nightmare. What then, is an appropriate response to all of this? How shall we live?

"Teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom." It is in this verse that God is asked to make the specific limits set for life a source of wisdom. We realize our utter dependence on God and take on the humble attitude of a learner. "Help us to live well," the psalmist could have said. "Make us mindful of each moment, and aware of life's preciousness." "Let us learn from our attention to the present moment, no matter what that moment holds." The present moment is one of power, of magic or miracle, if we could ever be wholly in it and awake to it. The present moment is, after all, where we meet God.