

ALL IN GOD'S GOOD TIME
(Ecclesiastes 3:1-13; Revelation 21:1-6a)

A muezzin calls Muslims to prayer five times a day, and the first call to prayer comes at dawn. The first time I heard it was about 4:30 on May 17, 2000. I remember it because that was my first morning in Istanbul. I didn't understand a single word, but since then I've learned that one line in the morning call to prayer encourages the faithful to get out of bed with the admonition that "prayer is better than sleep." That morning I would have taken exception if I had known what the muezzin was saying.

Some of you may be taking exception this morning, especially if you were up late celebrating last night. But if you were up really late and got carried away with the celebration, you're probably not here this morning. But you are here. You heeded the admonition and sacrificed a couple of hours of sleep in favor of worship and prayer. And the Quran has a promise for you. It guarantees "spiritual joy" to those who observe the hours of prayer. So maybe you didn't get here this morning for naught.

There's no simple formula that tells us when Christmas and New Years will fall on Sunday. Leap years mess it all up. The last time was 2006 and the next time will be 2017. The Sunday after Christmas usually isn't a holiday. Most years we're still in the old year.

The ancient Romans had a god for just about everything. One of their gods gave his name to the first month of the year: Janus. Janus was the god of beginnings and transitions. Statues of Janus usually have two faces, one looking forward and one looking back, one looking to the future, one looking to the past.

I suppose we all wonder what the new year will bring. But it's harder and harder to believe in grand new possibilities. Harsh reality has done a number on faith in human progress. For every step we take forward, we take a step backward – or maybe it's two or three steps backward. If we play Janus for a moment and look back on the year just past, it's hard to be optimistic that the year to come is going to be a big improvement. Since this is an election year that's going to be dominated by partisan politics, it's hard to imagine that 2012 is going to be kinder and gentler than 2011.

Most religions and cultures see time as something that runs in unending cycles. The same things happen over and over and over. An era comes to an end and then it starts all over again. A rather depressing thought, when you think about it. So the goal of many religions is to somehow be plucked out of this unending cycle of repetition – to be saved from going through the same old thing over and over again.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, though, have a very different idea of time. Time has a beginning and it will have an end, and in between the two it flies in a straight line like an arrow. The past is past and there's no going back.

We are time-bound creatures. We have our beginning and we will have our end. If you doubt that, just wander through the cemetery some time and look at the grave stones. Born – died. Beginning – end.

Not so with God. God has no beginning, God has no end. We say God is eternal. We sometimes think of eternity as year after year stretching out to infinity. But that's not what eternity means. Eternity is timeless. Eternity is above time. In eternity it's always right now, no future, no past. That's what it means when the Psalmist says a thousand years in God's sight "are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night" (Ps 90:4) or when the book of Revelation says God is "the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end" (Rev. 21:6).

God is above time, but God chose not to simply withdraw from our time, but to enter into it. The great affirmation of Christmas is that God did not leave us to our own time, to an endless, monotonous chain of one thing after another. That night at Bethlehem the angels announced to the shepherds: God is doing a truly new thing. God is coming from heaven to earth to dwell among us. That was the name Jesus was to be given: Emmanuel, God with us.

That Christmas affirmation transforms New Year's from what might be a pretty depressing time to an occasion to celebrate. We know that simply flipping a page on the calendar doesn't work any kind of magic. We don't get a clean, blank slate to write on. William Faulkner wrote, "The past is never dead. It's not even past" (*Requiem for a Nun*), which is to say that all of our history has a way of coming up again and again, for better or for worse.

Scarlett O'Hara's famous last line in *Gone with the Wind* may be technically true: "Tomorrow is another day." But we all know that tomorrow is apt to be pretty much like today and yesterday and the day before that. We make New Year's resolutions because we do want the new year to be different – i.e. better – from the old year. But it's pretty much wishful thinking. Of people who do make New Year's resolutions, and they're a minority, less than 50% stick with them for 6 months or more.

If all it had to go on was past experience, it would be depressing. But by God's grace, things can be made new. There may have been a time in your life when you stood before a closed door, a dead end. And then, to your surprise, God stepped in and knocked on the door (or maybe knocked it down), and you saw a future you could never have created or even imagined all on your own.

And so we can begin this new year with faith that God does not leave us stuck in our own time. Instead, God makes time for us, takes time for us so that our days become God's days.

The book of Revelation comes at the end of the Bible. But it's also a vision of the end of time. In the end, when in the words of the old gospel hymn, "the trumpet of the Lord shall sound and time shall be no more," the ending will be God's hands. God will not destroy the earth but will bring the earth to its grand conclusion, finishing the work God began at creation in Genesis.

In the meantime, which is the only time we have with God, God will continue to work with us and continue to transform our frustrating, disappointing, human time into God's good time.