

The 1st Sunday after Christmas: Holy Trinity Church: December 31, 2017

Galatians 3: 23-25; 4:4-7: *Teach Us to Number our Days, O Lord!*

Preached

By

The Rev. John E. Higginbotham

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It seems strange that Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve should fall on a Sunday. But that, of course, is what today is. Many of you are looking forward to New Year's Eve parties. I've always appreciated these words: Youth is when you're allowed to stay up late on New Year's Eve. Middle age is when you're forced to." I won't ask how late some of you will be up. Some of you will celebrate watching television. I also like what a comedian once said about that. He said, "I love it when they drop the ball in Times Square. It's a nice reminder of what I did all year long."

Well my sisters and brothers, we have all dropped the ball a few times this past year. But Monday begins a new year, a time for a new beginning. What an appropriate time to be in church worshipping when we can ask God to wipe

the slate clean on our failures in the year that is passing and asking God's help for the year that is arriving.

Of course, you may be like Lucy in an old *Peanuts* comic strip. Lucy is walking along the road with Charlie Brown. Charlie Brown asks her: "Lucy, are you going to make any New Year's resolutions?" Lucy hollers back at him, knocking him off his feet: "What? What for? What's wrong with me now? I like myself just the way I am! Why should I change? What in the world is the matter with you, Charlie Brown? I'm all right the way I am! I don't have to improve. How could I improve? How, I ask you? How?"

I think we have all known a few Lucy's in our time, but most of us are aware that we need to make some improvements in our lives. However, change is never easy, even when it comes to following through with a few resolutions. "I read somewhere that the top five resolutions are to get personal finances in order, lose weight, stop smoking, become more physically fit, and improve personal relationships. Some folks even decide to attend church more faithfully. I think they're going to start next week. But the fact is that after only one week, almost a quarter of us have bailed out on whatever it was that we had resolved to do; after a month, almost half have given up; after two years, only about one in five still hang in there.

Maybe if we gained some perspective on our lives, change would be easier. Maybe these words from St. Paul in his letter to the church at Galatia will help us get it right in the coming year:

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Paul says so much in these few words that we need to take a few moments to consider them. First of all, he talks about the fullness of time. The beginning of a New Year reminds us of the passage of time.

A young priest was visiting with an old a parishioner. The old man was near death. "Do you think you will die, Ralph?" The young arrogant priest asked rather bluntly. "Yes," replied the old man, "but more important than that," he said, "I think you will die too." This remark stunned the young priest. He was twenty seven years old, and the old man was seventy-eight. "As a matter of fact," the old man said, "I'm pretty convinced that everybody who is living is going to die, some sooner, some later. And the only people, who will really matter, when the dying is done with, are those who were good stewards of the

time they have lived.” “Do you know what Psalm 90:12 says?” the man asked his young pastor. The young priest shook his head and answered, “No.” At this, the old man recited Psalm 90:12, “Lord,” he said, “teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.” Then the old man added these well-remembered words, “There’s not a New Year’s Day that goes by that I don’t quote that to myself.”

“Teach us to number our days . . .” Someone has said that time waits for no one. It’s true. Time is passing for all of us. For some of us, it seems to be moving more quickly than for others. Here is the challenge for all of us as we close the door of 2017 behind us and open the door of 2018 before us. So, what are we doing with the time we have?

A New Year is about to begin. Can there be any sadder person than one who comes to the end of life and says, “My life has been wasted. I could have done so much good in this world, but now it’s gone”? These words from St. Paul remind us of the passage of time.

But there is a second thing that Paul reminds us of in these words: He reminds us of who we are. *“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.”*

What greater thought can there be to take into the New Year? We are the adopted sons and daughters of God. I am convinced that the greatest problem in most people's lives is that they don't know who they really are.

My brothers and sisters, I compare our situation to the action film character Jason Bourne. For those who have never seen *The Bourne Identity* or any of the other five Bourne movies, Jason Bourne, played by actor Matt Damon, is a highly skilled former CIA assassin who was programmed to be a super spy. In the process of being programmed, however, he has all his past memories erased. He has all his life memories take from him. Bourne is trained and equipped and destined for greatness, but without any idea of who he really is.

Here is Bourne's situation in his own words taken from the movie *The Bourne Identity*: "I can tell you the license plate numbers of all six cars outside. I can tell you that our waitress is left-handed and the guy sitting up at the counter weighs two hundred fifteen pounds and knows how to handle himself. I know the best place to look for a gun is the cab of the gray truck outside, and at this altitude, I can run flat out for a half mile before my hands start shaking. Now why would I know that?" asks Jason Bourne. "How can I know all that and not know who I am?"

My brothers and sisters in Christ that is the question for many people today. They have so much information at their fingertips, more than any generation that has ever lived. They have skills and talents and are able to accomplish so much. And yet they do not know who they are and so they live flat, meaningless lives. We can see it in rising rates of suicides and increased deaths by opioid use. How can a beautiful person created in the image and likeness of Almighty God come to such a state of despair? Could it possibly be that the depression, the anxiety, the low self esteem and the opioids robs our children's identity to the point they do not know who they are and how precious they are to their Creator God?

“Dear friends,” writes John in his first epistle, “now we are the sons and daughters of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). Or as St. Paul writes in our reading from the Galatians, “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.” That is Good News that everyone on earth can celebrate regardless of their life situation.

Author Selina Duncan tells about a Good Friday service that she attended with her grandson, Luka, who at the time was 10 years old. Luka has Down syndrome. During this Good Friday service, each time after various people read scripture and gave a brief devotional, the congregation would sing, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.” After about the fourth time of singing this refrain, Luka, who loves music, substituted these words, “Jesus, remember Luka Hyde when you come into your Kingdom.”

Duncan says she stopped singing and tears welled up in her eyes. She writes, “To Luka it was no longer a song but the whisper of God speaking to his soul. ‘Jesus, remember Luka Hyde when you come into your Kingdom.’ Wouldn’t it be wonderful if each of us would know the depth of Jesus’ love for us and that He has already received us into his Kingdom?” Do you know who you are? You are a child of God. You need to remember that. We are God’s work of art. In Ephesians 2:10, “We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus.” It is that word “workmanship” from the Greek word *poema*, from which we get the English word “poem.” I translate *poema*, poem this way. God has made you to be a heavenly piece of poetry on this earth!

I like that. Do you know who you are as you prepare to begin this New Year 2018? We are the children of God redeemed by God's own Son. We need to know that and other people ought to see that in how we live.

There is a wonderful story about the well-known playwright Arthur Miller. Miller was sitting alone in a bar when he was approached by a well-dressed man.

"Aren't you Arthur Miller?" the man asked.

"Why, yes, I am," Miller responded.

"Don't you remember me?" asked the man.

Hesitantly, Miller replied, "Well, your face seems familiar."

The man declared, "Why, Art, I'm your old buddy Sam! We went to high school together! We went out on double-dates!"

Miller still couldn't place him. Sam continued, "I guess you can see I've done alright, department stores. What do you do, Art?"

The author replied, "Well, I write."

"Whaddya write?" the man asked.

“Plays, mostly,” came the reply.

“Would I know any?” the man pressed.

Miller responded, “Well, perhaps you’ve heard of *Death of a Salesman*?”

Sam’s mouth fell open. His face drained of color. He stood speechless for a moment. And then he cried out, “Why, you’re ARTHUR MILLER!

His old friend Sam didn’t really know who Arthur Miller was until he knew what Miller had done with his life. And so it is with us. Wouldn’t it be wonderful to run in to an old friend who was familiar with our life’s work and have them say to us, “Why you’re a SON OR DAUGHTER OF GOD? I can see it in your eyes. I can see it in the way you live. I can see it in your love for others. I can see it when others try to intimidate you and you return their hostility with love. I can see it in your good works for our community. I can see it in the way you treat your family. I know who you are--you are a child of God. It’s good as we say good-bye to 2017 and welcome in the year of our Lord 2018, that we are reminded how quickly time passes and how important it is that we make good use of our days. And it is also good to be reminded of who we are, children of God. Hopefully people will know us by the way we live. AMEN

