

Time, Like an Ever Rolling Stream
Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; Romans 12:9-21
September 11, 2005

Historian and author David McCullough addressed the U.S. Congress during their bicentennial celebration in 1987. In research and preparation for that talk, he found a clock above the north door into the old House of Representatives which is now called Statuary Hall. The clock was made in 1837 by Simon Willard from Roxbury, Massachusetts, and it was mounted in a statue of Clio, the Goddess of History, riding in a chariot.

McCullough told the members of Congress that he believed the reason Simon Willard's clock had been put there above the door was to remind all of our elected leaders, going in and going out, that they would ultimately be judged by history. Moreover, the clock, said McCullough, was a symbol of the way we once observed time – the hour and the minute hand showed what time it used to be in the past, what time it was in the present and what time it would be in the future.

Sad to say, observed McCullough, our chronological symbol today seems to be the digital watch, which only tells us what time it is right now and even beeps to mark the moment. And when the batteries run down, we simply throw our digital watches away and get new ones. But the hands of time on Simon Willard's old clock in Statuary Hall have been ticking consistently and steadfastly over the last 168 years.¹

Many of us can get so caught up in and anxious about the present moment that we forget to look back and remember God's faithfulness to us in the past. The "digital watch syndrome" focuses on the here and now, beeping signals to us by the second. But the biblical perspective shows us a very different way to mark time.

O God, Our Help in Ages Past is one of the great hymns of the faith. The words were written by Isaac Watts during the tumultuous beginning of the 18th century in England. It was a time of political and religious upheaval, with England, France and Spain vying for power and Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, and Anglicans struggling to maintain and advance the cause of their ecclesiastical traditions.

Surrounded by all of that crossfire and suffering from poor health in his own life, Isaac Watts opened the Bible and found the ninetieth psalm, which helped him look back and remember God's faithfulness in days gone by and God's sovereign grace and love down through the ages of time:

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations...

a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night...

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

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

Taking those verses as his text, Isaac Watts wrote some of the greatest and most inspiring words that have ever been set to music. We will sing it as our hymn of going forth. These are some of the words:

*O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,
our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.*

*Time, like an ever rolling stream, bears all who breathe away;
they fly forgotten, as a dream dies at the opening day.*

*O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come;
be thou our guide while life shall last, and our eternal home.*

In the midst of his personal life and the storms that threatened the security of his country, Isaac Watts was able to look back and remember God's faithfulness in the past and to look forward with a sense of hope in the future and for all of eternity.²

Ponder for a moment Watts' image of time as an ever rolling stream. Time itself is a gift of God, as is the gift of life. Time began before we were alive and it will continue once we are gone. We each have our opportunity to make our mark on the timeline of history.

Because our time is a gift of God, the stream of time is God's river of love. God intends the waters to be life-giving, quenching parched souls, flowing with justice and righteousness. The book of Revelation offers an image of the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God through the middle of the city street. On either side of the river is the tree of life with twelve kinds of fruit. The leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations (Rev. 22:1-2). Time – like an ever rolling stream, a river filled with the water of life, a waterway flowing with the love of God.

For the times of our lives, we are invited to ride on the river, to swim in the stream, to drink of the water of life. There will be level four whitewater rapids to forge. There will be slow calm waters to cross and everything in between. All is part of God's ever rolling stream of time.

Today we stand at a unique and critical moment in history, in the stream of time. We are marking the 150th anniversary of this congregation. Today is the fourth anniversary of the terrorist attacks that felled the World Trade Center in New York and killed over 3,000 people. At this moment our nation is in the midst of the largest natural disaster recovery effort we

have ever faced, with hundreds of dead yet to be counted and buried; thousands left displaced from their homes, jobless and bereft of possessions.

Our ancestors in the faith traversed some troubled waters. Elam Brown, the first patriarch of what we today call Lafayette United Methodist Church, led a wagon train of over 14 families across the country from St. Joseph, Missouri in 1846. They made it over Donner Pass merely days before much of the Donner Party was trapped there by snow. Elam Brown's co-leader, Isaac Allen, died on their journey westward, leaving his wife a widow with nine children. Yet these pioneers persevered, forging ahead to calmer waters and ever new challenges. It was important for them to establish a church in their new settlement, for in spite of hardship, they knew that it was God who had given them life and brought them safe thus far. As God had guided them in the past, they had hope that God would lead them forward into the future.

September 11, 2001 was a day in which the world's superpower nation, the United States, was attacked and knew vulnerability in a deep and profound way. We will never forget where we were when we turned on the radio or television, or when someone called and said, "Turn on the TV. We're being attacked." We will never forget the scenes of destruction, airplanes crashing, the twin towers of the World Trade Center collapsing, clouds of debris and dust rising, people running for shelter. We also remember the astounding outpouring of compassion and the countless acts of kindness, a witness to the essential goodness of humanity. We remember that goodness is stronger than evil.

The Psalmist encourages us to remember something else. This memory gives us hope for the present and the future. It is the memory of God's loyal love, which has not run out, grace which has not dried up. The memory of God's love, God's help in hard times, and God's justice gives us reason to hope. Evil will not have the last word in God's good world.

"A British father wrote that when he was on an outing with his family, his wife implored their daughter Molly to hurry up because there was 'no time to stop and blow dandelions.' In response, Molly raised what may be for a child – perhaps for all of us – the major philosophical issue of the new millennium. 'Mummy,' she said, 'what is time for?'"³

In his letter to the Christians in Rome in the first century, Paul answers that question. He gives some instructions on Christ-like living in the face of difficult days. Paul offers no less than thirty ways of living out Jesus' commandment to love one another. He is clear and direct. This is the way we are to use the time given us in the ever rolling stream of history.

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.... Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you...Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly...Do not repay anyone evil for evil....Live peaceably with all. If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink...Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:9-21).

Unlike the legislators of 1837 or 1987 or 2005, we may not find our names in the history books, but we are making history as the church of Jesus Christ in Lafayette. We will be known by how we use the time given us yesterday, today, tomorrow, and every day thereafter. God has given us these moments in the ever rolling stream of time. God invites us to wade, swim, float, or even dog paddle in the river of living water, in the stream of love, to make our mark in history by displaying genuine love, by overcoming evil with good.

Last week *The Christian Science Monitor* had an editorial cartoon depicting the continental United States. There are streams springing forth in various areas of the country, flowing together, uniting in larger tributaries, spelling the word “Relief,” and all converging at the Mississippi River which flows into New Orleans. The caption says, “We shall gather at the River...”

We stand at the river, my friends, the river of time, like an ever rolling stream. It’s a river that was streaming long before we were ever born. It’s a river of love that sustained our ancestors in the faith through difficult days. It is a testament to the steadfast love of our Lord.

What is time for? What is our time for? What is this time for? This is the time for love. Love always does what is good for the other person. As we embark upon the next fifty years in the history of this great church, as we remember the glory and the terror of the past, as we confront the current crisis of enormous magnitude, let us use our time in the ever rolling stream for love.

¹ George Bryant Wirth, "Fear and Faith," *Preaching Great Texts*, July 2003, p. 29.

² Ibid., p. 30.

³ John L. Locke, *The De-Voicing of Society: Why We Don't Talk to Each Other Any More* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), p. 172. Retrieved from *Homiletics Online* Sept. 7, 2005.

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