

"THE TIME IS NOW"
January 14, 1990

TEXT: II Corinthians 6:2 ". . . Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation."

For me, the start of a new year is always a very special kind of time, a threshold, so to speak, between the year now past and the year just beginning. I realize, of course, that the same thing could be said about every day of the year, but each time I catch myself about to write "1989" instead of "1990", I am again aware of how quickly time passes, and of how it can tyrannize life.

William Sangster, the great English preacher, put it this way: "All our lives we have been the slaves of time. If it were not prostituting the most solemn metaphor we know, we might speak of half of mankind as crucified upon a clock. Time . . . has dogged us like a demon since our tenderest years." As a matter of fact, time not only dogs us; it can also deceive us. Or rather, by its relentless demands, it can push us to self-deception. Self-deceptions which keep us from enjoying the abundant life for which our God created us.

The first deception is in thinking that others somehow have more time than we have. In reality, of course, we all have the same amount of time as anyone else: 60 seconds to the minute; 60 minutes to the hour; 24 hours to the day; 365 days to the year. If others seem to have more than we do, it is only because they manage it better.

Someone has said, "Our days are identical suitcases --all the same size-- but some can pack more into them than others." We may feel sorry for ourselves and say that we can not "find the time" for something. But the truth is, no one ever "finds time." We all have to "make" it. When we say "we don't have time enough", we are really saying one of three things. Either that we do not care enough to make the time, or that we are poor time-managers, or both.

Whether we realize it or not, we already have all the time there is. I have read that the last words of Queen Elizabeth I were, "All my possessions for a moment of time." But she could not buy even one extra second, and neither can we. In Max Beerbohm's words "I believe the twenty-four hour day is here to stay." Yet there is always time enough if we just use it.

The second deception is similar to the first. That is the belief that someday we may have more time than we do now. As children, most of us could hardly wait until we grew up and could do exactly as we pleased. We eagerly looked forward to the day when we could spend less time on the things others wanted of us and more on what we wanted to do, ourselves. But you know what happened just as well as I do. When we became adults, we found the demands on our time were greater than before.

Yet, many of us still persist in just such childish fantasies. "Maybe next year," we say. Or "Wait till my vacation." Or perhaps "When I retire." That kind of thinking can be very seductive, but it is not supported by the facts. When next year comes, it will almost certainly be just as busy as this one --perhaps even more so.

And everyone knows that vacation time is for the things we like, not for things we do not. When that time comes around again most of us will probably find ourselves saying, "When I get back from vacation, maybe then." And as far as retirement goes --well, the retired folk I know all say they are busier now than ever before. "I don't know how I ever found the time to go to work," they tell me. As I said, we shall never have more time than we have now. Unless, of course, we use it more effectively.

And the third deception is the worst of all. It is the delusion that we have any time except the present. There are some, for instance, who always seem to be living in the past. I do not mean those elderly folk, who remember so clearly things that happened back in 1920, but can not recall who came to see them yesterday. That kind of short term memory loss is quite involuntary, and not self-deception.

But every time we act out of habit, we are living in the past. Every time we act out of guilt, we are living in the past. Every time we refuse to accept today's blessings because they are not dressed up like yesterday's, we are living in the past. Every time we say --or find ourselves tempted to say-- "When I was your age . . ." we are living in the past. Every time we say, "We never did it that way before" we are living in the past.

Now, I am certainly not saying that we should forget the past. Far from it. After all, I taught history for eight years. I agree with Santayana that "Those who are ignorant of the past are condemned to relive it." By all means, let us learn about the past. Let us learn from the past. But, for heaven's sake --as well as our own-- let us try not to live in it. Finley Peter Dunne once wrote, "The past always looks better than it was. It is only pleasant because it isn't here." After all, these are the good old days our grandchildren will hear so much about in years to come. Let us use the past, but as a springboard, not a sofa.

On the other hand, there are others who want to live in the future. How often we miss out on life today because we are waiting for some tomorrow. For example, my wife and I lived in the Boston area for four-and-a-half years. Yet we went to the Boston Symphony only once. And never to the Boston Pops. And, when we knew that we were moving to Oklahoma, we had to rush around to see all those famous Boston tourist sites we always said we would see "someday."

Of course, we had been busy. I was serving a 400 member church and working on my Ph.D. And Peggy was taking care of a house, rearing three children, and trying to look after me. But we had not been that busy. Part of us was simply living in the future. We would do those things "someday." We needed Albert Camus's words, "I shall tell you a great secret, my friend. Do not wait for the last judgment. It takes place every day."

Admittedly, some things have to wait until the right foundation can be laid. Before you can be a brain surgeon, you have to have the necessary residency. And before you can have that residency, you have to go to medical school. And before you can go to medical school you have to go to college. And before you can go to college you have to --well you get the picture. And the law certainly frowns on those who would skip the intermediate steps.

But, as Peter Drucker writes, "Long range planning does not deal with future decisions but with the future of present decisions." If you want to be a brain surgeon "someday", there are things you need to do right now. If you do not, your dreams will remain just that, dreams and nothing more. The poet said, "My name is Might-have-been; I am also called No-more, Too-late, Farewell." (Dante Rossetti)

If we want to live at all, we have to live now, right here in the present. So St. Paul wrote, "Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation." Both in our spiritual lives and in our everyday occasions, now is the only time we have. "Do not look back and do not dream about the future. It will neither give you back the past nor satisfy your dreams. Our duty, Our reward, Our destiny are here and now." (Dag Hammarskjold) In closing, let me quote a little poem by that most famous of all authors, Anonymous:

"I have only just a minute,
Only sixty seconds in it.
Forced upon me --can't refuse it.
But it's up to me to use it.
I must suffer if I lose it.
Give account if I abuse it.
Just a tiny little minute,
But eternity is in it."