

HAVE A GOOD DAY

Pilgrim Church, Duluth

January 15, 1978

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Very late in the afternoon you pull into a gas station weary and disgruntled. Ever since the alarm went off twenty minutes early, all decisions have proven misguided, all plans have gone awry, all fortuitous events have yielded unpleasant surprises. You observe that the price on the pump is three cents higher than that advertised at the curb and a nickel more than they are getting across the street. As you hand the attendant your last twenty-dollar bill, he returns your dime in change and with dripping eyes and grimacing mouth exclaims, "Have a good day!"

There was a time when I rather liked that benediction. Spoken by the right person under optimum conditions early in the day, but not too early, it did help to create the illusion that the next twelve or fifteen hours were yours to conquer. As a parting shot it did not wound the spirit quite so mortally as those last words of the nineteen-fifties, "bye now." But the thing grows worn. It is mouthed mechanically by everyone from comptometer operators to podiatrists. It is spoken without any reference to the time of day or the life situation of the person addressed. It is the kind of thing you would expect that garrulous woman who gives the time over the telephone to say to you at midnight. I would not be surprised to hear the chaplain saying it to the condemned prisoner as he leads him to the gas chamber. It is just as likely to be said in some moment of high exaltation for which not even a Keats sonnet would seem appropriate. That happened to me once and for an instant I was so appalled that I thought I would expire. But in the next instant I forgave the other person. I realized that I was listening to the sort of motor automatism that people come up with when words fail.

The saying has grown mechanical to the point of absurdity. In fact, it is just the sort of thing you might expect to hear from a talking cow. You have never heard a talking cow? Neither had I until I found one mentioned in my AAA guide for Wisconsin, a resource that comes as near to infallibility as we have a right to expect in this uninspired age. There I was informed that in the town of Neillsville I might find "The World's Largest Talking Cow". Since my tour book was a couple of years out of date, I speculated that in the meantime some ambitious 4-Her might have raised one even larger. However, on the assumption that the one in Neillsville still would be larger than average, I pulled off the road there to take a look at it. The talking cow was very large indeed. My encounter with it was so overwhelming, in fact, that I cannot recall what it said to me. It is like that with moments of revelation; the sublimity of the experience obliterates the message. I do not believe that The World's Largest Talking Cow said "Have a good day." She had been programmed for the New York World's Fair of 1964, some time before that expression became current. However, - and this is my point - that is just the sort of thing you would expect a talking cow to say were she up with the times. It is when you hear it from individuals you have mistaken for people that the saying becomes disconcerting.

It is even more disconcerting to find this expression in print. When that happens you can hardly excuse it as a reflex action. It becomes an enduring affront. For example, I am told that as you register for cobalt radiation treatments at a nearby hospital, you are greeted by a large sign on the desk that reads, HAVE A GOOD DAY.

In a moment I want to examine this saying against a biblical background. In the meantime, let us note in passing another expression, designed for

later in the day, that is also well known in our culture. This is the saying with which Edith Bunker greets her husband when he arrives home each evening. "How was your day?" Except on those rare occasions when Archie has found a loose hundred-dollar bill on the subway, this question opens the latch to his warehouse of accumulated daily grievances. Nearly always the day has been bad, but it is rendered appreciably better by the opportunity to say so. The worst possible of all days is that in which Edith neglects her wifely duty and fails to show up at the door with this most comforting of queries.

Archie Bunker's typical response to Edith's question reminds us that no matter how many cheery voices may wish us a good day in the morning, come evening what we may desire most is not good wishes, but commiseration. The morning benediction need not be spoken entirely in vain. In the days of the patriarchs a word of blessing from the right source had power to shape the future for good. If love can get us through the night, a word of goodwill sincerely spoken may get us through the day. There is some practical truth to the theory of positive thinking, although it is a truth quickly dissipated by self-deception. However insubstantial its basis, a moment of euphoria at dawn may give us confidence to act in a way that leads to a far more kindly dusk than we deserve. Yet one reason Archie Bunker has received high ratings for so long is that his view of things at day's end reflects a common perspective. What we want at the end of the day, literally and figuratively, is someone to share our agony.

This contrast between blessing and actuality brings to mind a contrast in the way the Bible looks at the day. On the one hand, we have the ejaculation of Psalm 118:24:

This is the day that the Lord has made;
Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

It is important not to overlook the immediate context of this saying. The day of which the psalmist speaks is a festival day. It is a day of celebration marking the steadfast love of God through events that reveal his mercy. Not every day is like this, not even in the psalms. For the psalmists too there are days full of complaint in which the most positive note is a waiting for deliverance.

Yet there is also a wider context to this summons to celebration than the festival occasion for which Psalm 118 was designed. There is the context of God's creation, of his making the Day at the very beginning and declaring it to be very good. This day, whether it be one of festival or of fasting, is the day which the Lord has made. There is no day that is not God's day. Therefore there is no day that is not pregnant with the purposes of God. This truth about the day is more fundamental than the mood of any passing festival.

It does seem, however, that in the Letter to the Ephesians we come across a rather different appraisal of the day.

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil.

5:15-16.

Is it possible that the God who began making good days in the Old Testament is now making evil ones? or does this mean that we should accept the hidden assumption in so much apocalypticism that God has handed the day over to the powers of evil? Whatever the explanation, if the days are evil, is not our

only recourse to try to escape them, either by rising above them into some timeless eternity or by moving ahead of them in such a way that our dreams of the future justify relinquishing all responsibility for the present? Surely both these courses of action have proven recurrent Christian temptations, especially in times of stress. Which is to say in most times.

Once again we need to recognize the immediate context. The author of these words, Paul or someone else, sees himself living at the end of times. These are times of social disintegration and moral decadence. These are times when Christian discipleship will encounter harsh sacrifice and persecution. Perhaps the days of old were not evil, but these days of history's unraveling are. Consequently the summons is not to festival celebration but to putting on the whole armor of God so that we may withstand the wiles of the devil. (6:11). As we perceive this context, however, we become aware that it has shown no substantial change. If the author of Ephesians saw himself living in an interim of evil days that interim has stretched down the centuries, and despite all those prophets among us who read the signs of these times, the end is not in sight. Now too we face each day suffering, death, moral evil and the manifestations of social and personal disintegration. Now too the days are evil.

Yet again we need to take account of that larger context, both broader and deeper. This larger context has to do not only with faith in God's creation, but with the hope of God's redemption. The evil day remains the day that God has made. It is still pregnant with his purposes. This evil day is already the day that leads on to that ultimate day which is the Day of the Lord. Therefore, the task before us is not to forsake this day by seeking escape from time. On the contrary, the challenge is to "make the most of the time," to do that just because the days are evil and consequently give time more urgency. We cannot say with any exhaustiveness why this day that the Lord has made turns out to be an evil day. If we try to hang our salvation on answering that question, we are doomed. What we can do is to obey the commandment which those smooth talking prophets of our time so blandly throw at us. Yes, we can take them with the utmost seriousness. We can do our best to have a good day.

What does that mean? It does not mean, I think, that we must have a happy day. Not only may that be too much to expect, it may turn out to be quite irrelevant as well. Good Friday never was meant to be a happy day.

One thing having a good day does mean is that we grasp hold of a few moments for all they are worth. The time we are supposed to make the most of is expressed by the Greek word, *kairos*. This means a particular time, a special opportunity. The challenge before us is not to escape from time, but rather to face it, to grapple with it, to turn this occasion to meaningful ends. We cannot afford just to let time roll over us like the breaking sea, for first it will bury our face in the debris and then leave us high and dry. The way to deal with time is to catch the wave at the instant of its breaking and to ride the crest as one in command.

The popular "existentialism" that tells us to live for the moment is not all wrong. It is wrong in so far as it denies any connections between moments, connections that lend significance to history. However, it is right in insisting that the now matters. What is at stake is not just the trite observation that time is short and that the opportunity passes. What is at stake is the further realization that it is in the moments, the very short, almost instantaneous moments, that the riches of life are given to us. When we come to the end of the road, even if that road lead on for ninety years,

we are likely to find that what really mattered added up to no more than fifteen or twenty minutes. That is not to say that those minutes were not preceded by years of preparation or followed by years of realization. It is to say that the glory shines through in a few scattered moments that often come and go with great suddenness. As Whitehead observed, the waters of experience come to us not so much as a steady stream, but as drops that gather for an instant at the end of the faucet before they fall. And woe to us if we are not ready to catch them.

Shortly before his death Abraham Heschel said in Duluth that we are given God, ourselves and a moment of time. That is the way it is even though the days are evil. Of course, to have God in that moment does not mean we have nothing else. We may have a tree, a blade of grass, a bird, a song. We may have another person in one of those one-and-only moments of which Anne Morrow Lindbergh speaks, moments in which two persons are suspended in that drop of time in a way that seems to exclude all else, the kind of moments she says she shared with one of her children over marmalade and muffins. But, whether we know it or not, in the moment with the tree, the song or the child, God will be present too. And it will make a difference if we know it.

To speak of grasping the moment may suggest an opposition to the spirit of the injunction, "look carefully how we walk." Such care implies deliberation and deliberation suggests slowness. Wisdom is not a virtue we associate with impetuosity. Yet if we are wise there are times when we shall act quickly, for we shall know that otherwise it is not worth acting at all. And we shall recognize with Anne Lindbergh that duration is no test of validity and that "the day of the dragon-fly or the night of the Saturnid moth is not invalid simply because that phase in its life cycle is brief." ¹

If it is asked how we grasp the moment, I would answer that much of the answer lies in what I have described in another sermon under the word "hallowing." There are a variety of ways in which we may relate to the world around us. We may relate in a utilitarian way, a scientific way, an aesthetic way. We may use things, study things, approach things from an artistic perspective. Beyond all these ways of relating, yet also including them, is hallowing. In hallowing we approach things, and especially, persons, with reverence. When we do that the divine foundation to this day of the Lord is laid open for us. In some kairos, let us say while looking out of our car window at a bush, a fire hydrant, a child, we may hallow the world and so come face to face with God. For God is not this or that object, visible or invisible. God is that which appears whenever we give ourselves to anything in hallowing and thereby grasp the moment.

Another aspect of obeying the command to have a good day is to choose, to choose between good and evil. It is doubtful whether there is any day when that opportunity does not present itself. If we think we experience such days we probably deceive ourselves. If we think our days are so humdrum that they never pose the challenge of decision we probably have chosen already to live in that state of suspended animation which consists of the constant avoidance of decision. If we think we have so encompassed our lives with good that the evil options are few and far between, it is likely that the master sin of pride calls the shots on all the choices that we make. Because God made the Day and called it good, the good may be affirmed on any day. Because in the inheritance of manifold wrong choices "the days are evil" that evil may be opposed on any day. To say this is not to say that the choice is always obvious. We may find ourselves choosing between greater and lesser evils. We may be stumped by the problem of how to avoid T.S. Eliot's treason

1. Anne Morrow Lindbergh, A Gift from the Sea, (New York: Vintage Press), 1955, p. 78.

of doing the right thing for the wrong reason. We may find that although we think our basic principles are clear and firm, "the middle axioms" are shaky and the concrete situations come without sufficient precedent. Still, we can choose. We can take the risk. It is the risk on which all good days are based. God took it too when he made the first day, and some would say that it still remains to be seen whether that risk will pay off.

Still another element in having a good day is living as one who hopes for a better day. This is something different from positive thinking. Christian hope does not mean living by self-suggestion; rather it means living by divine promise. It is not whistling in the dark. It is the confident expectation that from the beginning of the age God has named the Day on which he shall become all in all. The Christian perspective is marked both by tragic realism and by wry irony. It eschews shallow optimism. So long as the cross remains its central symbol the Church cannot succumb to some Pollyanna view of human existence. The agonized atheists in every age are always nearer to the Christian viewpoint than the sentimental pietists. Yet fundamentally, Christianity is optimistic because it does in fact hope for the best. Stated in the most abstract terms this means that Christianity believes in the ultimate unity of goodness and power. Because it is allied to that belief, Christian hope looks bravely to the "not yet." Hope knows that time is both open-ended and providentially guided. On any evil day we may affirm with Bushnell that "every man's life /is/ a plan of God" and hence turn a little in the direction of that plan designed for us. The value of hope is that it gives a shove toward open ends more promising than those which closed around us when we drew the curtain on the day before.

These things we can do to have a good day: grasp the moment, choose between good and evil, hope for the future. They do not require that we always be in a cheery mood. At the end of the day we may still wait hopefully for Edith to pose the question that will lift the floodgates of our complaint. Nevertheless, if we have taken the commandment seriously we shall have experienced a day worth living. So then, when the cliché comes to you, whether across the candy counter or the counter where you pay your traffic fines, accept the saying in its full depth. Know that these voices that speak to you so casually are earthen vessels through which the Word of God summons you to have the best day you can.