

The Times: A Call to Wisdom

Ephesians 5:15-20

On a perfectly ordinary morning, a morning like every morning of his 12 years, a boy named David finds himself facing an extraordinary choice. The drab brown and gray, bounded-by-barbed-wire place that has been his only home is suddenly his to leave behind, to escape. Tempted by the promise given by a man he loathed and feared, the camp commandant, David is lured to embrace the great world outside. Before allowing him to escape, the commandant tells David that he must go to Denmark. There he will be safe.

This is the narrative framework of a remarkable book called *North to Freedom*, a story by Ann Holm that is born out of the oppression of a concentration camp somewhere in the Balkans. Its message of new life created from a life marked by brutality bears hearing in a community of faith and in light of Scripture.

Fearing a trap, David almost loses his opportunity to run. He wants to believe that his captor's unlikely promise of freedom is true. At the last moment, the electric current is turned off, David vaults over the camp fence. Now on his own, he will live or die by his wits and by the people he will encounter as he flees, mile by mile, north to Denmark—and freedom.

David has watched men in camp with him go insane, or lose hope, or sicken, or die from disease, or get shot. But he knows nothing of the ambiguities of ordinary life that he must embrace if he is to survive. When he finds himself alone and frightened, David has to find some way to make himself go forward, forward, forward.

David recalls that, when people face times of trial back at the camp, some of the prisoners would call upon some deity, someone called “God.” He comes to understand that God is a necessary part of his survival. He recalls, from camp, hearing about a God of green pastures and still waters—the God of another David long ago. David begins to pray to this God and asks God to help him remain free. David has decided to live.

As the story unfolds, David faces great dangers and runs into many obstacles. He keeps turning to the God of green pastures and still waters. Along the way, David finds life transformed. No longer does he live in silent despair; He shines with hope for the future. Growing into the dream of freedom is for David a growth in wisdom, his path illuminated by the wisdom of God.

“Be careful, then, how you live, not as unwise people, but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil.” We can infer from the letter of Ephesians some basic understandings about it’s place in the early church. Readers are being lead to specific kinds of behavior, as if such behavior would significantly impact the direction of their lives. Believing in the life, death, resurrection, and the ultimate reign of Christ within over and in spite of Roman powers was dangerous business near the end of the first century. Depending on who the Emperor is, Christians may be barely tolerated or outright hated. In such a world, Christians need guidance. If they are going to survive, they need to be able to call upon a wisdom far beyond what their wits alone might suggest.

Those who read the letter to the Ephesians saw their lives transformed. The author gives kingdom-seeking people some simple, common-sense guidelines: In evil times, caution is necessary. As they face an unknown future, they have ways of living as people traveling the road to salvation.

What about today? What are our days like? And how are we living into an unknown future? Turn on the news or read the paper and you know that this past week another suicide bomber struck in Iraq. You know that, in the U.S. citizens are highly anxious and easily offended. News clips show us town hall meetings in which citizens have sunk to screaming and name calling. You’ve seen pictures of our president with swastikas and a moustache like Hitler’s. All of the noise is about more than national health care, and it’s about more than government control. There is still a lot of baggage rising to the surface from WWII, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Cold War; there is racism, paranoia and violence, all of which is unbecoming of one who would call themselves wise.

What impact does all of energy have on life in the church? Or life in the home?

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I don’t have to try hard to convince you that we at Bethlehem Church are at a significant juncture. Eric Stroshine has served his last day with us. We are about to embark on a capital campaign. We are about to begin the search process for the next senior pastor. Add to that whatever is going on at your house, at your job, at your school. We can not afford to be living as unwise people. To use the advice of Rocky Balboa to his brother-in-law, Paulie, “Don’t get mentally irregular.”

If Balboa were an apostle, he may have told the Ephesians that the days are mentally irregular. A lot of what goes on out there doesn't make sense. Yesterday, U of E coach Marty Simmons came and spoke to men of Bethlehem Church about the Aces and the players of the coming season. He said that it is a fact that the support of an Evansville crowd has a noticeably positive impact on the players. Time and time again, Marty has seen the confidence of his players respond to the presence of a large and supportive crowd. This year the Aces are a young team, and Marty encourages everyone to grab their friends and come to games; it will make a difference.

On the Courier Press discussion website, I have read promises from life-long Aces fans to never set foot in the new arena. Really? What's that going to accomplish? Is this an effort to send a message to civic leaders? What about the athletes? How would the absence of fans impact them?

It isn't my intention to advocate one position or the other, but to wonder what in the world is going on. What if these kinds of threats were the norm in our church family? Can you see how what's going on out there can shape the way things are going on in here? **“Be careful, then, how you live, not as unwise people, but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil.”**

What does it mean to be making the most of the time because the days are evil, anyway? For the readers of Ephesians, the days were evil because there was the undeniable reality of the Roman Empire and everything it stood for. For us, it means that society has conditioned us to respond to news and ideas in a self-centered and paranoid way. Our days are evil, not so much because city, state and national governments run the risk of making mistakes, but because persons are attacked and hurt during the debate. Our days are evil.

Our call to wisdom involves making the most of the time. Before we can see how to make the most of the time, it may helpful to think about what wisdom is. The path taken by Godly wise people has to be understood on its Old Testament foundation. In the Old Testament, wisdom is not so much an intellectual achievement as an attitude toward life. It begins with knowledge of God and steering away from all that displeases God. Old Testament wisdom is a religious stance undertaken by Godly persons in Israel and their response to bad situations. For example, during Old Testament times when evil was rampant, the godless prospered, and the righteous were left to face unexplained trials. Wisdom is that outlook which enables a believer in

God to face life, to deal with its puzzles, and surmount its problems. A call to wisdom such as we have in today's scripture is a call to know and rely upon God whatever is going on.

Now, what does it mean to "make the most of the time?" The Greek verb that is translated here is taken from the vocabulary of the marketplace. It means to snap up all chances at a bargain that are available. It is an effort to spend in such a way as to get great value. You could say we are called to get the most bang for our minute. Spending our time is like spending our money at the grocery store. You can spend your dollars on junk food and goods that are overpriced. When you do that, you haven't made the most of your money. When you spend time doing things to hurt yourself or to hurt others or you spend time doing nothing, you haven't made the most of your time.

"Be careful, then, how you live, not as unwise people, but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil." Let's not allow our days to change us. Let's work together in partnership with God to change the days. Let's stand apart from the folly that surrounds us and embrace the wisdom of God. The wisdom of God is not something that we come to possess, but something we come to rely on in relationship with God.

Wisdom is not limited to an outlook on issues; it is also an outlook on life. As young David headed north, he believed in freedom and had hope for the future. As the early church struggled to make it in the Roman Empire, they believed Jesus' proclamation of release to the captives and freedom for the oppressed. They didn't give up on God's wisdom when Nero showed up, and things got worse. They hung on to hope. That was very wise living in evil days. If they had given up, we would not be gathered together today.

Our own times require that we participate in God's call to wisdom. Our participation in God's wisdom can not simply be measured by whether a bill is passed by congress, whether an arena is built here or there, whether church council takes this action or that. Ultimately, our participation in God's wisdom can be measured by what we have done with our relationships along the way. After all, aren't people worth so much more than the outcome of events?

We often talk about how Jesus ate with tax collectors and prostitutes, usually when we want to make a point about God's extravagant welcome. But what about those tax collectors and prostitutes. Jesus seemed to think that prostitutes have worth that goes beyond their mistakes. He seemed to enjoy the company of tax collectors even though they may have had some messy political views. Jesus sat down and ate with people because he loved them. He wasn't interested

in attacking them so he could win something. He wasn't worried about what affluent people would think of him when seen with such people. He loved the God he called father and he loved those he sat down with.

When Peter cut off the ear of the Roman soldier at Jesus' arrest, Jesus reminded him that those who live by the sword die by the sword. **“Be careful, then, how you live, not as unwise people, but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil.”**

So let's head north to freedom. Let's move together in the direction of freedom from anxiety about the future. Let's continue to worship and pray together that we might find God's wisdom for the journey. Let us move forward in the name of the God of green pastures and still waters, giving thanks for God's presence, power and promises. Amen.