

## THE REDEMPTION OF ORDINARY DAYS

Psalm 90

A Communion Meditation by Robert E. Dunham

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I stopped at a deli for a sandwich a few weeks ago and found myself in line behind two girls – maybe mid-teens – who were talking loudly enough for me to overhear. They were discussing their summers. “I’m so bored,” one of them said. “I’m going to be home all week, and there’s nothing to do.” I smiled to myself, remembering the annual angst of early summer when my own children were in high school. But the conversation continued, and it turned out that the reason this young woman was bored *that* week was that she had spent *the previous* week in Key West and was getting ready to leave *the next* week for a month-long camping experience near Banff in the Canadian Rockies. At that point her *ennui* seemed less charming. But as I thought further, I reasoned that, between the Keys and the Rockies, the familiarity of a New York apartment, as wonderful as it may be, might seem a little routine and boring. The high moments of our lives, after all, we cherish and remember; the low moments we are forced to contend with and thus remember; but we are likely to forget the more commonplace, ordinary times of our lives. What’s to remember, after all? They’re so, well, mundane.

That moment in the deli reminded me that there was a period of time when our family was young that we spent a few moments at suppertime every evening hearing reports from each family member on what they had been doing during the day...what special things each had done...interesting people we had met...perhaps something we had learned.

One such supper conversation is still etched in my memory all these years later. It was a mid-summer evening when our children were young. Our son told of the friends with whom he had spent the day, the games they had played... Marla talked about all the things she and our then four-year-old daughter had done (they had gone to the park, run some errands, visited a neighbor, played some games, done some shopping, spent some time at the swimming pool...the usual thousand things the mother of a pre-schooler does in a day. And then it was our daughter’s turn. “How about your day, Hon?” I asked. “What did you do today?” And without looking up from her plate of spaghetti, she shrugged her shoulders and said, “Not much.”

I remember thinking I might have to restrain Marla after that comment. But in the years since that night her comment has served as reminder to me of what we notice and what we miss in our mundane, ordinary days. It was more than just the mindless comment of a four-year-old. I’m willing to wager that all of us have had days like that...maybe recently... days when we have moved frenetically from place to place, event to event, task to task, and yet, at the end of the day, felt as if we’d done “not much”... common, ordinary days when nothing very unusual has happened. Days laced with

familiar routines, with the usual faces and voices, with the same old skirmishes and hassles. I suspect that for many folks, the majority of their days are spent that way. The summer heat only magnifies the problem, and along the way we may find ourselves in seasons of discontent, a bit bored or restless or even mildly depressed. On such days we may feel the way Samuel Butler felt when he wrote, “Life is [just] one long process of getting tired.”<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps it was on one of those ordinary days in his life that the Psalmist penned what we now call the 90th Psalm. There’s no mistaking the firm faith of this poet; he readily affirms from the beginning that God has been our “dwelling place in all generations.” But there’s also lament here, about the transience of human life, its brevity and its sorrow...days wasted, too soon gone:

You sweep [mortals] away; they are like a dream,  
like grass that is renewed in the morning;  
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;  
in the evening it fades and withers.

The years of our life are threescore and ten,  
or even by reason of strength fourscore;  
yet even then their span is only toil and trouble;  
they are soon gone, and we fly away.

Most of us have known days full of toil and trouble. Some of us have known years like that! Common, ordinary years full of common, ordinary and fleeting days, seemingly devoid of direction and joy. And yet, in the midst of his lament, the Psalmist also reaches deep into the reservoirs of his mature faith and, thinking about such ordinary days, makes a request to God:

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

Lord, don’t let us waste *any* of the days You have given us. Don’t let us get so caught up in the routine that we miss the special opportunities inherent in each day. Teach us to number our days in gratitude, that we might apply the wisdom of Your grace to our living. In one of the southern writer Clyde Edgerton’s novels, a character named Grove McCord made a simple, yet profound observation; he said, “You are history longer than you are fact.”<sup>2</sup> He was right, of course. We are history longer than we are fact, but rather than depress us, that maxim should enliven us and open our eyes and ears and hearts to the grace and abundance that accompany all our days. “Teach us to number our days that we may gain a wise heart.”

The Scottish writer John O’Donohue argues that not living into such wisdom, not living life as fully and as open to the Spirit as possible is more than a shame; it is a sin.

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Butler, *Notebooks*, 1912.

<sup>2</sup> Clyde Edgerton, *In Memory of Junior*.

He writes of being at the deathbed of a friend who was so full of regret, longing for another year to do some of the things his heart had always dreamed of doing. He says,

We are so privileged still to have time. We have but one life, and it is a shame to limit it by fear and false barriers. Irenaeus, a wonderful philosopher and theologian in the second century, said, “The glory of God is the human person fully alive.” ... The divine has such passionate creativity and instinct for the fully inhabited life.<sup>3</sup>

*The fully inhabited life:* what a wonderful phrase! What a helpful antidote to the deadening complaints and the deep-seated restlessness with which many face the progress of their days. The fully inhabited life may well be another way of naming the heart of wisdom the Psalmist sees as flowing from a faithful counting of our days. Such counting roots us in a sense of dependence on God’s grace. Moreover, it leads us to the recognition that every day...every moment...is a gift of God, that God invests even the most ordinary days of our lives with extraordinary grace. The Psalmist prays that God will grant the wisdom of knowing our limits, the wisdom to set aside the temptation of a depressed and disappointed view of life with an affirmation of life as a gift, so that we may fully inhabit our days.

When we claim such wisdom, the ordinary takes on extraordinary dimensions. The commonplace becomes the arena for special glimpses into the workings of grace. The naturalist and poet Annie Dillard once described such a moment, when she happened upon an everyday occurrence in the life of a mockingbird. She had just rounded a corner of her house, she said, when she saw a mockingbird step off the second-story rain gutter and drop. With wings folded tightly at its side, it looked as if it were going to crash into the ground; but just before it would have done so, it spread its wings and broadened its tail and floated onto the grass. It was nothing remarkable, and yet it was remarkable indeed! Annie Dillard wondered how many such moments pass by without anyone even noticing. “The answer must be,” she said, “that beauty and grace are performed [all around us every day] whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there.”<sup>4</sup>

Part of our vocation as God’s people is to try to be there...to pay attention to the passing moments of our lives and to try to sense what God is up to...to try to sense God’s comforting presence in a fearful time of loss, to try to see in the face of a laughing child the very face of God...to sense in the embrace of a loved one God’s embrace...to count every good memory as a fortifying gift. Part of our vocation is to inhabit fully our days.

If we can employ our senses to be more in touch with God’s grace in seemingly mundane, ordinary times, it will help us to begin to feel more of a kinship with the Teacher who noticed grace in the commonplace: in lilies of the field and birds of the air... who phrased his messages in terms of common, everyday events: a woman sweeping a floor looking for a lost coin, a shepherd watching sheep, passers-by on a road,

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<sup>3</sup> John O’Donohue, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*, New York, HarperCollins, 1997, 124.

<sup>4</sup>Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, New York, Harper’s Magazine Press, 1974, 8.

a father running to embrace his son. Ordinary people on ordinary days doing ordinary things... yet not really ordinary at all.

And it was the same Teacher who took the ordinary table-stuff of his time, bread and wine, and shaped them into signs and channels of extraordinary grace...then offered them to us all, as the means for the redemption of every ordinary day... of every fleeting moment of our lives.

Ogden Nash gained fame for his light humorous verse, poking fun at those ordinary moments and relationships that comprise our ordinary days. Brief poems like "The Fly:"

The Lord in His wisdom made the fly,  
and then forgot to tell us why.

That's it. Or his brief "A Word to Husbands,"

To keep your marriage brimming with love in the loving cup,

Whenever you're wrong, admit it;

Whenever you're right, shut up.

Most of the time, Nash's poems were like those; but sometimes his verse was poignant indeed, as in his very simple poem, "Communion."

This table now is simply spread  
With little loaves of common bread.  
Not pumpernickel, corn or rye  
To spark the taste or please the eye.  
Just bread, it's sold in any store.  
I've had it many times before.  
I am accustomed, when a guest,  
To being rather more impressed.  
I might expect a gracious host  
To brown the bread and make some toast,  
Or see his table was arrayed  
With butter, jam and marmalade.  
Danish pastries filled with jam,  
Some scrambled eggs with lots of ham.  
This would impress me more. Instead,  
The Lord shares common, daily bread.

I'll eat this bread; but I will find  
Its taste won't linger in my mind.  
This bread is easy to dismiss.

I've had ten thousand bites like this.  
 This bread, I think, in many ways  
 Reminds me of my common days.  
 Some days are vivid in design,  
 Resembling an exotic wine,  
 Days of joy and days of sorrow.  
 (One may well arrive tomorrow.)  
 But nearly all the days I've led  
 Are more like this plain, common bread:  
 Like, say, last 19th of September.  
 (A day I simply can't remember.)  
 It's gone, slipped from my memory  
 Just as this bread is bound to be.

At this table I shall praise  
 The God who gives me common days.  
 And I shall live these days with pride,  
 Knowing God moves by my side.  
 For at this table God has said:  
 "I share with you this daily bread,"  
 And by this Word we all are fed.<sup>5</sup>

"Lord, teach us to number our days," said the Psalmist, "that we may gain a wise heart." Maybe the grace we have learned here, at table, is part of the key to such a heart, as it enables us to find contentment and grace in our own most common and ordinary days.

In one of his journals, the Trappist monk Thomas Merton once scribbled, perhaps tongue in cheek, "Suggested emendation in the Lord's Prayer: Take out 'Thy kingdom come' and substitute, 'Give us time!'"<sup>6</sup> But time has been given to us. The length of our days has been given to us. Even *this* day has been given to us. So, count it as a gift and inhabit it fully. Live it to the limit. Exude gratitude. Respond to grace with grace. Think of it as cardiovascular exercise for a wise heart.

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<sup>5</sup> As cited by David Steele, *Presbyterian Outlook*, November 18, 1985.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Merton, as cited by Dillard, 85.