

THE BEST DAY OF YOUR LIFE

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Psalm 118:19-29; Matthew 6:25-34

***“This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.”***

– Psalm 118:24

What would you say was the best day of your life? Or, if you prefer, what do you imagine *will be* the best day of your life?

Faced with such a question, many of us go straight to occasions. Maybe a graduation, or a wedding, or the birth of a child. Maybe the day that business first turned a profit, or the day you scored that crucial touchdown or home run or goal that led your team to victory.

Or, it could have been a perfectly ordinary day — at least, the way it started out. But then something happened, something remarkable. Maybe there was a chance encounter with someone who absolutely changed the course of your life. Or, maybe that perfectly ordinary day somehow became illumined, as though by otherworldly light.

Such was the experience of the Irish poet, William Butler Yeats: an incident that happened to him in, of all places, a London coffee shop. The several lines of poetry he wrote in response — a portion of a much larger poem — have become famous:

**“My fiftieth year had come and gone,
I sat, a solitary man,
In a crowded London shop,
An open book and empty cup
On the marble table-top.
While on the shop and street I gazed
My body of a sudden blazed;
And twenty minutes more or less
It seemed, so great my happiness,
That I was blessed and could bless.”¹**

It was, in short, a mystical experience. It came upon the poet unbidden and unsought. It was, for him, as though the skies had parted and a dove descended, and a voice from the heavens boomed out a benediction: “This is my beloved son.”

“Twenty minutes more or less” was all it took. That was as long as the epiphany lasted, but it changed Yeats’ life forever. Was that the best day of the poet’s life? Could well have been – or, if not, he surely ranked it with the best of them.

Some of us may feel the best day of our lives is behind us. Others may be more inclined to look to the future – restless, striving, never entirely satisfied with the way things are.

Now, you may be inclined to think this is a function of age: that everyone sitting here over a certain age — somewhere in mid-life or beyond — tend to look

¹“Vacillation,” from *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, 1933.

backward, while others who are under that life-dividing age look forward. But, that's not the case. I've known plenty of people well into the gray-haired years who awaken each morning with a gleam in the eye, eager to learn something new. I've also known people in their twenties who are just as sedentary in their outlook as others twice or three times their age.

We've just started out a new year. Not only that, some say it's a new decade – although, to be mathematically precise, the new decade doesn't officially begin till January 1st of next year. Still, that doesn't alter the fact that we've turned the corner on the “twenty-teen” years, and moved on to the 2020s.

So, what's this year 2020 going to bring us? Health, wealth and prosperity? Or, rack and ruin? The turning of the year gives us all an excuse to wax philosophical.

Forget *the year*, though. I have a more immediate question: what's *this day* going to bring us? The writer of Psalm 118 has a suggestion on how to approach it:

**“This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.”**

Now that may sound like a tired old truism — the liturgical equivalent of a throwaway line — but, in fact, that statement of the Psalmist's is dripping with

profundity. Oh sure, we say to ourselves, God made this day: just like God makes every day. But wait – what if God created today to be a very special day? What if God created it especially for you or me, to be the best day of our life?

Not long ago, the kids of our congregation and community were waiting for a special day. That day, of course, was Christmas. Think back to the time when, for you, Christmas was at its most captivating: when you went to bed the night before and every muscle in your body seemed to be twitching with excitement. You may have been in bed, but sleep? That was a different story. Sleep never came easily on Christmas Eve, back then — nor does it yet, today, for those who retain even the smallest particle of yuletide wonder.

What if, on the night before *this* day, as you were lying in bed, eyelids heavy with sleep, you heard a whispered message, one that came from you knew not where? What if the voice identified itself as belonging to an angel, and declared it was bringing you “glad tidings of great joy” — or something else suitably angelic? Then, what if that voice – more sweetly beautiful than anything you’d ever heard, more elusive than a throbbing vibration borne on the wind — delivered to you a simple message? *“Tomorrow is going to be the best day of your life!”*

Do you think, for a moment, you’d have gotten any sleep after that? Why,

you'd be more excited than a hundred kids on Christmas Eve! Every nerve, every sense, would be attuned to pick up the first hints of whatever good news was to present itself after break of day.

“This is the day that the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it!”

There's something in us — isn't there? — that forever wants to be looking for happiness just a little further on, just a step or two beyond the place we now find ourselves. It's like that old image of a carrot dangled from a stick out in front of a donkey. The donkey keeps trudging along, in hopes of taking a bite out of the carrot — when, in fact, this is never going happen, because the stick's being held by its master who's sitting back there in the cart. Every step the dumb beast takes carries the carrot precisely that much further down the road. Is that what our lives are really like: never happy in the present, with tomorrow always looking better?

You and I stand at the threshold of a new year, even a new decade: peering into the misty future, wondering what life will bring. Alternatively, we just may turn in the other direction, looking back: toting up, as all the news organizations are fond of doing, the milestone events of the past year (or decade).

Maybe, though, we ought to be doing neither one. Maybe we ought to be looking neither into the storied past nor into the mysterious future. Maybe we'd do

better to focus our most heightened attention on the here and now, this day **“that the Lord has made”!**

Jesus himself says something similar today’s Gospel lesson from Matthew 6. It’s taken from his famous Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is speaking to his disciples: who’ve had quite enough, thank you, of this wandering around the countryside, living off the kindness of strangers. They put up with it, for the most part. They don’t ask very much of him. All they want to know is where their next meal is coming from!

Jesus doesn’t relent. He teaches them, instead, about the lilies of the field, who neither toil nor spin — yet even glorious old King Solomon, clad in sumptuous cloth-of-gold, is not arrayed as one of these! Jesus tells them, next, about the birds of the air. They never planted seed nor pulled a weed — yet, even so, they awake each morn to discover how well the good creator-God is feeding them!

Then, the Lord goes on to present these friends of his, and all the assembled multitude, with a nugget of practical wisdom. It’s a spiritual principle so deceptively simple, so glaringly obvious, we just may blink twice and miss it as it goes by: **“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today”** [6:34].

Well, duh! It doesn't take a Ph.D. in philosophy to hand out that advice. It's just common sense!

Not so common as you may suppose, though. Just think of how consarnedly difficult it is to *practice* that advice!

You and I, we stand at the threshold of the new year looking back; or, we spin ourselves around and look forward. Doesn't much matter. Yet, what if — *what if* — the highest spiritual ideal is to practice neither one of these? What if our Lord's best advice to us, at New Year's or any other time, is simply to celebrate this God-given day, *the present*?

The most renowned spiritual leaders are those who demonstrate precisely that ability. Jesus himself, of course, is a prime example. Remember that time when the crowds are surging around him — when he's got things to do, people to see — and he stops in his tracks and starts playing with a little child? That's not on the day's itinerary, Jesus!

But what does he care? Jesus ignores his handlers: **“Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs”** [Mark 10:14].

Or, take Francis of Assisi. He founded a reform movement within the Roman Catholic church, a back-to-basics form of spirituality that sought to

discover joy in the simplest things. The Franciscan movement grew rapidly, even during Francis' own lifetime. He could have wielded political clout at the Vatican, if he'd wanted to. The pope — a scheming, secular ruler, as all the popes were back then — was even a little afraid of him. Yet, to his dying day, Francis loved nothing better than to be out in nature, communing with the animals, greeting Brother Fox and Sister Bird as though he were meeting them for the first time. To this day, the mental image most people have when they think of this mighty reformer of the church is not some heroic statue placed high atop a pedestal, but a simple garden figure of a man with wild birds perched on his outstretched hands.

There's a story out of the Eastern monastic tradition — the Desert Fathers of Egypt — that makes a similar point. It seems there was a beloved old monk who had spent his entire adult life in prayer and contemplation. In his old age, he sought a final benediction from God, so he could depart this life in peace.

God spoke to the monk, then, deep within his heart. God directed him to seek out a man in a nearby village, a humble seller of vegetables, for this man, God told him, had reached a higher level of spiritual development than he.

How could this be true? The monk grabbed his staff and, leaning heavily upon it, made his tired old legs carry him down to the village. There he found the greengrocer, completely immersed in a sea of people. It was late in the afternoon

and all the other market stalls were closing. This man, though, kept his stand open, better to serve the needs of his customers.

The crowd in the street was starting to get rowdy. The farmers and shepherds from the surrounding country had purses jingling with money. Many of them had already been to the stall of the wineseller — not once, but numerous times. They were staggering down the street in front of the fruit-and-vegetable stand, arm in arm, singing bawdy songs out of key.

Amazed at the noise and dirt and chaos of the market, the cloistered monk turned to the merchant — the one who was purported to be such a holy man — and asked in wonder, **“How can you ever pray in the midst of such a racket?”**

The grocer looked around compassionately at the same raucous, surging crowd he saw every day and replied simply: **“I just tell myself they’re all going to God’s kingdom. Listen to them** (he said, pointing at two drunken young men, holding each other up). **They’re concentrating with single-minded attention on what they’re doing. You or I may not think much of their songs, but notice the concentration with which they sing them! See how they’re training themselves to sing the songs of the heavenly choir — and without even knowing it! How can I do any less, myself, than to pray a simple, silent prayer to the same God they’re celebrating in song, despite themselves?”**

The wise old monk realized, then, why God had dispatched him on this errand. The Lord meant him to learn one final lesson in the spiritual art of attentiveness. Through all his long decades in the desert, this holy man had mastered the art of prayer in absolute silence. Yet, here was a man who had learned to pray with the same devotion, but in the middle of a crowded marketplace!

That night, as the old monk walked thoughtfully back to his cell, he prayed a prayer of gratitude. For the Lord had led him to a man who'd shown him how to be close to God amidst the ordinariness of life!²

“This is the day that the Lord has made.” This is the day, my friends. Not tomorrow, nor the next day, nor the next: but *today*. Got a New Year’s resolution, still? You’re not going to keep it by wondering whether you’ll have the willpower a week from now, or a month from now, or a year from now. Have you broken a New Year’s resolution already? Not to worry: yesterday is gone, but this morning offers you a fresh opportunity to do better.

Life in the Spirit is not about our yesterdays, nor even our tomorrows. It’s only about today. Here and now. Yes, indeed, **“this is the day that the Lord has**

²Adapted from a story told by Belden C. Lane in *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (Oxford, 1998).

made” — and the Lord has given it to each and every one of us as a gift.

Use this day wisely, faithfully, and well. Because, who knows? It just could be the best day of your life!

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