March 9, 2014 Norwalk

First in a Lenten Series on the Hymn:

*Take Time to Be Holy*

**Pastoral Prayer**

So we have lost an hour, O God -- at least of sleep. That, when it already feels like we don’t have enough time as it is. Losing any of it is, among the varieties of our assets, the last thing we can afford. We may not really long to sit rocking in the chair on the front porch, but it would be nice to fit everything in between sun up and sun down with a little time left over to simply “be.” And that just seems to rarely happen -- the “to-do” list spilling out over the edges of the calendar. Precious, then, these moments of worship when, the speaking and the singing and the standing and sitting notwithstanding, the “being” is far more important than the “doing.” Hold us here, in holiness, we pray.

And hold those particularly needing your care -- the Ukranians and the Crimeans, the Presidents and their representatives sifting through options; soldiers sifting through dangers; legislators and governors sifting through values; students sifting through learnings and futures and where to go next; the hurting and the healing and the grieving and the flailing, all sifting through fears and frustrations and physical limitations; and the frenetic, whose busyness is simply a way of running from their emptiness. Hold them, we pray, and speak into their souls your still-creating word.

And hold us -- in this time and all times -- in your holiness. For we pray in Jesus’ name, and with the words he taught us: Our father, who art in heaven…

## Leviticus 19:2

*Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.*

***Taking the Time for Holiness***

For reasons that I no longer remember, I recently became intrigued again with – and started listening again to -- the music of Mary Isobel Catherine Bernadette O'Brien, the British pop and R&B singer famous in the 1960's who was better known as Dusty Springfield. She recorded a number of memorable hits – *The Windmills of Your Mind, I Only Want to Be With You, The* *Look of Love*, *I Just Don't Know What to Do with Myself*, and my personal favorite,  *Son of a Preacher Man.* There were certainly others, including a Hal David and Burt Bacharach song later made famous all over again in the soundtrack to the movie *My Best Friend's Wedding*, which started:

*Wishin', and hopin', and thinkin', and prayin',*

*Planning and dreamin' each night of his charms.*

*That won't get you into his arms*

*So if you're looking for love you can share*

*All you gotta do is hold him, and kiss him, and love him,*

*And show him that you care.* ***[1]***

In a convoluted sense, the song's counsel is based on the same understanding of reality as the song around which our Lenten thinking will be guided: *Take* ***TIME*** *to be holy.* Good things rarely happen just because we want them to. “Wishin' and hopin'” won't finally get it done. Ultimately, some intentional action is required.

We *understand* that principle more than we practice it. I had my annual physical last month. I have been fortunate in recent years to not get sick that often, and so I rarely see my Internist who has cared for me now over 20 years. The annual physical, then, is a time to catch up on life as well as health. Which is not to say he neglects the reason for the visit. To be sure, he poked, he prodded, he tested, he listened and he did various other things not suited to public discourse. Finally, he reported. And then he instructed. These numbers and those were a little beyond the comfort zone, but all would be well if I...and I knew these words were coming...lost some weight. I am smart enough to know that that has some implications for *what* I eat (meaning “healthier”), but also how *much* I eat (meaning “less”*)*. And it also makes some demand on my activity level (meaning I need to exercise more).

That latter, at least, shouldn't be a problem. We have a wonderful space in our home delightfully outfitted for exercising. It has music. It has television and a media player. It’s all there, wonderfully arranged. But the tragically funny thing about it is that *having* it isn't the same as *using* it. The equipment has no electronic force field that simply by proximity purges me of calories and stimulates my cardio-vascular system. “Wishin' and hopin'” won't finally make it happen. There is simply no substitute for setting aside the time, getting on, and getting after it.

And likewise when it comes to our spiritual health. We have to ***take time to be holy.*** Those words as we have come to sing them in our hymnal originated with a man named William Dun Longstaff, a “wealthy philanthropist and free church leader who was close to the nineteenth-century American evangelistic team of Dwight L. Moody and Ira D. Sankey.” [2]

According to the story, Longstaff once heard a sermon based on a verse from the first chapter of 1 Peter, which urges disciples to “*Be ye holy, for I am holy.”* The thought struck him as solid, sensible and even central to the meaning of discipleship. Not long afterwards, Longstaff heard a missionary, recently returned from China, likewise refer to holiness. “Take time and be holy” the missionary urged. Connecting the phrase to the earlier sermon, something clicked. The phrase knocked around in his mind for a time until, substituting a single word, he made the phrase his own: “take time to be holy,” and “before he knew it, the words and phrases were becoming lines and stanzas, and he was reading the first stanza of his own original hymn.” [3]

*Take time to be holy, speak oft with thy Lord;*

*Abide in Him always, and feed on His Word.*

*Make friends of God’s children, help those who are weak,*

*Forgetting in nothing His blessing to seek.*

It is, you might have noticed, a hymn with heavy emphasis on verbs – *take, speak, abide, feed, make, help, seek;* and those in the first stanza alone. It's as though Longstaff suddenly saw the exercise equipment in the basement of his own soul and recognized the necessity of some concrete utilization – that “wishin' and hopin'” weren't going to be enough for discipleship, either. Holiness requires intentionality.

“Intentionality”, of course, is right up the alley of Lent – the season in the church's calendar that began this past Wednesday with the imposition of ashes on our forehead, and continues for the six weeks leading up to Easter. Traditionally, Lent is a time for clearing away the accretions of culture and habit that, over time, come to muddy and finally obscure the better practices of our faithfulness. Think of that icy moraine of sand and gravel and repeatedly refrozen snow and ice that eventually petrifies on your driveway. IceMelt won't dent it. I'm not even sure sunlight and warm temperatures will soften it any time soon. It takes something sharp and metallic, accompanied by muscle and sweat. So, too, with spiritual life. It has to be cleared, refreshed, and then exercised. Intentionally.

Over the course of these six-weeks, then, we will be using Mr. Longstaff's familiar hymn as a prod for our Lenten renewal. We will be taking his verbs seriously, but also his sense of what the “holy life” looks like. And so we will be...

***Taking the time…***

***…for holiness***

***…for learning***

***…for community***

***…for prayer***

***…for obedience***

***…for stillness***

Not all of those will feel comfortable; and none of them, I suspect, will come easily. But the fruit of such intentionality is desirable enough, and so I invite you to come along – starting today with this notion of holiness. So what is it? Let's assume for a moment that we have all the time in the world, and that we are more than willing to take it, but what does it mean to take time to be “holy”?

According to Frederich Buechner, one of my favorite and most provocative authors, *Only God is holy, just as only people are human. God's holiness is his Godness. To speak of anything else as holy is to say that it has something of God's mark on it. Times, places, things, and people can all be holy, and when they are, they are usually not hard to recognize.* ***[4]***

Or as someone else has put it, “Wherever God's presence is felt, there [people] encounter the wonder and mystery of holiness” [5]

Holy Cow.Holy smoke. Holy Bible. Holy ground. Something – or someone – with God's mark so indelibly inscribed that it isn't hard to recognize.

“And ***you***,” reported Moses and later Peter, “shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy.” You shall bear my mark. In you shall God's presence be felt.

I read that this 19th chapter of Leviticus is “one of the most quoted and most often read chapters” in American Reform Judaism. Indeed, it's often described as a “holiness code.” After announcing this need to be holy, the chapter proceeds to list all kinds of examples of holiness from almost every area of life – a hodge-podge of moral, civil, and religious injunctions -- with the punctuating refrain, “I am the Lord [your God] marking the end of almost every one of the sixteen paragraphs.” [6]

Which is to say that, for Leviticus, spiritual faith and ethical behaviors are two sides of the same coin. We can, therefore, do away with all the cartoon pictures of the sanctimonious holy person wearing a halo and a prudish glare. To be holy is not to be narrow-minded and primly pious; it is, rather, to imitate God. To be holy is to roll up one's sleeves and to join in with whatever God is doing in the world.

So what is God doing in the world? Well, as the hymn will eventually go on to observe, part of the practice of taking time to be holy is paying enough careful attention to learn and observe. But a quick scan through Leviticus 19 will show that it looks a lot like social justice – protecting the welfare of the poor and the disadvantaged; reverence for all people and the need for patience and truthfulness between them. And mindfulness of the difference between the Creator and the created.

When Peter takes over the phrase, he introduces it with what would literally translate as “gird up the loins of your mind” and “sober up” -- both of which suggest a readiness, a preparation for, movement. “Girding loins” being the equivalent of “rolling up your sleeves” in order to get to work; and sobriety meaning exactly what it suggests: don't be drunk – drunkenness suggesting a total unreadiness for action born of either satisfaction with, or resignation about, the present circumstances or location.

I trust that we will find ourselves to be neither – neither satisfied with, nor resigned to the way we are, or the world around us. But holiness – our own or the world's – will not happen automatically. It will demand intentionality, effort, discipline, and patience. We'll need to take some time for all of this. But it will be worth it...

...in time.

[1] words by Hal David. Music by Burt Bacharach

[2] *Chalice Hymnal: Worship Leaders Companion*

[3] Ernest K. Emurian, *200 Amazing Hymn Stories* (www.tanbible.com)

[4] *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC,* p. 39

[5] *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* vol. 2 p. 617

[6] *New Interpreter's Bible*, p. 1132