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 Texts: Psalm 90 (selected verses); Romans 12: 2
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Numbering Our Days: On Distraction, Boredom, and Creating a Spiritual Life

Here's something that happened this summer, something so ordinary and so universal that it scarcely merits attention. But sometimes it's the most pedestrian and seemingly insignificant moments that deserve our curiosity. At the end of the Green Grass journey in June, the group departed in waves - one wave left very early in the morning, while two of us - me and Jolene Brant - showed up at the airport mid-morning. We had plenty of time, but since Jolene's flight left earlier than mine, I dropped her off and then dealt with the rental car return. I got my boarding pass, checked a bag, and then headed toward the security line. It was shockingly long. And it was excruciatingly slow. Perhaps someone hadn't shown up for work that day. Or maybe it's like that every morning at the Rapid City airport. But there was nothing to do but wait, filling the empty time as best we could. And so I did what almost every other person in that line did: I pulled out my phone, and started swiping, eventually landing on an article that interested me very little. After nearly an hour, I made it through the line just in time for my flight. Jolene made her flight as well, though only because they delayed the departure to accommodate those in the line.

It's not the long line, or the hassles of airport security that merit attention here. Nor is it our phones, really, that seem significant, though they play a role. It is, rather, the experience of boredom, and the way boredom serves to expose the barest and most raw dimension of our existence: time.¹ We are born upon a current of time. We are bodies placed in time, given to fill that time with our labor and our leisure and our love and our distraction. We mark the passage of time with our private rituals and through holidays, and we fill the hours of our days with various tasks. But for the most part we tend not to think about time itself, because it can be positively unnerving to do so.

When my grandmother died about a decade ago, Sabina, who was then about six, asked, "how many days did Grandma June live?" She was 88 when she died, and so I made a rough calculation - 88×365 . The answer sort of floored me. "She lived for about 32,120 days, I told Sabina. "Whoa!" she said. "That's a lot." To a six year old, perhaps that's true, but I was caught up short for the opposite reason. I was struck by the stark brevity of that number.

Lord, teach us to number our days, the Psalmist says. That's a terrifying prayer, isn't it? When and if we do number our days, we're thrown against the very finitude of that number. Is it any wonder that we turn toward most anything that will distract us from the incessant ticking of the clock? Is it any wonder that, confronted by empty time, we pull out our phones and start swiping? Boredom is the painful awareness that we are creatures of time, and that our days are indeed truly numbered. Who can blame us if we work to suppress that terrible knowledge?

Even so, I have some questions about my own encounters with boredom and time. Maybe you do too. For instance, I wonder if our lives have become somehow spiritually thin

¹ I'm grateful to an article published on the website The Marginalian, by Maria Popova, entitled "Nobel-Winning Poet Joseph Brodsky on the Remedy for Existential Boredom" for some of the insights here on boredom and time. A link to her article is here: <https://www.themarginalian.org/2024/06/28/brodsky-boredom/>

because we no longer know how to be bored. I wonder if we have become creatively stagnant as human beings, and as a culture, because we refuse the experience of boredom. And I wonder if we've become politically pliable, and perhaps also quiescent about things we ought not be quiescent about, because we avoid boredom at all costs. Boredom throws us up against the very fact of time. It throws us up against our own bottomless existence. But it also throws us up against our own selves, and our ability to think and feel. Do we become somehow less than human when we do not allow ourselves to experience boredom?

Not long ago I saw a graphic meant to illustrate the state of our culture today.² It showed a small fish with the label Art. Art is a cultural artifact, any cultural artifact that takes time and effort to absorb. Art can be playful, but it also tends to require a kind of slowness, a stillness even, like when you read a novel or gaze at a painting. In the picture, the Art fish was on the verge of being swallowed by a larger fish, this one labeled Entertainment. Entertainment here would be art that requires a little less time and effort, even if it still requires careful construction and at least some modicum of commitment to absorb it, like Hollywood films or streaming TV. But on this graphic, that fish too is in the process of being swallowed by an even larger fish, this one labeled Distraction. This larger fish represents the quick hit of a Youtube video, the endless scroll of Facebook, the swipe of TikTok videos, or, God help us, the chatter of X, formerly Twitter. By every measure, the traditional forms of entertainment, like films and long form TV, are struggling to adapt to the quick hits of dopamine delivered by social media platforms like those. But then finally, on this graphic, the fish labeled Distraction was about to be devoured by the largest fish of all, labeled simply Addiction. This is the recognition that it's not really "content" at all that the tech platforms are providing, but little bursts of stimulation that will deliver a dopamine hit, which will ultimately keep us all scrolling.

The whole graphic seemed to sum up the massive efforts we've gone to, culturally, to prevent ourselves from ever having to feel the empty time of boredom. And it suggests the herculean efforts we've gone to in order to avoid hearing from the deepest parts of ourselves, which is often, I think, where the voice of God can be heard.

I also want to note, by the way, that entertainment and distraction are at times necessary and good. Mine is not an argument for living in prison cells and staring at the wall in order to attain enlightenment. It is, rather, an argument for what the Apostle Paul called "being transformed by the renewing of our minds." How does that renewal come about?

To get at that question, let me move this closer to the world of the church and what we're doing here on Sundays. I would suggest that the first fish on that graph, the one labeled Art, could also be labeled Religion. Art and Religion come from the same, or very similar, places in the human soul. They both require time, stillness, and some degree of effort. But religion, like art, is being subsumed by the same forces and processes. Many congregations have been under pressure to entertain their people, turning their services into events resembling concerts and motivational speeches. The assumption is that religion shouldn't require effort at all, but is rather about providing a quick burst of feeling. But even that model has been hard to sustain, given the all pervasive power of distraction and yes, addiction. Just the other day, I heard of a preacher whose style of preaching was akin to swiping right on a phone over and over again: quick story, quick story, quick story, uplifting thought, done. For all I know, it may work. It

² The graphic is found in a Substack article published by Ted Gioia, on his site The Honest Broker. The article is entitled "The State of the Culture, 2024" from Feb. 18, 2024. It can be found here: <https://www.honest-broker.com/p/the-state-of-the-culture-2024>

may be what some folks want. But I have some serious doubts about the long term viability of that model. My own instincts are very different. Perhaps yours are too.

Now, I think it's a sin to bore people with the gospel. I think it's a sin to make religion into a dull and mundane affair. (That may mean that I've sinned often as a preacher, for which I beg your forgiveness!) The Gospel of Jesus Christ, to say nothing of religion more broadly, is an adventure of the mind, of the heart, and of the soul, meant to stir the very deepest parts of ourselves. But it often takes thought, and it requires a kind of slowness and careful attention that puts it at odds with entertainment and distraction and addiction. Religion, like art, is just an entirely different realm than the realms of entertainment, distraction and addiction. It's a different way of experiencing time, not unlike what happens at a choral performance, like the one that took place here on Friday night from Ensemble Altera. It was exquisite, but I confess it took a little time, and a little effort, to allow myself to enter that realm. But I was so glad that I did. It ushered me, and presumably those of you who were there, into an interior space that I wouldn't otherwise have accessed. To be ushered into that realm, however that happens, whether through music, or literature, or some form of communion with nature, is what it means, I think, to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

The same is true in a church service. What may initially present itself as boredom is actually (or so I hope) an entryway into a different kind of timekeeping, a deeper form of attention. And that allows us to access different aspects of our being than what we get in the realms of entertainment, distraction, and addiction. If we let the process work, it can help us clarify what our values actually are. It can help to clarify what kind of people we wish to be. It can help us clarify how we might use the time that is given to us. It can help to remind us of who we love, and who might need more of our love. It can help to reveal the things that are worth struggling for, and the things that are worth investing in. And it can help to reveal those things that are not worthy of our attention, worthy of our money, or worthy of our allegiance.

Most of all, though, it can disclose a reality that I don't think we get to in the realm of entertainment, distraction, and addiction. Those of us who are religious call this reality "God," but that word has suffered so much abuse that we might need to find other ways to talk about what we mean. Here's my own attempt: we discover, or at least come to have a deep suspicion, that there is some benevolent force in the world that wishes us well. We come to suspect that there is within the cosmos itself some active principle that is a kind of long suffering love, and that, whatever it is, it begs for our participation. And we come to know that even though there are all kinds of ways to ignore or damage or contravene that love, that somehow, our task as human beings is to learn the art of love, even amidst the wreckage that piles up around us. This is the reality that we come to discern, as so many people have over the ages, when we yield to that empty time, when we face into what initially feels like boredom, only to discover that it leads to the infinite. We all have an ocean at the back of our minds. But we can only get to that transcendent ocean through the narrow way, the slow way, which, if I am right, leads initially through what can feel like the wilderness of boredom.

Joseph Brodsky was a poet and essayist from the Soviet Union who ran afoul of the authorities there. And so he was forced into exile, living here in the United States, where he went on to become a Nobel laureate. In 1989, two years after receiving the Nobel, he gave the commencement address at Dartmouth College. It was entitled "In Praise of Boredom." Here is what Brodsky told those undergraduates and their parents:³

³ The following quotes are found in Popova's article on Brodsky and boredom. See again: <https://www.themarginalian.org/2024/06/28/brodsky-boredom/>

You'll be bored with your work, your friends, your spouses, your lovers, the view from your window, the furniture or wallpaper in your room, your thoughts, yourselves. Accordingly, you'll try to devise ways to escape. Apart from the self-gratifying gadgets... you may take up changing jobs, residence, company, country, climate... You may lump all these together; and for a while, that may work. Until the day, of course, when you wake up in your bedroom amid a new family and a different wallpaper, in a different state and climate... yet with the same stale feeling toward the light of day pouring in through your window.

He then continues:

When hit by boredom, go for it. Let yourself be crushed by it; submerge, hit bottom. In general, with things unpleasant, the rule is, the sooner you hit bottom, the faster you surface.

Surface toward what, we might ask? Toward a greater awareness of ourselves, including our own passion and our own pain. We surface toward a greater awareness of our world, and what it, and those who live in it, suffer. And if we are lucky, we surface toward an intuition of something like the ocean at the back of our minds, which is the beginning of an awareness of God.

Teach us to number our days, the Psalmist says. Be transformed by the renewing of your minds. I hope and trust that what we do here week by week is an invitation to do just that. But I also hope that it serves as an invitation, whenever you're waiting in an airport security line or at the DMV, or wherever you're fated to wait - I hope it serves as an invitation to touch your boredom, at least briefly, in order to see just where it may lead you. Believe it or not, it may disclose bottomless wells of being, a bottomless well that you yourself are, a well in which the still small voice of God just might be heard.