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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Psalm 90:12; Matthew 17: 1-8
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String Theory: On Learning To Live in Ordinary Time

*Teach us to count our days, that we might gain a wise heart.
 Psalm 90:12*

Today I'd like to share a story about time, told in 1894 by a French writer named Anatole France. It's a story that's been on my mind quite a bit lately, stuck as we are in what often seems like a never-ending repetition of days that all feel more or less the same. But rather than just telling you the story, I'd actually like to show it to you, using the Meetinghouse as a kind of stage against which to dramatize a life. Here's how the story goes:

A genie appears to a child, and gives him a magical ball of string. The genie says to the child, "This string is the sum of your days. When you want time to move ahead for you, take the string and unwind it. Your days will go quickly or slowly, depending on how fast you unravel the string. But as long as you don't touch it," the genie says, "you'll remain in whatever moment of existence you happen to be in." The child is fascinated, and so he takes the ball of string. And he begins to unwind it, just like...this!

First, he unwinds it to the point that he becomes an adult, finally gaining the freedom and autonomy he had so longed for as a child. He lives in that moment for a little while, and then he grows curious to know who he will marry. And so he pulls on the string a little more, just like...this!

He arrives at his wedding day, and discovers that he marries his childhood love, a realization that fills him with happiness. And so he puts aside the string and lives within the ecstasy of those early days, until things begin to settle down and he becomes curious about what his children might be like. He unravels the string once more, just like...this!

First he comes to the birth of his eldest child, which he celebrates, but then he wonders about another, and so he unravels the string again, to the birth of his second child, and then a third time to the birth of another. They're joyous occasions, and he celebrates them all, as well he should. But in each case, the initial flush of new life gives way to the relentlessness of caring for those lives, and so the child, now a man, returns to the string. This time he wonders what successes he might have in his vocation, and so he unravels it a little further...like this.

He unravels it until he achieves a benchmark in his legal career. He unravels it until he is given accolades for his successes, and he unwinds it in order to witness the public honors that are heaped upon him. He pauses for what feels like long stretches of time, but whenever he gets to the worrisome years, he unwinds the string a little more. Why linger there, he reasons, and so he unwinds a little more, through the disappointments, the frustrations, and the illnesses.

Eventually, he comes to the ravages of old age, and in order to avoid the indignities and discomforts that too many go through, he unwinds the string all the way to the end.

Now, the genie had been following the child all along, and he smiles knowingly, and with a hint of pity, when the string runs out. The child had lived no more than four months after the genie's visit.

For two weeks at the end of July and the beginning of August, our family traveled to Maryland and then to Tennessee, to see Rachael's extended family and to see my own. Everyone was careful in the weeks prior to our visit, and once we got to the houses where we stayed, we didn't leave. We sheltered in place there, and enjoyed being together in a way that felt precious. I have to admit that returning brought with it a sense of melancholy, not because it isn't good to be home, but because it feels like there isn't a great deal to look forward to in the year ahead. We won't be returning for worship anytime soon. We won't get to welcome families and children back for a new Sunday School year, at least not in person. There will be no visits from partnership friends, no potluck meals in the fellowship hall. Thanksgiving will be different, and God only knows what Christmas might be like this year. There will be some good things that happen along the way, it's true, and I don't want to minimize those things. But so many of the things that we all look forward to at the end of summer won't be there this year, which, for me, made it feel sad to face into the succession of days arrayed before me, arrayed before us all. Which is to say, if a genie handed me that magic ball of string, I might be tempted to pull it a little bit, just to get past this part, the pandemic part, where, for many of us, life has all but stopped.

I'm guessing I'm not the only one who feels that way. Given the opportunity, many of us would be tempted to pull on that string right now. And in truth, many of us would gladly unwind the string in other times as well, during the worrisome years, during the painful years, or when nothing much seems to be happening, when time just stands still. But I want you to look at the string unwound through the Meetinghouse. If every peak represents a moment when something noteworthy took place, the rest of the string represents moments when nothing much happened at all. Which for most of us, to say nothing of most human beings in the history of the world, is represented by most of the string. If we're honest, for 95% of our lives, nothing much happens that's noteworthy. Are those moments somehow less valuable because nothing much is happening? Are they worthy of being skipped? And is it true that nothing is happening? Perhaps, to switch metaphors, those moments are something like looking upon the calm surface of a body of water, where the surface conceals an entire universe beneath it?

Over the years, I've often spoken about the two kinds of time that occur in the Bible. There's kairos time, the fullness of time, those opportune moments when life feels pregnant with possibility and meaning, when something big is happening. Kairos time is when visions appear, when worlds are made, when liberations take place. Kairos time is when the Red Sea parts. It's when the Promised Land can at last be seen. It's when winged messengers appear, when prophets speak, when miracles occur. The fullness of time is when Jesus is born. In our own lives, kairos is when we take decisive action, seizing the moment because the time is right. Kairos time would be all the moments of significance in Anatole France's story of the child with the genie's ball of string, all those peaks and turns as you look at the thread strung out throughout the Meetinghouse. I love kairos time, and the biblical writers seem to as well. Quite often, like most good writers, they pull the string until they get to the noteworthy parts, which, by the way, might help to explain why we know so little about Jesus as a child and as an adolescent.

But Jesus himself seems to offer an alternative to simply unwinding the string to get to the good parts. It happens in the story of the transfiguration. Jesus takes Peter, James and John to the top of a high mountain, and when he's there, he somehow becomes more fully himself. His appearance becomes changed, and the story makes clear that a special kind of presence takes place on that mountaintop. The ancestors, heroes from the past are apparent there – the spirits of Moses and Elijah draw close, and they convey their wisdom and approval upon Jesus. Which is to say, the past and the present somehow intersect, and in that kairos moment the fragmentary quality of time is somehow rendered whole. It's a moment not unlike all those peak experiences the child in the story rushes to get to, where everything that one has worked and hoped for converges to produce a singular event that provides life with new focus and direction. I believe the story of the transfiguration is a story not only about Jesus, but about every human life. If we're lucky, we all get those moments of convergence, those singular events when the past draws close. When it happens, a kind of glow can develop around us, and we might wish to stay there forever.

That's exactly what Peter tries to do. Caught up in the moment there on the mountaintop, he exclaims that he wants to build a permanent structure in order to preserve the moment, in order to remain in kairos time forever. But it's telling that Jesus won't let him. That's because chronos, the second form of time found in the Bible, beckons. Chronos is clock time. It's calendar time. It's the seconds and minutes, the days and weeks that form the content of our lives. It's a gift to enter those kairos moments, but, Jesus suggests, the real task is to know how to live well in the long stretches of the in-between, when nothing much is happening. And so Jesus and Peter, James and John come down from the mountain, and they take their place not in kairos time anymore, but in chronos time, ordinary time, where the days stretch out, and where struggles and arguments and tedium occur. Because really, that's where life is happening. In the long stretches where a biographer or storyteller wouldn't have much to report.

That moment, when Jesus comes down from the mountain, is written for everyone who is tempted to hustle on past the empty and small moments of life in search of the big events. I like to think that's it's offered to all of us right now, who are tempted to believe that nothing much is happening, when in fact, everything is happening. Moments of clarity and vision do occur on the mountaintops of our lives, but the ordinary and the mundane is where we work out our very humanity. "Teach us to count our days," the Psalmist writes, "that we might gain a wise heart." To put it differently, we might say it this way: "Teach us to dwell in chronos, in the mundane hours when nothing is happening, that we might learn something of who we are and who we wish to be. Teach us to reside with the routine and the ordinary, that we might acquire the wisdom that comes from residing in the slow passage of time. Teach us the habits of slowness – slow thought, slow food, slow movement, slow speech, that we might learn the virtues of patience and gratitude, discernment and care. Teach us to value the tactile pleasures of being alive, lest we forget the joy of all our senses. Help us to remain open to the pain that we so often feel, lest we rush past and miss an experience that might deepen our compassion, that might help us to extend our empathy. Teach us to make sacraments of our days, to imbue our living with the conscious intentionality of those who know themselves to be graced. Teach us to count our days, living as we do in chronos time, so

that we might actually be alive to the world as it presents itself. I hear all that and more in Jesus's insistence upon coming down from the mountain.

There's a German film called *The Wings of Desire* that beautifully depicts the predicament of time. It's probably my favorite film. It's slow and meditative. It's a story about angels who inhabit the landscape of post-war Berlin, simply bearing witness – mutely, helplessly – to the events that occur in people's lives. Those events are the stuff of mundane living – the people they observe read; they write; they remember; they wander through the city streets; they make art; they make music; they fall in love. One angel becomes transfixed by the living, so transfixed that he yearns to enter and feel the mundane qualities of time. He learns that it's possible to renounce eternity, to come down from the mountain, and to enter the flow of ordinary time. At one point he draws near to a man played by Peter Falk, who, years before, had also been an angel, and had done that very thing. He too had renounced eternity in order to experience time. On a bitterly cold Berlin morning, the man speaks to the unseen angel while he orders coffee at a street stand. "I don't see you, but I know you're there. I wish I could look into your face and just tell you how good it is to be here, to touch something," the man says. "It's cold," he says, "but you can warm your hands on a cup of coffee. It's wonderful. And you can rub your hands together to make them warm, and it feels so good. And here," he says, pointing to a notebook in his hand, "you can draw. You can make a line, and then you can make another line, and it's a good line. There are so many good things," the man says. "But you're not here. You can't know this. Even so," he says, "I want you to know that I'm here, and I'm your friend."

We need those friends right now, to remind us of the ordinary, simple pleasures that come from living in time. We need visions of the wisdom that can accrue from learning to count our days, rather than letting them unspool. That's something of the wisdom I'm trying to remember as this pandemic stretches on. That's something of what I'm trying to remember when the days and weeks feel emptier than normal, caught along an interminable stretch of thread. I'll be glad when this is all over, but I don't want to miss whatever this moment may yet have to teach us.

Which is to say, I want us all to resist the lure of the genie and the string. I want us all to become acquainted with those long passages of time when nothing much seems to happen, and to become content within them. I want us all to come down off the mountain with Jesus and Peter and James and John and live into whatever good or ill the days might deliver. I want us all to trust that there are friends out there, seen and unseen, ready to help us live into the ordinary pleasures and pains of this very chronological time. May we all learn to count the days, that we might every one of us gain a wise heart.