

Whew! It’s already been a hot one, hasn’t it? Now I was around in the summer of 1980 when the Great American heat-wave hit. How many of you remember that? In Dallas/Fort Worth, high temperatures exceeded 100 °F a total of 69 times, including a record 42 consecutive days from June 23 to August 3. Dallas/Fort Worth reached an all-time high on June 26 and 27, when the temperature reached 113 °F on both days. Thank the Lord we’re not vying for THAT record, but it’s still hot.

In recognition that it’s summertime, we’re going to spend the new few weeks looking at some of the scriptures that deal with the elements of summer. This series is entitled “The Hot Word from the Bible,” because there’s something about our Holy Scriptures that keeps the message feeling like it’s hot, right off the press—fresh, relevant, up to date for our lives.

We kick the sermon series off this morning with an unusual text from the book of Joshua in the Hebrew scriptures. Will you join me as we study “The Day the Sun Stood Still.”

I. The Story of Joshua

Time stands still for no one—or so we’ve always been told. Yet this morning’s text shares with us the story of how time seemed to stop at the command of one man—Joshua.

Who is this guy, Joshua, anyway? Many of us may remember him only as the character in the song we learned at church camp or Sunday School—Joshua fit the battle of Jericho. But he was much more than that.

Born into Egyptian bondage, Joshua was appointed Moses’ commander two months after the people of Israel crossed the Red Sea. In the book of Exodus, we hear of a younger Joshua spying out the land of Canaan as the possible site of the Promised Land. Forty years later, when Joshua was 90+ years old, God designated him as Moses’ successor. The book named for him, and from which our scripture today comes, records his leadership in the conquest of Canaan.

His first victory was at Jericho, about which the song describes. But that was just the first of many battles which Joshua directed. The story from which this morning's scripture is taken is about the Battle of Beth-Horan. According to the tale, Joshua needed just a few more hours of sunlight to win the battle, and so he commanded the sun to stop its movement.

Did you hear Joshua's words this morning? "'Sun, stand still at Gibeon. And you, Moon, stay put in the valley of Aijalon.'" And the sun stood still and the moon stayed, for a whole day! There has been no day like it before or since!" the scripture tells us.

Could such a miracle have happened? Is there any truth to this tale at all?

II. Just the Facts, ma'am.

Well, yes and no. First, let's look at the more rational, scientific side of this scripture. Joshua lived between 1500/1400 B.C.E. At that time, and for two millennia after, people thought that the earth was the center of the universe, and that the sun, moon and stars revolved around the earth. It's easy to see why they would have thought that—from our vantage point on the earth, we don't feel like we're moving—and yet the sun comes up in the east and goes down in the west each day. It seemed only reasonable that it was the sun that moved, not us.

In 1543 C.E., Copernicus proposed that the earth was one of several planets which orbited the sun. At the time, religious fundamentalists reacted against such heresy. In 1616, Copernicus' book and all other books that affirmed the idea that the earth moved around the sun were placed on the Index of prohibited books by the Catholic Church. It wasn't until 1822 that the church allowed its members to read books which state that it is the earth that moves—not the sun. ("Wisdom, Knowledge: Copernicus and Kepler" from www.elbourne.org/sermons).

We now know that not only does the earth move around the sun, it also rotates on its own axis. The only way that the sun and the moon could have stood still was for the earth to stop rotating for a time.

An interesting guy, Dr. Dan Ward, who received his Ph.D., in Nuclear Physics from U.T. Austin, proposed that the earth's rotation could possibly have slowed or

ceased if a large enough mass (like a potential collision with another planet) entered into the gravitational pull of our planet. (www.halexandria.org)

To get the real scoop on this question, I called one of my friendly experts, a member of my former congregation in Tucson. Dr. Tim Swindle is an associate professor of Cosmochemistry in the planetary sciences department at the University of Arizona. He studies the chronology of the solar system, and seemed the perfect resource for my question—Could the earth have ever stopped rotating on its axis?

He responded that it is short of impossible to think that the earth stopped rotating. There's no scientific or historic record of such an event occurring. Besides, if the earth stopped rotating, that would affect gravity. Our scripture this morning did not describe that Joshua or his enemies suddenly floated upwards into the heavens.

So, according to the science we have today, this story cannot be taken as literal truth. Someone may come up with a new discovery tomorrow, but today, science cannot support this story from Joshua.

That does not mean that we don't believe in a God who transcends the laws of the universe—after all, we believe our God created them in the first place. With God, all things are possible. The Almighty, we believe, has the power to stop the earth's rotation any time, any way, for any reason.

Rather than get mired in the science vs. religion question, there are still other truths contained in this Biblical story that have importance for us, truths that shape our lives in the here and now.

III. When Time Stops

For example, this text got me wondering—when do we feel as if time is standing still? What are the occasions that cause us to think that time has stopped, or is moving in slow motion?

You know, like those moments in the hospital waiting room, anticipating the doctor to emerge with news any minute, yet the minutes drag on and on. You

keep looking at the clock on the wall, and it seems like the minute hand hasn't moved a centimeter.

I remember when I was in first grade and I got in trouble for talking too much in class and I had to stay after school. Surprise, surprise! Mrs. Hendrickson made me sit with my head on my desk for five minutes. Since I didn't know how to tell time yet, I didn't have the concept of five minutes. I thought it should be short. Instead, it felt like time stood still.

Or how about when you're on I-30 and there's been an accident in "the canyon" and you're just sitting in the sweltering heat for hours—time mired in the traffic behind and in front. These are all moments when we wish for the sun to move faster—not slower.

Still, if we had the opportunity and the wherewithal, aren't there those occasions when we would want time to stand still—when we wish we had the power of Joshua to command the sun and moon to stay in their places for just a few minutes more?

There are those moments of joy that we want to prolong for as long as we can—moments like falling in love. Do you remember that wonderful, heady feeling that all is right with the world, and the colors seemed brighter, and you smiled at everyone and everything? Wouldn't you have liked for time to stand still then?

Or how about the moment when you held your child in your arms for the first time and gazed on the little nose and fingernails in wonder? Wasn't that a time you wanted to freeze in place for as long as possible?

Or maybe when you graduated from college, the first in your family to do so. Or when you were hired for your first real job. Or when you were on vacation, so relaxed, watching the sun set on the ocean. All these are times that we wouldn't have minded asking the sun to stop for a while, to live in the moment for just a little while longer.

Then there are other times when we're so busy, when we have so much to do before the day is done. We want to finish our big project before we leave work, or complete our homework before we leave school, or get the kitchen clean before

watching tv in the evenings. If we could just have a few more minutes, another hour, we'd feel like things would be complete. Essentially, this was Joshua's reason for commanding the sun to halt. He was so busy, and wanted to finish his business before the sun set.

We've all had those time when we've wished we had the power of Joshua to say, with just a word—stop, sun, stop. Stop time—time aging—stop the ever flowing movement toward our inevitable end to time.

IV. Deeper Truths

The story of Joshua's victory at Beth Horan reveals our complex relationship with the concept of time. Time is our friend, and our enemy. Time waits for no one, and waits on everyone. We tell time, and time tells on us.

One of the great musical entertainers of the last century—Victor Borge, once told a friend that he could tell time by his piano. His friend was incredulous, so Borge volunteered a demonstration. He pounded out a crashing march. Immediately there came a banging on the wall, and a shrill voice screamed, "Stop that noise. Don't you know it's 1:30 in the morning?!" (Hewett, James. Illustrations Unlimited. Tyndale. 1988. pg. 477)

The truth is, Time represents the need in human kind to control that which seems uncontrollable. It holds sway over us, and we fight its power with everything we can—from skin creams to transplants to cryonics. But to be human means we must humble ourselves to work within its limits, to place our time with trust into God's timing.

Even Jesus, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, did not have the knowledge to know God's plan with time. In the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus preaches an apocalyptic sermon about the end of time (Mark 13, Matthew 24, Luke 21), Jesus warns about being prepared for the end of time as we know it, but in all three gospels he concludes "But of that day and hour, no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only."

The Markan version of that text concludes with this admonition from Jesus: "Take heed, watch, for you do not know when the time will come."

Jesus calls us to an awareness of time. Jesus encourages us to make good use of the time we have. Jesus reminds us that time is precious—and needs to be filled with the things of life that please God and bring about the realm of God in the here and now.

I know you've heard this metaphor before—or received it via email. But it is so true. If you had a bank that credited your account each morning with \$86,000 that carried over no balance from day to day...Allowed you to keep no cash in your account, and every evening cancelled whatever part of the amount you failed to use during the day, what would you do? Draw out every cent every day, of course, and use it to your advantage!

Well, you have such a bank, and its name is TIME! Every morning it credits you with 86,400 seconds. Every night it rules off as lost whatever of this you failed to invest to good purpose. It carries over no balances, it allows no overdrafts. Each day it opens a new account with you. If you fail to use the day's deposits, the loss is yours. There is no going back. There is no drawing against tomorrow.

The 90th Proverb says: "Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom."

And so, the Hot Word from this text this morning—the wise word that goes to the heart of wisdom--is to treasure time. Don't take it for granted. Be aware of its gift.

Without having Joshua's power to stop the sun, we still all have all the time in the world for the important things in life. We just need to be aware of them, and put them first in the order of our days. There really is enough time in the day to get all the things done that need to get done—the really important things in life. What doesn't get done—well, either they'll be handled tomorrow, or by someone else who can share our burdens.

Even Jesus was able to move on from the time of this world, to time eternal knowing that there would be others to pick up what was left to be done—people like me and you. May this word refresh you in the heat of the moment, when God's time is on our side.