



*"Michelle Van Loon's wise, readable,
and informed study is a gift for all of us."*

SCOT McKNIGHT

AUTHOR, *THE JESUS CREED*

MICHELLE VAN LOON

MOMENTS & DAYS



How Our Holy Celebrations Shape Our Faith



Where has this book been? Now that we have it, what did the church ever do without it, and can I ever not have it nearby? I am savoring this book like a black iron skillet that gets better with age and will use it to cook up some theological dishes I never thought possible.

LEONARD SWEET

Author of *From Tablet to Table* and creator of preachthestory.com

We lose time, save time, waste time, find time. But what about inhabiting time? That is Michelle Van Loon's important invitation through her well-studied exploration of the Jewish and Christian calendars. She bids us to keep holy days (not just holidays) and relieve our cultural anxiety that time is running out.

JEN POLLOCK MICHEL

Author of *Teach Us to Want*

One of God's earliest gifts to Israel after forming them into a covenant people was a calendar to celebrate and to remind Israel of the major moments of God's redemption. Israel's year was shaped by those redemptive events so that every major holiday was simultaneously a memorial of God's gracious redemption. The New Testament era of history was not long enough to form a Christian calendar, and even more the Jewish Christians already had their own calendar—which they were adapting and adjusting in their worship of the Messiah. So it was nothing but Spirit-led wisdom for the church as it spread into the Roman Empire to adapt the Jewish calendar into a Christian calendar. Michelle Van Loon's wise, readable, and informed study of the two calendars is a gift for all of us. Try one year of using the Christian calendar and you will be reminded, not of our presidents or our heroes, but of God's redemption in Christ.

SCOT MCKNIGHT

Julius R. Mantey Chair of New Testament, Northern Seminary, and author of *The Jesus Creed*

This wonderful book is full of both information and inspiration about times we call holidays. The author offers rich background on the origins of both Jewish and Christian observances and includes practical ideas for making these times more meaningful. This book will be an invaluable resource for every home and will make a wonderful gift.

DALE HANSON BOURKE

Author of *Everyday Miracles*

This is an absolutely wonderful book for anyone who wants to understand the grace-filled rhythms that God has built in to our days. As a pastor and parent, I cannot recommend this book highly enough!

REVEREND TRACEY BIANCHI

Worship and teaching pastor, Christ Church of Oak Brook, traceybianchi.com

Many books have been written about how to honor God with our talents and treasures but very few about how to honor Him with our time. Michelle has provided a much-needed resource for those who want to benefit from engaging in the sacred festivals within the Jewish calendar that were observed by Jesus himself or the Christian ones that were inspired by his life and ministry. This book will teach you how to see time from God's perspective and how to leverage it for His glory and your delight. A must-read for anyone who takes the Bible—and their days—seriously.

JUSTIN KRON

The Keshet Forum

Herein lies a vast storehouse of riches that Michelle Van Loon unlocks for us. In *Moments & Days*, we discover our spiritual roots and the rhythms of our days. Van Loon, a Jewish follower of Jesus, wisely and deftly explores the formative implications of

living by the Jewish and Christian festal calendars throughout the year. Jesus himself was spiritually formed by living according to the festal rhythms. If you long to become more like Jesus, then read this book. It is a unique and important work—a gift. Don't miss out.

MARLENA GRAVES

*Author of *A Beautiful Disaster**

MICHELLE VAN LOON

MOMENTS & DAYS



How Our Holy Celebrations Shape Our Faith

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INTRODUCTION

Take My Moments and My Days

FOR 85 PERCENT OF EACH WEEK, modern Jerusalem is a noisy place. Each year, one and a half million camera-wielding pilgrims jostle for space with the city's eight hundred thousand permanent residents. Mix fervent prayer, the chatter of mothers walking their children to the market in strollers, the dialed-to-eleven volume of debate in cafés and at bus stops, car and taxi horns honking, sirens blaring, and feral cats fighting, and you have a mad symphony of sound.

But as Friday afternoon marches toward sundown, these sounds fade, and the city takes on a remarkable stillness. Save for a few cabs and service vehicles, cars disappear from the streets. Businesses close their doors. Voices dial down their volume from eleven to four. A holy hush descends on the city long before the first star appears in the desert sky over the city.

It is *Shabbat*, the Sabbath. The hush holds the city in its embrace until about an hour or so after sunset on Saturday. The volume builds once again in the early evening darkness as Jerusalem returns to its regularly scheduled program—until the following Friday afternoon.

The first time I experienced Sabbath in Jerusalem, I heard within the silence a loving reminder: There was a story the infinite God was telling us about himself within the finite measures of time that he's given to each one of us. It is a story about who he is and who we are called to be. In our plugged-in, 24/7/365 world drumming to an insistent, unvarying beat every single day, we are prone to miss the cadence of eternity. God has built his own rhythms of restoration and celebration into our days and years.

This book is meant to give us ears to hear them.

TAKE MY MOMENTS AND MY DAYS

I grew up in a fairly secular Jewish home in the suburbs of Chicago, so I knew about Shabbat. At least I thought I did.

On Friday nights, just before we ate dinner, my mom would kindle the two candles that welcomed the Sabbath into our home, and we'd pray the traditional Hebrew blessing over the flickering lights. After those moments of ritual, we'd go back to whatever we were doing—watching TV, doing homework or chores. Once in a great while, my family would visit our local temple for Shabbat morning services. But that level of religious observance was the exception, not the rule, in my Middle American, baby boomer childhood.

I came to faith in my Messiah Jesus as a teen, much to my parents' deep chagrin. Christians have a long, ugly history of persecuting Jewish people, and my parents could not understand why I would join a team with a track record like that. The horrible anti-Semitism exemplified by the Crusades, the pogroms, and the Holocaust was a fabric woven of bitter thorns, entirely different from the love and mercy I'd experienced from my Jewish Savior, Jesus.

I married a young man I met in a Bible study. The bonus for me was that he had a Jewish mom, which made him Jewish too. Bill and I began attending a small Messianic Jewish congregation near our home. These gatherings are designed for Jewish seekers and followers of Jesus, as well as Gentile Christians interested in learning more about the Hebrew foundations of their faith. Some of these gatherings use the liturgy and practice of a Jewish synagogue, while others function more like a Jewish-accented nondenominational church. Most of them orient their worship and celebration around the Jewish calendar cycle.

The Shabbat candles, the Passover meals, attendance at the autumn High Holy Day services at our temple—those bits of childhood ritual I'd experienced took on new meaning as we walked through the weekly and yearly cycle of the Jewish calendar with other Jewish believers. As we worshipped with other Jewish believers each week, the colorful but disconnected puzzle pieces of the faith I'd experienced as a child were being fit into a Jesus-shaped framework. They fit perfectly.

Shortly after our first child was born, we moved to an affordable but far-flung suburb. Continuing to attend the Messianic congregation was no longer practical, so we found our way to a nondenominational evangelical congregation similar to the one in which we'd first met. Several relocations over the next decades kept us living in primarily Gentile communities. We were often the only family of Jewish believers in some of the congregations we attended.

Some church people told me that my Jewishness didn't matter now that I believed in Jesus; the church had replaced Israel in God's plan. Other churches treated us as trophies, a sort of living down payment on a Last Days timeline because we as

Jewish people now believed in Jesus. Despite some of the awkward, uninformed, but usually well-meaning words, our family found a home among evangelical Gentile followers of Jesus. Bill attended an evangelical seminary. I began writing plays, skits, articles, and curriculum for publication, to be used by the church. We were active members of the congregations we attended. Yet in our home we committed to pass on to our children a sense of their Jewish identity, as well as a living faith in their Jewish Messiah. We believed their Jewish identity and a living faith in the resurrected Lord were their birthrights—and our responsibility to pass on to them.

On occasion through the years, my husband and I would be invited to teach Sunday school classes about some of the Old Testament foundations of New Testament faith. We led a number of Passover seders for curious small groups. People were always interested in the story of our respective faith journeys, too. But while I continued to carry a sense of the yearly rhythms of time and worship described in Old Testament Scripture, it seemed simpler somehow to keep “our” holidays as a background beat. Attempting to blend in seemed to be the best way to get along with our Gentile brothers and sisters.

But then two things converged to push the sound of those rhythms—two distinctively different beats—to the foreground.

During our first trip to Israel a few years ago, I experienced a Sabbath where most everyone around me was observing it. The stillness of this place shouted at me. I realized my intellectual understanding of what the day was meant to be fell far short of its actual experience in the context of community. Even those in Jerusalem who weren't particularly religious stayed off the streets from Friday at sundown until the first three stars appeared after

Saturday's sunset. They were drawn into the holy hush of Shabbat by the strong level of observance within the city's predominately Jewish populace. The hush carries into the city's Muslim community, for whom Friday is a day of prayer, and it is respected by the minority Christian groups who have maintained a presence in Jerusalem for centuries.

A fellow Jewish believer in Jesus living in Israel told me that this shared, communal participation in the weekly Sabbath and the yearly cycle of biblical and historical holidays had been a very powerful formative experience in her relationship with the Lord. I caught a glimpse of how that could be true in the silence that draped Jerusalem like a prayer shawl as the sun set each Friday.

A second rhythm occasionally matched the first, but it had its own distinctive beat. My husband and I began attending a congregation that followed the church calendar and used formal liturgy in its worship. All of our previous congregations had a cycle of observance that went something like this:

- › Thanksgiving
- › Christmas
- › Good Friday
- › Easter
- › Mother's Day
- › Father's Day
- › church picnic

Our new congregation's yearly cycle began with Advent and moved into Christmastide, then Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and Pentecost, before settling into Ordinary Time. Though I'd long

known about the basics of the Christian calendar, it was an entirely different experience to worship through it.

Each of these rhythms invited me to live inside its distinctive cadence. Each one accented a different story about the One who created us and is redeeming and transforming us in real time. As I contemplated the rhythms of stillness in a Jerusalem Sabbath and the music of joyous bells ringing during a Resurrection Day church service, my questions became my prayer:

Lord, what story does the Jewish calendar tell me about you? What do you want me to know about you through the Christian calendar? In light of what I learn, Father, how am I to respond? In this plugged-in, always-on age, what do the answers to those questions have to say about how I live every day—and how my family and my congregation choose to worship you?

My prayed questions gently convicted me. Perhaps I had too small a view of the moments and days I was offering to him. I've always loved the words of Frances Havergal's hymn, "Take My Life and Let It Be." The lyrics provide a way for me to express my desire to surrender myself wholeheartedly to God.

*Take my life and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee.
Take my moments and my days;
Let them flow in endless praise.*

Perhaps, in my prayer filled with questions, there was something more than my watch, cell phone, and Day-Timer at stake.

DISCIPLESHIP: FOLLOWING THE QUESTIONS

In our always-connected digital world, many of us have become accustomed to the idea that we are the architects of our days. We make our appointments and set our schedules, all the while kvetching that we're just too busy. Our overscheduled lives proclaim to the world and ourselves that, really, we're superindispensible people. We allow a subtle pride to warp our understanding of our roles in God's story: "Look at my crammed date book! If others need or want me this much, I must be pretty important."

And if they don't, then it's not a far leap for some of us to believe that maybe our lives don't matter much.

I'd like to suggest that our watches and Day-Timers and Google calendars are not the measure of our worth. We who belong to Jesus understand (at least in our heads) that we are not our own. Our eternal God has given us this slice of eternity, right here and now, in which to live for and with him.

Following a calendar that tells us our lives are not all about us is a powerful place to learn to inhabit that sacred gift of time. When Paul acknowledged not all followers of Jesus see specific days as holy, he wasn't suggesting that everyone in the church needed to hit the "Delete" button on the discussion (Romans 14:5-10). He was instead encouraging them to give one another lots of grace as they sought how to honor God together in their community. He never discounted the value of the weekly/yearly rhythm of holy days. He simply wanted the Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus to understand that the finished work of Jesus the Messiah fills full the meaning of these festival days:

Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink,
or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon

celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. COLOSSIANS 2:16-17

That reality must shape our ordinary moments and our sacred days. For those of us who find our spiritual identity determined by our own schedules, growth in discipleship may well mean choosing instead to be formed by the rhythms of appointed times with God in our individual lives and in our church communities. Those holy days are gifts of love from God designed to help us understand the nature of eternal life.

Rabbi Jack Reimer offers a wonderful explanation about the difference between the kinds of holidays that populate our own calendars and the everyday eternity of a holy day:

On holidays we run away from duties. On holy days we face up to them. On holidays we let ourselves go. On holy days we try to bring ourselves under control. On holidays we try to empty our minds. On holy days we attempt to replenish our spirits. On holidays we reach out for the things we want. On holy days we reach up for the things we need. Holidays bring a change of scene. Holy days bring a change of heart.¹

This book is designed to give you helpful, illuminating information about our rich biblical heritage of holy days, along with practical inspiration as you consider these questions for yourself. Together we'll explore the gift of time and take a brief look at the relationship of the Jewish and Christian calendars and their stories, structures, and histories. You'll find short chapters about each key holy day or season in both calendars that include

- › Bible background;
- › an explanation of how observance of the holy day has changed through history;
- › a look at how Jesus' life and ministry fulfilled (or will fulfill at his return) the heart of each sacred appointment in time; and
- › some practical suggestions about how you, your family, and your congregation might step into the day or season.

These holy days aren't a pile-on of additional to-dos for your busy life. They are instead a way for you to create intentionality in the way you live the gift of eternal life God has given you through his Son. My prayer for each of us is that we will have ears to hear the rhythm of eternity as we consider the ways in which we live each moment and day of our lives.

Teach us to number our days,
that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

PSALM 90:12

1

MEASURING TIME, BEING MEASURED BY TIME

The Calendar

I GLANCED AT THE CLOCK on the wall in my kitchen, and the familiar whoosh of adrenaline flooded into my system. I had to get my three young teen kids to three different destinations at the same time, and we were running late. In other words, it was a typical Tuesday in our suburban household.

“Get a move on, you guys,” I called, ratcheting up my voice half an octave so my three young teens would catch my sense of urgency. “We should have been out of here five minutes ago! Rachel, do you have your Spanish folder? Ben, where’s your tie?”

Jacob yelled from the basement, “I’ll be there in just a minute. I just have to finish—”

“No, not ‘just a minute,’ Jake,” I interrupted him. “Now!”

Rachel stomped into the room. “I can’t find my Spanish folder.”

“Did you look in that pile of books by the piano?” She stomped out of the room in double time. On cue, Jacob emerged from the basement, no shoes or socks on his feet.

“I think all your socks are in the laundry,” I told him. “You’ll have to run back downstairs and grab a pair from the dirty pile. Hurry!”

From the living room, Rachel called, “I can’t find my folder anywhere!”

At that moment, Jacob emerged from the basement holding an unmatched pair of tube socks as if he were carrying a sack of rabid bats. “*This* is the only pair I could find.”

Ben clipped his tie onto his grocery store uniform shirt as he hustled past me to the car, muttering, “I’m gonna be late for work.”

It’s been more than a decade and a half since I was chauffeuring my kids around our local suburban solar system. I have plenty of cherished memories of them during those growing-up years, but precious few of those memories were made during the frantic daily chase to lessons, after-school jobs, get-togethers with friends, or youth group activities. Though there are certainly seasons of life that are busier than others, it is true in every stage that abundant activity does not equal abundant life.

Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of Matthew 11:28-30 captures Jesus’ winsome invitation to each one of us:

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly. MATTHEW 11:28-30, MSG

A rhythm is by definition a pattern. Many of us get used to living without a pattern, without pauses or punctuation marks:

Our days bleed together *onethenext*. Though penciling onto our calendars some breaks in the form of vacations, downtime, and appointments to gather with family and friends will create a little bit of emotional breathing room in our 24/7 lives, we still function as though we're the author of our stories. There's not much space for grace if that's the case.

Most of us in the church have heard plenty of messages about the generous use of our financial resources or the value of serving others with our gifts and talents. The way we use our time is often included in the way we talk about stewardship. Time is a precious, irreplaceable resource, certainly. But when we speak of it only in terms of something at our disposal, we risk missing much grander and more beautiful truths about ourselves and the One who made it for us.

IN THE BEGINNING . . .

The first words of Genesis 1 highlight the way in which the eternal God first chose to express himself as Creator. The words “in the beginning” establish a line of demarcation between the eternal One and his finite creation. He anchored time to a fixed point “in the beginning” in order to unfold the rest of his creation. Indeed, the notion of time itself speaks of limits. Time can be measured, a distinct contrast with the limitlessness of God.

Yet God reveals his own use of created time throughout Genesis 1. Each movement of creation ends with a time stamp: “There was evening, and there was morning—the first day . . . the second day . . . the third day”—all the way through to the description of the creation of Adam on the sixth day. Even on the final day of the creation week, the holy rest had a beginning, a middle, and an end.

The way in which time was lived and measured by the ancient Jews was extremely countercultural. Writer Thomas Cahill credits the God of the Jews with changing the way in which ancient peoples measured time. Every other ancient civilization (such as the Sumerians and Egyptians) saw time cycling continually in place, without a larger purpose. “Cyclical religion goes nowhere,” he writes, “because, within its comprehension, there is no future as we have come to understand it, only the next revolution of the Wheel.” The human race began to talk about time differently when God called Abram to leave Ur by faith and head to an unknown land God would show him. Cahill continues,

Since time is no longer cyclical but one-way and irreversible, personal history is now possible and an individual life can have value. This new value is at first hardly understood; but already in the earliest accounts of Avraham [Abraham] and his family we come upon the carefully composed genealogies of ordinary people, something it would have never occurred to Sumerians [the dominant civilization in the region at the time Abram was living] to write down, because they accorded no importance to individual memories.¹

Time became a journey, not a wheel. What’s more, the journey had an eternal purpose—and a destination.

Within a few generations, Abraham’s descendants eventually found their way to safe harbor in Egypt during a time of famine in the Promised Land. Within a few more generations, these honored guests of one pharaoh became slaves of another, who carried no memory of the blessing Abraham’s great-grandson Joseph had been to the Egyptian people.

After four centuries of slavery, Moses led the people into the desert and then, after forty years of wandering, to the edge of home once again. As they traveled through time and place in God's company, they learned what it meant to stop living as refugees and begin living as pilgrims. The journey from slavery to freedom, from wandering to rootedness, and from seeing themselves as a family of tribes to embracing their calling as God's Chosen People occurred in the school of the desert. They'd known God as their Creator in Egypt, but by the time they crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land, they'd learned that he was their Redeemer and Provider.

If you were to trace this journey on a map, it would form a ragged loop. But this loop doesn't represent the meaningless, repetitive, impersonal cycle of the pagan. This journey through time is, to use a New Testament term, a narrow path. It has a distinct beginning and a specific, holy destination.

Before they entered the Land, God emphasized once again that their lives with him would be formed both by their day-to-day labor and by receiving his gifts of rest, celebration, and reconnection. Leviticus 23 prescribes the weekly Sabbath and the yearly cycle of holy days. The Sabbath gave God's people a day of sanctified rest, designed to renew their relationship with him and one another. In addition, throughout the year, the community would celebrate six holy gatherings that anchored them in the story of God's redemption. As they received these gifts of time from the Eternal One, he empowered them to spread his light to the world he loved.

Relationships are forged from time together. The unique relationship between God and the Hebrew people has been indelibly imprinted by both everyday discipleship and the weekly/yearly

festal cycle. The calendar has been integral in developing Jewish identity—an identity that has held the Chosen People through millennia of dispersion, oppression, and suffering. It reminded them of who (and whose) they were when it would have been far easier to forget and assimilate into the surrounding culture.

The effect of living in time differently than the prevailing culture has essential lessons for us today. Our personal schedules are not the extent of our identity. When we are focused on the mission of God and allow its story to determine the rhythms of our lives as a community, we proclaim to the world around us that our God is one and our Messiah is Lord—and all the little Caesars around us are not.

LEARNING THE WAY OF JESUS VIA THE CALENDAR

The Gospel of John opens with the words, “In the beginning,” a direct reference to Genesis 1. John emphasizes Jesus’ eternal, divine nature as Lord and Maker of his creation. In order to restore this creation to himself, Jesus maintained his divinity while at the same time choosing out of love to become a fully human member of his own creation: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). In so doing, he placed himself amid the Hebrew community he’d called millennia earlier to reflect his light to the world. The Jewish Jesus grew up celebrating the holy days prescribed in the Law. As he stepped into his ministry years, Jesus applied to himself his heavenly Father’s intention and meaning for those days in ways that confounded some of his listeners and caused others to draw near to God. Every time he healed on the day of rest, he reflected his Father’s restorative purpose of the Sabbath (see Mark 3:1-6). He modeled the kind of actions that flow from a clean heart as he washed his disciples’ feet during his last Passover meal with them

(John 13:1-7). And in his resurrection he showed us that eternal life was his gift to us in our here and now (Matthew 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20).

On the first Shavuot (Pentecost) after his resurrection, Jesus' band of Jewish disciples became a body of more than three thousand people (Acts 2). They were first known as a sect of Judaism, followers of the Way (Acts 22:4). It was only as Gentiles flowed into the church over the following decades that a shift began to occur away from the Jewish cycle of marking time. Paul's words to his Gentile friends in Rome reflect the beginning of that shift:

One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. ROMANS 14:5

The apostle to the Gentiles was concerned for what motivated Gentiles to adhere to the festal cycle given to the Jews:

Now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you. GALATIANS 4:9-11

But it's important to remember that the Jewish man who wrote these words himself continued to mark time by Jewish feasts, even as he spoke or wrote to primarily Gentile audiences (see Acts 20:16; 1 Corinthians 5:7; 16:8). Paul did not want to see those who'd been incarcerated in the prison of paganism continue to function as if

they were captives—not after they’d been set gloriously free by Jesus the Messiah. Paul wanted them to remember that Jew and Gentile alike were free to live, celebrate, and proclaim God’s salvation story.

Gentile Christians continued to grow in number, and in order to trace the story of their Savior through time each year, they adapted essential days from the Jewish calendar while also reimagining some of their own cultural festivals. The church calendar that took shape served as both a discipleship tool and missionary “marching orders” for the Christian community. It was how the church learned what it means to walk in the way of Jesus. As such, this calendar mirrored the same message as the Jewish festal calendar from which it grew: You and I are not the center of the universe. It’s really, truly not about us.

MEASURING TIME, BEING MEASURED BY TIME

The calendar used by a people shapes their culture. Calendars in all cultures mark big events and measure ordinary days as well. The Jewish people worshipped in time to the festal calendar and eventually came to use the festal calendar as the basis for their civil calendar.

The festal year was linked to agricultural seasons. The first month of the year, Nisan, is in early spring, but the Jewish civil year begins in the fall, on the first day of the seventh month of the year. Confusing? Consider the way in which we mark time in our own culture.

Our calendar tells us a new civil year begins on January 1. However, we also have an academic year, beginning in late August or early September. The academic year was set up as a way of standardizing public education in a way that reflected earlier agrarian rhythms and accommodated common cultural practices such as

summertime travel that allowed families to escape the sweltering heat of congested cities.

The Jewish calendar was a lunar calendar. Each month traced the twenty-eight-day cycle of the moon. Several other ancient civilizations used a lunar calendar as well, but those calendars didn't reflect the belief of the Jews that they were on a pilgrimage through time with and toward God.

Because most of the first followers of Jesus were Jews, the lunar calendar shaped the worship of the early church. If you've ever wondered why we celebrate Easter on March 28 one year and April 15 on another, your answer is found in the lunar calendar: Passover, the holiday so linked to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, is calculated from a lunar year of only about 355 days. (A "leap month" is added to the Hebrew calendar every few years so that the feasts remain aligned with their agricultural seasons.)²

Over the next centuries, for a host of reasons, the church moved to a solar calendar. Roman emperor Julius Caesar introduced this calendar about four decades before Jesus was born in an attempt to correct the discrepancy between the lunar cycles and our earth's 365-and-a-quarter-day annual trip around the sun. Christian celebrations such as Christmas were anchored in this Julian solar calendar. But the Julian calendar had its own issues with imprecision. The "movable feasts" of Easter and Pentecost (so named because they were tied to the lunar calendar and changed from year to year) had been drifting ever later in the calendar. So in AD 1582, Pope Gregory XIII (aided by mathematicians and astronomers) fine-tuned the Julian calendar. These adjustments included changing the way in which leap years are calculated and removing ten days from that year's calendar. Over time, the Gregorian calendar became the de facto civil calendar of the West, and today it is the

primary tool by which much of the world plans its business meetings, date-stamps legal documents, and schedules piano lessons and work hours at the local grocery store.

Many of us treat the civil calendar as if it's a giant empty cabinet awaiting the details of our lives. We stock it with containers of appointments, boxes crammed full of work time, and stacks of recreational activity, acting in the process as though we're captains of our calendars. But this approach to the calendar more closely resembles that ancient, cyclical calendar in which there is no meaning in our past or future, only in the acquisitions and achievements of our present. There is no story, no journey associated with our civil calendar. We have to look elsewhere for that.

When we pray, "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12), we are not asking for a tidier organizational system for our calendars. Wisdom is not a clever squishing of time to fit daily Bible reading into our schedule or have better attendance at weekly worship services. The Chosen People discovered more than three millennia ago that when God called them to number their days, it wasn't about rearranging their calendar, but about reorienting their lives—heart, soul, mind, and strength—as they followed him like pilgrims through time.