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“Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain wisdom of heart” (Ps 90:13).

Eccles 1:2-11’ Ps 90; Luke 9:7-9

Today’s readings reflect common ways of thinking in the ancient world. In Ecclesiastes, the sophisticated author soberly laments the predictability of natural cycles and life patterns. “There is nothing new under the sun” and “all things are vanity.” In the long view of things, everyone dies and is forgotten, so what purpose is there to life? Many upper-class people succumbed to boredom, the pursuit of trivia and idle pleasures or sank into existential numbness.

In Luke’s Gospel, King Herod is both sated with power and decadence and dabbles in superstitions, signs and portents, the return of dead prophets, including John the Baptist, whom he had beheaded. He hears rumors about Jesus and is eager to see him perform a miracle. As a brutal and paranoid ruler, Herod is dangerous and unpredictable, and Jesus refers to him as a “fox” to be avoided.

In our post-Enlightenment civilization, it is discouraging to know that many people indulge in wild conspiracy theories, reject science at their own peril and live in alternate worldviews driven by violent fantasies and fears. Social media, an astonishing technical advance in instant communication, has also been shown to amplify the spread of disinformation connecting malevolence to gullibility, destroying public trust and social cohesiveness when we most need them. Others abandon productive lives and sink into drugs and passivity.

The Psalmist reflects on the essential need to make God our organizing principle, the one, absolute Source that gives purpose to our brief lives. There is something

haunting about this counsel when considered in hindsight. Those who waste their lives with indecision and lack of commitment can learn as they lament these words: “Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain wisdom of heart” (Ps 90:13).

Yet, it is never too late. The great St. Augustine postponed his encounter with God because of his pursuit of pleasure, then grieved that he had come so late to discover God’s love. Others have described God’s relentless pursuit, like Francis Thompson, who concludes his long poem, “The Hound of Heaven,” with the pursued’s discovery of who is pursuing him. God has never lost track of him and has pursued him like a lover all his life.

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