

**Learning to Count Our Days**  
**Psalm 90**  
**First Presbyterian Church**  
**October 13, 2019**  
**Stewardship of Time**

Prepare our hearts, O God,  
to accept your Word.  
Silence in us any voice but your own,  
that, hearing, we may also obey your will;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Psalm 90

<sup>1</sup>Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.

<sup>2</sup>Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world,  
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

<sup>3</sup>You turn us back to dust, and say, "Turn back, you mortals."

<sup>4</sup>For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the  
night.

<sup>5</sup>You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning;

<sup>6</sup>in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.

<sup>7</sup>For we are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed.

<sup>8</sup>You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance.

<sup>9</sup>For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh.

<sup>10</sup>The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their  
span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.

<sup>11</sup>Who considers the power of your anger? Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.

<sup>12</sup>So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.

<sup>13</sup>Turn, O LORD! How long? Have compassion on your servants!

<sup>14</sup>Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

<sup>15</sup>Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil.

<sup>16</sup>Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children.

<sup>17</sup>Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands— O prosper the work of our hands!

### Sermon

Most of us here this morning  
were around and probably remember  
when the Franklin Daily Planner was introduced in 1984.

You remember it?

It was a huge, textbook size three-ring book  
that was thick enough to hold two pages  
for each of the 365 days of the year.

It was advertised as a tool for increasingly busy and scheduled people...  
and I must say it was a bit intimidating  
to be a young pastor sitting in a church committee meeting  
and have everyone whip out their planners  
to schedule the next event.

Of course, that was and still is its value –  
to remind us when we are to meet a friend  
or see the dentist or turn in a school assignment  
or get the oil changed in the car.

But the truth is the Franklin Daily Planner is MORE than a tool:  
it's also a way of seeing time.

The flat pages become our way of visualizing what time is:  
a set of blocks to be filled in  
with activities and commitments and reminders....  
and as the owner of this time we see on the pages before us,  
we imagine our role is to look down from above  
and determine what goes where.

This, of course, is a delusion we live with –  
that we are the owners/the masters of our time –  
it's a delusion fed by our ability to do most anything we want  
at most anytime we want.

Time, for us, is no longer hinged  
to the rhythms of the sun and the seasons.

Whereas our ancestors, most of them farmers,  
worked within the confines of light and darkness,

hot and cold weather,  
dry and rainy seasons...  
our children are shaped by the “round-the-clock” availability  
NOT ONLY of light and water and air conditioning,  
but of entertainment and communication and shopping  
and almost anything else they could want.  
This change in our relationship with time  
has been under way for centuries,  
yet, in recent years it has shifted into hyper-speed...  
and frankly, it’s yet to be seen  
how we can adapt to the changing rhythms of time.

What has not changed – at least for people of faith –  
is that when we talk about stewardship...  
when we recall the opening words of Psalm 24 –  
“the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it,  
the world, and those who live in it” –  
when we talk about stewardship  
we must include God’s gift of TIME in that conversation.

It is interesting to me that the church  
so closely ties “stewardship” to money...  
when in the grand scheme of things,  
money is not our most precious gift.

Though most of us begin our young lives  
thinking money and possessions and success  
are the most precious things we can have...  
somewhere along the way that changes  
and we realize that time is the most precious thing we have...  
that time is the most precious thing we have to give –  
time to do the things we enjoy and that feed us...  
time to spend with the people we love and cherish  
and bring us joy...  
time to ponder and reflect upon the meaning and purpose of life...  
time, in the words of the Westminster Catechism,  
to simply “enjoy God.”

Time is precious.  
When it has passed, it is gone...  
when it has been given away, it cannot be take back.

In our ancient Hebrew texts,  
the 90<sup>th</sup> psalm is called  
“A Prayer of Moses, the Man of God.”  
Tradition holds that Moses spoke these words

while he was standing on Mount Pisgah –  
Mt. Pisgah was the mountain at the edge of the wilderness  
from which Moses and the tribes of Israel  
could look down into the promised land.

After 40 years of practicing  
how to live as free people under God's law –  
they had finally reached their destination.

But Moses was old... he was dying...  
and he would never enter the land  
he was now seeing for the first time.

It didn't matter that according to scripture  
he was a greater mortal than any other man –  
the one "whom the Lord knew face to face."

Still, he was mortal...  
and like all mortals, he ran out of time.<sup>1</sup>

But God didn't...  
and the deep truth of this psalm  
is that our mortal lifespans  
are set in the grandest context imaginable –  
our time - seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong –  
is played out on a stage  
that runs from everlasting to everlasting.

We are dust...  
the years of our lives are like a dream, or grass, or a sigh.

And those years are played out on a stage  
that belongs to the One for whom a thousand years  
is like yesterday when it is past,  
or like a watch in the night.

The contrast could not be sharper.

Yet, Psalm 90 brings together these two kinds of time –  
our short sigh and God's long eternity...  
our mortality and God's immortality...

and we discover that only a dwelling place  
this broad and this deep can finally hold  
all the days, weeks, and years of our lives.

Only within this dwelling place might we mortals  
learn to count our days wisely.

Which for me is another way to describe  
the stewardship of time –  
to count our days wisely.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bass, p. 120

<sup>2</sup> Bass, p. 121

Busy people tend to think  
that all they need is just a few more open boxes  
on the pages of their datebooks...  
a few more hours in the day,  
a few more days in the week,  
a few more weeks in the year.  
And though we understand this,  
we know it would only offer a temporary fix...  
not only because those extra boxes  
would soon fill up like all the others,  
but also, because what we really need  
is not MORE TIME,  
but time of a different "QUALITY."

For instance, someone who cares for you kindly asks,  
"How was your day?"  
The truth is your day passed like a whirlwind  
and you have to really focus  
to remember what all happened.  
So, you conjure up an image of the little boxes on your calendar,  
running through them quickly in your mind –  
you scan the checklist of tasks completed  
and those waiting for you tomorrow...  
and finally, recalling no major catastrophes, you answer,  
"Not bad. How was yours?"  
And there's nothing wrong with that,  
but I read this week about a mother  
who has a different way of asking that same question.  
As she tucks her children in to bed each night...  
their teeth brushed  
and their hair still damp from the bathtub,  
she asks them a question:  
"Where did you meet God today?"  
And they tell her, one by one -  
"a teacher helped me do my math,  
there was a homeless person in the park,  
I saw a tree with lots of flowers in it."  
She tells them where she met God, too.  
And before the children drop off to sleep,  
the stuff of THIS day has become the substance of prayer.<sup>3</sup>  
How might just asking that simple question each night

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<sup>3</sup> Bass, p. 14

help you receive God's gift of time each day?  
To ask: "Where DID I meet God today?"

What about your week?

I assume you're like me  
in that your week has a certain rhythm;  
even those of you who are retired,  
I assume there is some rhythm and flow to your week.

This was one of the biggest adjustments for me  
when I became a pastor.

I was always a church member  
and Sundays were always important,  
but before I was a pastor,  
I thought of my week in terms of five workdays  
which were followed by a weekend.

Then, all of a sudden my workdays stayed workdays  
and my weekends became workdays...  
and there was always looming this REALITY  
that someone once described  
as the "relentless return of the Sabbath" –  
which meant that by Sunday morning  
you better have a worship service planned and a sermon prepared  
because it was going to happen ready or not.

You can't just put a sign on the sanctuary door,  
"Sorry, nothing came to me this week.  
Try again next Sunday."

So, my WEEK has a rhythm... your WEEK has a rhythm...  
and the question is HOW,  
during those seven days,  
how can we attend to God and ourselves...  
how can we open ourselves to others and creation  
as a regular part of our weekly rhythm?

Well, you know God's answer to that, right?

God's answer is the gift of the Sabbath.  
"Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy."

And as most of us know,  
"back in the day" that was a THING...  
the Sabbath was a "thing"  
that meant stores were closed  
and no one went to work  
and lots of folks went to church  
and you might as well forget about going to a movie.

That has changed, of course...  
    now the Sabbath is just like any other day.  
What HASN'T CHANGED is our NEED for it...  
    our need to set aside a day  
        (or at least some portion of a day) and keep it HOLY...  
to refrain from work and the need to produce...  
    to honor God's creativity in making this world...  
to imitate God's taking time to rest...  
    to remember and experience our freedom  
        from the bondages of this world.  
Though times have changed,  
    we haven't outgrown our need for this gift.  
So, is it remotely possible  
    that at some point in the rhythm of our week,  
        you and I might keep (even a few hours)  
            of holy sabbath time?

And finally, once we've considered our day and our week...  
    how might we receive the time God gives us in a full year?  
One of my favorite stories tells of a land  
    where it is always winter and never Christmas.  
In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*,  
    two boys and two girls from England  
        stumble by magic into a snowy forest,  
    where a good Faun and his Talking Animal friends  
        recognize them as Sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve.  
They discover they are in Narnia...  
    a land that was created and is still dearly loved  
        by the great and good Lion, Aslan.  
But now Narnia is caught in the cold, cruel grasp  
    of the White Witch... and it's always winter.  
Just try to imagine a full year  
    without seasons of warmth  
        and days of special gladness.  
Imagine that evil has triumphed so completely  
    that the earth is forbidden to tilt toward the sun...  
        that plants cannot blossom or flower...  
    that creatures are denied  
        the smells and colors and tastes of life.  
Day follows day without meaning.  
    They are all the same.  
        They wait and wait for spring, but nothing happens.

Life is all fasting, with never a feast.<sup>4</sup>

Thankfully, our home is a planet  
where we do have seasons of warmth  
and days of special gladness...  
where spring eventually comes to every place...  
where there is a time for planting and for reaping...  
for fasting and feasting...  
for letting go and starting over.

Thankfully, for us  
there are times of very intense work and times for vacation...  
there is the school year and then summer...  
and of course, there are birthdays, anniversaries,  
baptisms, graduations, retirements, national holidays.  
These rhythms run through the days and weeks of our lives,  
eventually being stitched together  
until they come full circle over the course of a year.

Yet, for Christians there is another circling year, isn't there?  
Call it the church year... the liturgical year... the Christian year...  
but whatever we call it,  
it is the year as lived by Christian people at worship.  
It is our way of infusing the "content" of our faith –  
God's own salvation story – into our present time.  
Inviting us here-and-now to experience the story  
that began at creation and continues into a future  
that is already dawning.

This, for me, is one of many blessings  
I discovered when I became a Presbyterian.  
For a Southern Baptist, this thing called the "liturgical year"  
was at first, awkward... and honestly, kind of weird.  
I mean what's with the different colors of the different seasons?  
And really, why can't we sing Christmas carols  
from Thanksgiving on?  
What's this Feast of the Epiphany?  
And O my goodness, why do we put ashes on folks' foreheads?  
Can someone please tell me what a "maundy" is?

Allow me to let Catholic theologian Mark Searle answer this.  
He writes, the year encircles us with "sayings and stories,  
songs and prayers, processions and silences,

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<sup>4</sup> Bass, p. 79

images and visions, symbols and rituals,  
feasts and fasts” ...  
and through them all “the mysterious ways of God  
are not merely presented but experienced,  
not merely perused but lived through.”<sup>5</sup>

I guess it has been about 40 years now  
that I have been practicing the Christian year.  
And I can honestly say  
that of all the ways I mark time each year –  
fall, winter, spring, summer –  
school in session and school on break –  
birthdays, anniversaries, and special holidays –  
of all the ways I mark time,  
it’s our congregation’s observance of the Christian year  
that means the most...  
that gives it its meaning and purpose... the fact is  
that reminds me EACH YEAR  
of all God has done and is still doing  
within our time.

We are just six weeks from the beginning of Advent  
when we start the circle once again.  
Let me to encourage you this coming year  
to be a part of our church’s observance of the Christian year –  
joining in weekly Lord’s Day worship  
and also in our special services such as Epiphany,  
Ash Wednesday, and Maundy Thursday.

Allow the Christian year to open you up  
to receiving God’s gift of time in a deeper way.

So, to be honest I couldn’t think of how to end this sermon –  
we know each other well enough now  
that I feel comfortable confessing that.  
So I’m going to end with a poem  
which is not unprecedented in the craft of preaching -

you’ve no doubt heard the old description of a typical sermon –  
three points, a poem, and a prayer.  
So, I am going to end with a poem  
by someone who was learning to count her days.  
Jane Kenyon was diagnosed with cancer in 1994  
and died a little over a year later.  
A few years earlier she wrote a poem

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted by Dorothy Bass, p. 90-91

springing from her awareness that she was having a good day...  
and that she was planning to have other goods day just like it.  
But she was also aware that one day such days will no longer exist...  
which awakens in her an appreciation for the time she has.

I got out of bed  
on two strong legs.  
It might have been  
otherwise. I ate  
cereal, sweet  
milk, ripe, flawless,  
peach. It might  
have been otherwise.  
I took the dog uphill  
to the birch wood.  
All morning I did  
the work I love.

At noon I lay down  
with my mate. It might  
have been otherwise.  
We ate dinner together  
at a table with silver  
candlesticks. It might  
have been otherwise.  
I slept in a bed  
in a room with painting  
on the walls, and  
planned another day  
just like this day.  
But one day, I know,  
it will be otherwise.

So teach us, O God, to count our days  
That we may gain a wise heart. Amen.