

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

¹Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.

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

³You turn us back to dust, and say, "Turn back, you mortals."

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

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

⁶in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.

⁷For we are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed.

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

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

¹⁰The 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.

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

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

¹³Turn, O LORD! How long? Have compassion on your servants!

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

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

¹⁶Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children.

¹⁷Let 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 taken back.

In our ancient Hebrew texts, the 90th 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.¹ 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.²

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?”

¹ Bass, p. 120

² Bass, p. 121

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.³ How might just asking that simple question each night 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.

³ Bass, p. 14

But now Narnia is caught in the cold, cruel grasp of the White Witch... and it is 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.⁴

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, 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."⁵ 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.

⁴ Bass, p. 79

⁵ Quoted by Dorothy Bass, p. 90-91

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 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 springing from her awareness that she was having a good day... and that she was planning to have other good days 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.