

“Our Days are Numbered”
A Sermon preached by
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Scripture: Psalm 90: 1-12 (Psalm from the Lectionary on November 15, 2020)

SLIDE 1 – Intro

SLIDE 2

Land Acknowledgment

SLIDES 3 &4

Call to Worship (Psalm 121)

- The Lord be with you.
- **And also with you.**
- I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.
- **He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.**
- The Lord watches over you—the Lord is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.
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- **The Lord will keep you from all harm— he will watch over your life; the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.**

SLIDE 5

Prayer of Adoration & Confession and Assurance of Pardon

Worthy of praise from every mouth, of confession from every tongue, of worship from every creature, is your glorious name O God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God forever. You created the world in your grace, and by your compassion you redeemed it. Heaven and earth are full of your praises: glory be to you, God most high.

Angels and archangels and all the host of heaven worship you. We are not worthy to praise you; but, for your mercy sake, accept the praises of all your servants, your might beyond measure, your wisdom beyond knowledge, your love beyond all telling. You have put eternity into our hearts and made us hunger and thirst for you. Satisfy the longings you have implanted that we may find you in life and find life in you.

As we near the end of this church year and look forward to the beginning of the season of Advent coming soon, we acknowledge your steadfast presence during the difficult months that have past. Bless the work of the congregations of Vancouver Island Presbytery, specifically Knox and Trinity churches as we pray for our pastors Laura and Reid and thank you for this

week of rest with their loved ones. Guide the ministers, elders, members and adherents of these congregations in the months ahead that all may seek, serve and delight in your truth revealed, grant that learning may flourish among us as we study your word, as a means both of enriching our lives and of drawing us nearer to you from whom all truth proceeds.

As we focus on you, O God, we acknowledge that your creation is beautiful, yet broken, marred by sin and fallen from your glory and intention for abundant life. Through individual and corporate sin, we confess that we are caught up in this brokenness that manifests in relational, racial, and economic injustice. We participate in this brokenness in the devastation of your creation and our lack of care for this planet and its creatures. We long to be a part of the healing of creation and so we confess that we have tried to hide from you, for we have done wrong. We have lived for ourselves and apart from you. We have turned from our neighbours, and refused to bear the burden of others. We have ignored the pain of the world and passed by the hungry, the poor, and the oppressed. In your great mercy, forgive our sins and free us from selfishness, that we may choose your will and obey your commandments, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Friends, here the good news! Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ, and Christ died for us, Christ rose for us, Christ reigns in power for us, Christ prays for us. Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old life is gone; a new life has begun. Know that you are forgiven, treasured, loved and be at peace. Amen.

SLIDE 6 – Psalm 91 – My Dwelling Place (Keith and Kirsten Getty)

SLIDE 7 – Prayer for Illumination

Gracious God, we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from your mouth. Make us hungry for this heavenly food, that it may nourish us today in the ways of eternal life; through Jesus Christ, the bread of heaven. **Amen.**

SLIDES 8 & 9

Psalm 90

A prayer of Moses the man of God.

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

² Before the mountains were born
or you brought forth the whole world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

³ You turn people back to dust,
saying, "Return to dust, you mortals."

⁴ A thousand years in your sight
are like a day that has just gone by,
or like a watch in the night.

⁵ Yet you sweep people away in the sleep of death—
they are like the new grass of the morning:
⁶ In the morning it springs up new,
but by evening it is dry and withered.
⁷ We are consumed by your anger
and terrified by your indignation.
⁸ You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your presence.
⁹ All our days pass away under your wrath;
we finish our years with a moan.
¹⁰ Our days may come to seventy years,
or eighty, if our strength endures;
yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow,
for they quickly pass, and we fly away.
¹¹ If only we knew the power of your anger!
Your wrath is as great as the fear that is your due.
¹² Teach us to number our days,
that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

SLIDE 10

- Our days are numbered. A listener can receive that statement in many different ways. How does it strike you? Of course, it could be received as simple fact. On the other hand, hearing that one's days are numbered could be a fearful thing. Or, for those who adopt a posture of gratitude for each moment knowing that our days are numbered could fructify our common life together in church and community. "Teach us to number our days," Psalm 90 proclaims, and in many ways, we do number our days as simple fact. We currently live a reality where numbers in our everyday life have significance. The number of mails in ballots counted. The number of active Covid-19 cases in our province. The numbers on the TSX stock exchange as people both retired and working keep an eye on their investments.
- Of course, the expression "your days are numbered" could also be a fearful thing. Some may fear their days are numbered in their workplace as the economy remains unstable during a pandemic. Some may worry their days are number due to a doctor's diagnosis or concerns of Covid-19 in the community. Days may be numbered in our relationships or friendships.
- But are there more hopeful ways to understand our days being numbered? Let's turn to our psalm today to find out.

SLIDE 11

- Psalm 90 is a well-known and well-loved song of Israel, an opening prayer at the beginning of Book IV of the psalter. It's imagery of God as our dwelling place generation

after generation, a promise that while earthly life is fleeting God is “everlasting to everlasting,” makes it a favourite passage for funeral or memorial services. It has sparked the sanctified imagination of artists and poets and musicians down through the years. Just think about the classic hymn “O God our help in ages past” by Isaac Watts.

- I remember my Church of Scotland trained minister as a child dropping into Sunday School class and teaching us, like a magic trick, that if you open your bible to the middle, it usually lands in the Psalms. I was taught that at the heart of Scripture, therefore, is praise of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Later in seminary, however, when I dove more fully into Scripture studies, I learned how the Psalms are set into five sections and scholars argue that the placement of the psalms in the psalter is not by accident, but rather is done so with great care, intentionality and meaning. For example, up until now in the Book of Psalms, the first three books of the Psalter have led us to a crescendo making clear just how broken God’s covenant with David has become, raising questions about God’s people and the monarchy of Israel.
- Scholars argue that this fourth part of the Psalter that Psalm 90 introduces was likely gathered together during the post-exile period. The temple destroyed and rebuilt in Jerusalem, the people of God are without a King and uncertain about the future. Here, in Psalm 90 they turn a corner and recover the assurance of God’s faithful presence with them. One scholar has argued that the theme of this fourth part of the Psalter is simply that “the Lord reigns.”

SLIDE 12

- Curiously, this fourth part of the psalter begins with Psalm 90 being dedicated to Moses. Hmm, that’s a bit odd. Why? This is the only psalm dedicated to Moses. Moses, whose deep sense of God’s presence and faithfulness in a time of disruption, a time on the move, not dependent upon a holy land, temple or Davidic King. Psalm 90 is dedicated by the people of Israel to Moses, as they find themselves in circumstances of wandering akin to when their ancestors were led by Moses, and ultimately led by God.
- In both Exodus and Exile, God’s people experienced time differently. The uncertainty of the future, the disgruntlement of the present, and the painful longing for the past, all stretched time differently for Israel. In fact, the dedication to Moses also reflects the truth that Moses, like so many is a story of just not enough time.
- I recall leading a pilgrimage group on one of my many trips to Israel, this one had an extra side trip to Jordan. One day, we stood at the top of Mount Nebo, looking down on what Moses and the Israelites would have seen before crossing the promised land. Even today, on a clear day you can see Jericho from the top of Mt. Nebo. As you’ll recall, however, after leading the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt for 40 years to the edge of the promise land, Moses dies before entering. That night at the hotel on the outskirts of Amman, I checked my email from home. A member of our congregation had died, 64 years old, having just sold off his architecture firm and was gearing up for an exciting retirement full of travel and adventure. At the memorial service two weeks later I preached on Moses at Mt. Nebo, as his widow mentioned in the eulogy that of all their careful planning for retirement, the one thing they hadn’t accounted for was the preciousness of time.

SLIDE 13

- The psalmist acknowledges this sense of unease with our lack of control over time, “for a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night.” John Calvin reflecting on this verse asked, “to what is it owing that we have so great anxiety about our life, that nothing suffices us...but because we foolishly imagine that we shall nestle in this world forever?”
- Indeed, although the psalm declares God to be our resting place, it does not promise that life will be restful. The brevity of life mentioned earlier also has shades of God’s judgment baked into the psalmist’s cry. The psalmist is expressing our human grief and sorrow of the amount of suffering in the world. Human life fades and withers, the psalmist imagines us as being consumed by God’s anger, with no ability to hide from God what we hide so well from others. The lectionary tries to protect us from the full blast of the psalmists lament by omitting verses 9-11:
- For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh. 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.
- I’ve yet to see a Hallmark card with those Scripture verses on them – uplifting, eh
- And yet, search your own life experience. Think about your friends and family, whether they are Christian believers or not. Are they anxious about their length of days? Do they wonder whether their lives have meaning and purpose? Is there not something natural for us as human creatures to wonder whether our lives have made any kind of impact on the world?

SLIDE 14

- People can be puzzled by the language of “wrath of God” in verses 9 to 11 but theologian James May writes, “the wrath of God is a linguistic symbol for the divine limits and pressure placed against human resistance to his sovereignty – eternity belongs to the sovereign deity of the Lord as God . . . death is the final and ultimate “no” that cancels any human pretense to autonomy.” Normal human limits are experienced as wrath, and if we fail to trust God, it is natural to fear death and as Canadian theologian John Douglas Hall noted that the fear of death itself becomes “death-serving.” In other words, it motivates human beings towards further self-assertion further alienating us from God.

SLIDE 15

- In my first call I was blessed to have a former Moderator of the General Assembly in my congregation. Retired well and nothing but a support to me as a fresh faced twenty something pastor, we would golf together in the summer or curl in the winter and every week I would seek his wisdom on whatever went wrong at the Session meeting, or dealing with the latest concerns of parishioners. He was always kind, encouraging and honest about life and faith, including his own short comings and mistakes in ministry.
- One day he said, “Ross, I’ve come to think of the life of faith as sand through the fingertips. Some days you finish and you’re not sure what you’ve accomplished for the

provision – when captive in Egypt, God sends Moses as liberator, when a sea blocks their escape, God makes a path, when provisions have reached their end, manna is provided, and in the fullness of time, when humanity cannot find its way out of sin, a Saviour is sent. Even then, when death on a cross ends all hope, the tomb is found empty.

SLIDE 18

O God our Help in Ages Past

SLIDE 19

Prayers of Intercession

Gracious God,
who has set us in a world of soaring beauty,
and profound mystery. . .
who has enclosed our years within the eternal context
of fragrant fall mornings,
and sparkling winter nights. . .
who has granted us, over the years,
the lilt of lively companionship,
the provocation of ideas and personalities.

We give thanks for those who love and care for us,
giving us a place of belonging, valuing us for who we are.
We give thanks for the valuable people that surround us today watching the service online
for gifts that are shown in the church and in our community.

Eternal defender of the poor and sad,
hear our prayers for all who suffer, especially those impact by health concerns related to the
impact of Covid-19.

For those who are refugees, exiles from home,
because of the cruelty of enemies or the vagaries of nature.

For those who are starving
and whose tears are their only food.

For those who are desperate for a drink,
and who thirst for life-giving water.

For those who are sad and troubled,
whose hearts break for want of hope.

For those whose faith is weak,
who feel that God has abandoned them.

Protector of the weak, be with all who need you today.
May they know that they are not forgotten.

Give us this day our daily bread, O God, and grant us a wise heart
As we learn to count our days aware of your presence.

During this time of global pandemic, we ask that you would
Bless the unemployed and those who are the victims of economic depression or job discrimination.

Bless the poor barely surviving on minimum incomes.

Bless the aged who must sometimes live out their days in circumstances of struggle.

Bless the millions of people in our world today who suffer from acute hunger and from the oppression of the rich.

O God, let our abundance at this time supply their want.

As Jesus had compassion on the multitudes, so let our hearts be broken—and opened—and emptied—and may your love be multiplied.

We remember before you now those who are facing uncertainty and are dear to us...

Forgive us, Lord, our debts, as we fully desire to overlook the chasm of hurts which have stood between us and our debtors.

Forgive us the irreverence of our many idolatries.

Forgive our anxieties about circumstances of the moment.

Forgive our enslavement to work, our over-devotion to leisure.

Forgive our participation in the violent temper of our times.

Forgive our artfully concealed prejudices.

Forgive our impatience with sickness or pain.

Forgive our lack of trust.

Even as you have promised, Lord, let no temptation overtake us but such as are common to all people, for we know you are gracious and will provide us a way of escape that we may be able to persevere.

Grant us, we pray, deliverance from the evil one.

Bring peace to the striving nations, unity to a divided church, deliverance to a host of oppressed peoples, and salvation to all your human creatures.

For truly, Lord, yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever!

Amen!

SLIDE 20 – Be Thou My Vision

SLIDE 21 – Offering

SLIDE 22 - Benediction