

*Teach Us
to Count Our Days*

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
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by
the Reverend Agnes W. Norfleet

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Fair warning before I read this text. Psalm 90 is the source of a favorite hymn of many, *Our God, Our Help in Ages Past*, and it contains some of the most comforting affirmations in the Bible. But between our general familiarity with its opening and closing images we encounter more language about God's anger and wrath than progressive Presbyterians are accustomed to enjoying! So let me give you a hint for interpreting this language in our hearing.

Pondering the reality of human frailty and finitude, the Psalmist is wondering if our limitations are the result of God's anger. It is more of a projection on the part of the Psalmist, than a proclamation about the nature of God. So with that in mind, may we tune our hearts to hear the good news of 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!

Every once in a while we come across some fragment of a script from another era, and it is almost haunting how relevant it feels in the present day. The French philosopher Voltaire had a wit and wisdom that transcends his moment as a figure of the 18th Century Enlightenment. He posed an intriguing question, in the form of a riddle, that I believe preoccupies much of our consciousness today. Voltaire asked, “Of all the things in the world, what is the longest and the shortest, the swiftest and the slowest, the most divisible and the most extended, the most neglected and the most regretted, without which nothing can be done, which devours all that is little and ennobles all that is great?” And then he gave the simple answer: “Time.”¹

We are well acquainted with this paradox of time. If we are waiting in a long line, anxious for the doctor to call with test results, or yearning for a college acceptance letter to arrive in the mail, then the passage of time lasts way too long. However, if we are rushing to get somewhere, have an unreasonably lengthy to-do list, or find ourselves up against a tight deadline, then time speeds by and comes up short. And, when we expand our musings regarding the passage of time from the personal to more general concerns about things like – the upcoming presidential election, or climate change and global warming, then sheer panic can erupt over the times we are in.

We yearn for time to give us a chance to transform, heal, repair, rebuild and open upon a brighter tomorrow. Depending on our momentary perspective, time is both the longest and the shortest, the swiftest and the slowest, the most neglected and the most regretted indeed.

I typed Time Management as a subject into the Amazon Books search engine and over 50,000 titles can be found, including an entire section on time management for kids. Long gone are the days, it would appear, when children spend hours outdoors enjoying the good earth, making mud pies and feeding birds, climbing trees and taking flight in their imaginations.

¹ Marcel Danesi, *The Puzzle Instinct* (Bloomington: Indiana State University Press, 2002), 42.

In 1979 a child was deemed ready for the first grade if she were six years old, had two to five permanent teeth, could tell a school crossing guard her address, could stand on one foot with her eyes closed for ten seconds, could ride a small two-wheel bicycle, could travel alone four blocks to a friend's house, and could count eight to ten pennies correctly. Just forty years later, a checklist for the first grade in one public school includes: the ability to identify and write numbers to 100, count by 2's to 20 and by 5's to 100, interpret and fill in data on a graph, read all kindergarten-level sight words, be able to read books with ten words per page and form complete sentences on paper using phonetic spelling. ²

No wonder there is a market targeting time management books for children! And sadly, during the recent Christmas shopping season, we learned that if you want one of those books the very next day, and I'm guilty of checking that box, we can put peoples' lives at risk because of the pressure placed on subcontracted truck drivers to meet our need for speed.

What did Voltaire say? Time "devours all that is little," and can ennoble "all that is great."

In this season of high anxiety about both the urgent, quick passing of hours and the slow moving length of days, how can we ennoble the great gift of time itself? The Psalmist gives answer, as if praying on our behalf in this moment of history, by asking God, *So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.* Psalm 90 puts our worry about the passing of time in a theological context that may be more beneficial than any book on time management.

The psalm begins with strong affirmations about God, the Creator who transcends time, proclaiming, *Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations... from everlasting to everlasting you are God.* It culminates declaring ageless and comforting attributes to describe God who steps out of

² Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 186.

eternity to enter the finite existence of humankind with *compassion, steadfast love, glorious power* and *favor*.

In the intervening verses, the psalmist is utterly realistic about the human experience of time passing by. Our years seem fleeting; they are quickly swept away. We can feel guilty and regretful about how we have spent our days when they are soon gone, and we wonder – if our limitations are the result of God’s displeasure and wrath.

(These days, frankly, I welcome some of God’s displeasure and wrath... I just don’t want it directed toward me, you know what I mean?)

When the human lifespan is set upon the stage of God’s everlasting life we can feel very small and insignificant. Even so, our hastening years still matter a great deal, held as they are within the eternity of God’s steadfast love. The very fact that we live within God’s grand drama is precisely what gives our transitory nature meaning and significance.

The movement of the psalm itself encourages this confidence from its opening affirmation about the eternal, everlasting nature of God; Through the stark acknowledgement of human finitude and limitations; to its culminating prayer for practical wisdom about how to gain *a wise heart*. According to biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, *a wise heart* is one that discerns the purposes of God; *a wise heart* recognizes that human beings have power, freedom and responsibility; and *a wise heart* employs these attributes in trust and obedience to the living God.³

God’s dwelling place is not about geography but about relationship, and the psalmist’s closing petitions show us how to number our days with wisdom born of that relationship: we remember God has *compassion* for us; God satisfies us *in the morning with steadfast love*; God fills our days with *gladness*

³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg publishing House, 1984) 111.

greater than any affliction we have endured; God's good *work and glorious power* are made known to us; and God's *favor* rests upon us.

Finally, the great God of creation who is beyond all time, cares *to prosper for us the work of our hands, to prosper the work of our hands*. God's eternal presence affects and influences the daily work of our hands. How awesome is that!

Twenty years ago, on the eve of the millennium, as the clock ticked forward and the year readied to turn from 1999 to 2000, my family buried a time capsule. It was a Christmas gift from friends who were spending the first New Year's Eve with us in a brand new mountain cottage that our family built on property I inherited from my mother. The time capsule was a two-foot long PVC pipe with one open end that could be secured with a tightly fitting top, a metal ring and screws. Our children were six and four-years-old. Between Christmas and New Year's we collected some things to bury under the deck, not to be opened for some time to come.

One of the friends who gave us the time capsule recently turned eighty, so we decided to dig it up this past New Year's as we celebrated her four-score years and the twentieth anniversary of the house. Each of us remembered some of what we had put in the time capsule, but none of us remembered everything. The boys dug it up out of the ground and I said, "I don't remember that it was covered with all those brightly colored stickers," and our younger son, who was just four and a half when we buried it said, "That's about all I remember."

We delighted in opening the time capsule. It included the Christmas Eve bulletin and a newsletter from our church; my husband Larry's architectural drawings of the mountain house; a 1996 pin of Atlanta's centennial Olympics since we lived in Atlanta at the time; a 33 cent postage stamp – now clearly outdated; the January 1st, 2000, *Newsweek* magazine with a cover cartoon of Charlie Brown saying "Good Grief" at his retirement after 50 years.

Both of our sons had put in a picture they had drawn and a Pokémon card, and the six-year-old had included a little suitcase ID tag with his name and address proudly printed by hand. There were photographs of our friends who gave us the time capsule and pictures of our family in front of the cottage under construction. There was a little note that reads: “This time capsule was put together by James, Winston, Agnes, Larry, Libba and Suzanne on New Year’s Eve, 1999. Today we went on a hike, worked a puzzle, went to the playground, worked a puzzle, had a good time, worked a puzzle, and buried this time capsule on New Year’s Day, 2000.”

Over these twenty years, those little boys have grown to young men who are making their way in this world largely on their own. Libba and Suzanne retired and left Atlanta to live not far from our cottage in western North Carolina. Larry and I have moved a couple of times, we survived our children’s adolescence, we suffered the deaths of our parents, we have been called to new work, and frankly, look about twenty years older!

When we dug up the time capsule, apart from the stuff that we surfaced and examined through faulty memories and curiosity, the salient reminder that came to light for me was this. Time marches on and we grow older; we accomplish much; we make mistakes and we endure terrible things, but the most enduring qualities of life transcend the hours and the days – love, family, friendship, laughter, hopes and dreams and aspirations, work for the common good, fidelity, trust and faithfulness. *A wise heart* remembers God, the Giver of all these precious gifts.

Now, I know that most of life is not lived in a vacation home surrounded by family and friends enjoying the recollection of a really fun holiday twenty years ago. But amid what seems like a perilous time in our nation and in our world, the Psalmist reminds us all: the daily work of our hands matters because our fleeting years unfold within the drama of God’s gracious compassion and steadfast love.

O God, teach us to count our days that we may gain *a wise heart*:
a heart that discerns the purposes of God; a heart that recognizes we have
power, freedom and responsibility; and a heart that employs these good gifts
in trust and obedience to the living God. AMEN.