

Psalm 90:1-12

“Day by Day”

I love to hear people talk about the prayer traditions in their families, especially ones that involve children. We always taught our children the standard, “Now I lay me down to sleep . . .” followed by the names of the family members that we thought they should bless. When our daughter got old enough to say them herself, she decided to add her two favorite stuffed animals, “Woof” and “PJ” and from some reason, “pillows and blankets” to her list of family members.

When our son came along and got old enough to say prayers too, he also asked God to bless “Woof and PJ, pillows and blankets” which we thought was so cute. When our first grandchild was born, as Katie took him to daycare at our church each morning, there is a place where you come to the top of Pelham Road in Greenville and have a beautiful view of the mountains. Katie decided that was a good time to talk about the things she was thankful for and as Hayden began to talk, he started adding his thoughts. It became their morning prayer time together.

When they arrived in the parking lot at church, they would end by saying, “Alleluia, Amen.” Hayden is now six and, when he says his prayers at night or asks the blessing at the meal, he still says, “Alleluia, Amen.” All of this makes me acutely aware of how children are listening to us, even when we don’t think they are. This is proven in the cartoon that shows Dennis the Menace saying to Mr. Wilson, “What kind of prayer is ‘Oh Lord, not him again’.”

Thinking of the innocence of toddler prayers, where all they do I thank God, made me realize that most of my prayers over the last months have been full of petitions and intercessions-

that is – asking God FOR thing for my loved ones and for the world. However, I have not spent much time in true prayers of praise and thanksgiving.

This led to the decision to preach about gratitude this week. Seemed like a good time to remind us all that, even in the midst of the COVID ordeal, school being so strange this year, hurricanes Marco and Laura, wildfires, violence AND a national election that we STILL have much to be thankful for. So I turned to the Psalms.

The Lord made it pretty clear to me that I should preach from Psalm 90 so as I began to prepare, I expected this Psalm to be one of Thanksgiving. Yet, the first time I read it through, I remembered how many times I have been asked to read it at funerals and memorial services. I assumed that the Holy Spirit and I had gotten our wires crossed and started reading through other Psalms. But the Spirit seemed to nudge me back to Psalm 90 very consistently.

Then I came to the line, “We are consumed by your anger, by your wrath we are overwhelmed” and I decided that the Holy Spirit and I were speaking different languages. Maybe the Spirit thought I actually *learned* Hebrew in seminary instead of barely passing it and was using what my Hebrew Professor called, “God’s native tongue.” But if there is anyone more stubborn than I, it is HS as I refer to her, so I plugged away and, hot dog and hallelujah! I found so much gratitude in this Psalm, that I am going to share it and see if you agree.

The first piece of gratitude comes when we consider WHO wrote the Psalm and who the original audience was. Psalm 90 is attributed to Moses and is believed to be the oldest Psalm in the Bible, probably written around 1400 BC. In case you don’t remember, Moses was called at the age of 80 to lead the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt and into the Promised Land. Yet, because of human sinfulness and doubt, Moses was unable to complete his life’s work. He

died with the Promised Land in sight but never crossed the border. Yet, even when life had not gone according to plan, Moses gave praise and gratitude to God.

However, when the Psalm was first shared, it was read to the Exiles in Babylon. Imagine how comforting this was to people who had lost everything. They had heard about the faithfulness of their greatest prophet for hundreds of years and knew of the hardships that he faced throughout his lifetime. Yet, listen to the first words of his Psalm as translated in Eugene Peterson's translation The Message: "God, it seems you've been our home forever; long before the mountains were born, long before you brought earth itself to birth, from "once upon a time" to "kingdom come"—you are God."

This testimony of faith is the second piece of gratitude. Moses' words reminded the Exiles and reminds us today of the constancy and surety of God. This one statement alone reassures us, as we continue to battle not only the disease of COVID but the changes that it brings to our world that God's power is limitless; that God's imagination is infinite; that God's love and grace are eternal. Friends, this is Good News!

Yet, as the Psalm progresses, Moses, like any human, shares not only his praise but his frustration. I find this to be good news as well. It reminds me that we can all be angry at God for different events or injustices in life AND that we are free to tell God all about it. But even more than that, it shows us that Moses has hope. His faith is strong enough to believe his prayers can make a difference.

Now when I say hope, I am not talking about "I hope it cools off soon" or "I hope the carpool line will be cut in half since only half of the kids are here" kind of hope. I am talking about "I have barely escaped an Egyptian army before they drowned so I could wander in the desert with a bunch of whining and complaining ungrateful former slaves who never listen, do

what they want no matter what I tell them, whose lack of faith has cost me being able to have the grave that I chose” kind of hope.

And the reason that Moses can have this kind of hope is our next piece of gratitude. Moses knows that the days that he is enduring, indeed the days that we are living through right now, are short compared to the eternal life that God has planned for us. This can give us a completely different perspective. “Surely it is comforting to know that a season that seems incredibly long from the human perspective is passing quickly from the eternal perspective.” (1)

As we wonder WHEN the vaccine will arrive, HOW many more campaign advertisements we can endure, IF we will use all the names for Hurricanes this year and have to start with the Greek alphabet, WHY people are choosing to respond to violence with more violence, it is helpful to remember that all of this is but a moment in Eternity. Or as one of my close friends always says, “My favorite saying from the Bible is . . . And Jesus said it came to pass . . . he never said it came to stay.”

The remainder of the verse that we heard this morning seem to be Moses attempt to find hope in the human condition, an anchor in the storm, an oasis in the desert. However, the last verse I read, verse 12, is what really puts everything into perspective and fills me with gratitude. “Teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart” or to paraphrase Moses: “Every day is a gift from God – use it wisely.”

Now, as one who has officiated many funerals, I can see why people ask for this Psalm because of the reference to counting our days. It is a reminder that life is fleeting and we should make the most of all that we have been given. But I think many of us may miss the point entirely, which makes this more a Psalm about living than one about dying. You see, Moses asks

for wisdom. And in the search for and promise that God's wisdom can be found, we will receive the biggest blessing from the Psalm. A clear understanding of what that wisdom brings.

First of all, this verse is a reminder to trust the wisdom of the cycle of life. God made you and me and every other human in God's image and designed us before the first mountain was every formed. From Moses perspective, he could look back and see how God had used his formative years of being raised by a king, even a foreign one, to prepare him to be the spokesman for his people. At a young age, he was able to observe dignitaries while they ruled and policies and procedures being carried out. This prepared him for those days when he dealt with Pharaoh and other rulers.

He could also see that having to flee to the fields to live in hiding after killing an Egyptian had prepared him to deal with those disobedient and unappreciative Israelites for forty years. It taught him not only survival skills but patience and endurance and leadership.

When this Psalm, based on Moses' wisdom and experience was first shared with the Exiles in Babylon, they in turn, could see that God had been active in the foundation of the earth, in their own history and in their future. Therefore, we can have hope in the wisdom of God' plan that is at work in the present circumstance of life, even when we cannot see it or do not understand it. This is the wisdom of God's plan for the cycle of life.

When I served as a Chaplain in Easley, I was visiting someone in the hospital before she had very serious surgery. She was a woman of strong faith and told he that, if she did not make it through surgery, she would be fine. But she would pray for all of us who still had to struggle with the realities of the world. At that moment, the hospital speaker played the chorus of "Great is Thy Faithfulness", which meant that someone there had just passed away.

A part of me thought it was a bad omen. Honestly, it unsettled me a little. Shortly afterwards, we had a time of prayer together and the moment I said “Amen” the speaker began to play “Brahman’s Lullaby” which meant that a baby had just been born. This Psalm reminds us of the circle of life that is part of God’s wonderful and amazing plan.

It also reminds us to trust in God’s ability over human ability. As we continue to find a new normal, which seems to be changing daily during this time of COVID and all of its consequences, this Psalm can help us learn to view human limitations as a chance to depend solely on God. Listen to this story about God’s sovereignty, even in the midst of war and its consequences.

In the 1920s Stalin ordered a purge of all Bibles and believers in Russia. Thousands of Bibles were taken, and Christians were sent to prison where many died for being enemies of the state. Recently an old warehouse was discovered outside of a certain town where these Bibles had been stored since Stalin’s time. Several Russians were loaded onto a truck and sent to retrieve the Bibles. One helper was a young man - a skeptical, hostile, agnostic university student, who only came to earn a few dollars.

As they loaded the Bibles, one man noticed that the student had disappeared. Finally, they found him in a corner of the warehouse weeping. He had slipped away, hoping to quietly take a Bible for himself. What he found pierced him deeply. The inside page of the Bible he picked up had the handwritten signature of his own grandmother. It was her personal Bible. Out of the thousands of Bibles still left in that warehouse, he stole the one that belonged to his grandmother - a woman persecuted for her faith all her life.

Friends, the God who is from everlasting to everlasting surely provides a way for God’s people when there seems no way. Minister Jessica Tate writes: “When the sea blocks escape, the

waters part. When sustenance is scarce, manna is provided. When humans are trapped in sin, a savior is sent. When death ends all hope, the tomb is empty. God can be trusted and depended on.”

As I worked through this Psalm, searching for the gratitude that God wanted me to find there, a song from my tween years kept playing in my mind. It comes from the 1971 rock opera “Godspell” featuring teens from those hippie days singing and acting out the parables. In that time in my life, when the foundation of my personal faith was forming, I found myself singing it often. And this week, it seemed a good summary of this Psalm and how God can give us gratitude, even in difficult times. The key is to ask for the wisdom to recognize those blessings when they come our way.

“Day by day, day by day. Oh, dear Lord, three things I pray. To see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly, day by day.”

So may we all see God more clearly, love God more dearly and follow God more nearly, day by day by day by day by day by day.” Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf

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(1) Kristen Deede Johnson; Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1; Westminster/John

Knox Press, Louisville, 2011, pg. 300.