



"Striving for Wisdom"
Scripture – Psalm 90:1-12
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, November 15, 2020

Whether the artist intended it or not, there is a painting in the Prado Museum in Madrid that stands as a visual interpretation of the 90th Psalm. On one side of the canvass, we see an attractive young woman. Next to her, stands an old woman whose body shows the wrinkles and sags of aging. She has her arm around the younger woman and her eyes riveted on her. She seems to be thinking "I used to look that way – soft, supple skin, a fetching figure, and healthy hair." Her mouth is curved down in a bitter expression.

Next to the older woman is another figure: the Grim Reaper. He is holding an hour glass in one hand and his other arm is hooked into the older woman's arm as if he is about to pull her away.

These three figures convey the brevity of life. One day we are young, appealing and energetic. Then, in what seems like no time at all, we are old and sluggish, and our hair is thinning – all right, vanishing!

When we are young, time moves at a leisurely pace. Twenty years after we graduate from high school, we think to ourselves, "Gosh, it seems as if it has only been *ten* years." Then as we get older, the days race by at a blinding pace. This painting in the Prado captures the feeling that our lives are slipping away much faster than we would imagine.

The 90th Psalm captures the stark contrast between the eternal nature of God and the finite nature of human beings. It expresses feelings of both comfort and frustration – satisfaction that God is our dwelling place from everlasting to everlasting, and disgruntlement that life is sometimes a struggle and much too brief.

The 90th Psalm arose among the Hebrew people during a time of calamity – not during a pandemic, but after a devastating defeat. The psalm opens on a reassuring note. "Lord, you have been our dwelling-place in all generations." That is, not only now, but in every era, the people have recognized God as their secure harbor, their safe haven.

"The **Lord** is our dwelling place." This is a vital affirmation for all times, but it is especially significant for people who feel cut off from all that is familiar. Some Old Testament scholars believe this was the context in which this psalm emerged. Jerusalem had been destroyed and the people had been dragged away to a foreign land. What a powerful psalm for the people to sing. Imagine the Hebrew community of faith gathered for worship and singing together while choking back tears: "We have been ripped away from our homeland, but you, O God, are

our true home. Regardless of where we reside, you are our genuine dwelling place, and no one can sever our tie with you.”

There are 150 psalms in the Hebrew Psalter. Do you know how many of them are attributed to Moses? This is the only one. Moses did not actually write it. It was written centuries after he lived. The people who are cut off from their homeland are relating to how Moses must have felt shortly before he died. Remember that he returned to Egypt to free the Hebrew people from bondage and to lead them to a new land. After struggling with Pharaoh and successfully liberating the people, Moses led them on a forty-year journey through what is today the Sinai Peninsula and Jordan. And once they were on the brink of finally stepping onto their promised turf, when they were so close to it they could see the rivers and smell the cedars, Moses died on Mount Nebo. From there he could see the Dead Sea.

Nearly his entire life had been wrapped up in leading the people to that land. He endured constant criticism of his leadership and faced numerous obstacles. I suspect that many times he was tempted to give up on the dream of ever reaching it. But with enormous fortitude and immense faith, he forged ahead; pushing and pulling his bickering people to their new home. And then, when the finish line of his decades-long trek was in sight, his body gave out. He never set foot in the land to which he had been journeying most of his life. Today’s psalm was written when the people longed to be home, but knew that, like Moses, they might not get there. Their song affirmed that no matter where they were, God was their home.

One of the reasons that this psalm has been attractive to many through the ages is because it does not attempt to spread a sugar glaze over reality. It refuses to make the dubious claim that if your faith is strong, God will keep you insulated from the sharp blades of life.

The anguish over life’s trials gushes forth. “God, you turn us back into dust. You sweep people away as if we are merely a dream. We are like grass that pops up in the morning, but by evening, it withers. We might live to be 70, and if we are strong, perhaps 80, but life is a struggle and in what seems like the blink of an eye, our time is up.”

Reminding us of the hardships of life, the psalm assaults us with words intended to remind us of the passage of time. “Mortals. Yesterday. Morning, evening. Days pass away. Years come to an end.” It is the ticking of the clock, constantly reminding us that time is running out.

Why the depressing declaration? Why pound away at the brevity of life? Why remind us that no matter how closely we monitor our diet, no matter how many marathons we run, no matter how many things we still hope to accomplish, life will come to an end before we are ready.

Author Jen Hatmaker writes, “The average human gets around twenty-five thousand days on this earth, and most of us in the United States will get a few more. That’s it. This life is a breath. Heaven is coming fast, and we live in that thin space where faith and obedience have relevance. We have this one life to offer; there is no Plan B. We get one shot at living to expand the kingdom, fight for justice. We will stand before Jesus once. We will have one moment to say, ‘This is how I lived.’”¹

Ann Wroe writes the obituaries for the *Economist* magazine. She chooses people from around the globe who have died recently and attempts to capture the essence of their life in 1,000 words. I read one from a few years ago when she wrote about two wealthy women from New York who died within a week of each other: Brooke Astor and Leona Helmsley.

She wrote, "The concept of *richesse oblige* has various dimensions. The bottom line is that those who have come into oodles of money should give some of it back; the second-to-bottom line is that they should cut a certain style while doing so. Both Brooke Astor and Leona Helmsley gave millions of dollars away. And their similarities ended there.

"Mrs. Astor was as small, delicate and fine as a Meissen cup, her tailoring exquisite and her jewels unobtrusive. Mrs. Helmsley favored loud trouser suits and chunky diamond clips, with her mouth made big and cruel by scarlet lipstick. Mrs. Astor set great store by good manners, civility, and kind remarks. Mrs. Helmsley believed in loud words and elbows."

How do you expect to be remembered? You are writing your obituary every day.

You may have heard about the interfaith panel that featured a Christian minister, an Imam, and a Rabbi. They were answering questions about similarities and differences among the three religions. At one point in the questioning, the moderator asked this question: What do you hope they will say about you at your funeral?

The minister said, "I hope they will say: 'He extended the ministry of his church beyond the church walls.'"

The Imam said, "I hope they will say: 'He put the interests of his congregation before his own interests.'"

The rabbi said, "I hope they will say: 'Look! He's moving!'"

I suspect that many of us hope it's not over too soon. We will get a little more time.

The part of the psalm we often choke on sounds very unlike Christ. The psalmist speaks of God's anger and wrath. But in fact, these are outgrowths of God's love. The prophets had warned the people that there would be consequences for neglecting justice and righteousness, and the psalmist interpreted their defeat by a foreign power as punishment for sin.

Last week we looked at a passage from Romans in which the Apostle Paul called on us to hate what is evil. That is because God hates what is evil. Thus the psalmist says to God, "For we are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed." God's wrath does not stem from a harsh judge who revels in punishment, but from a loving Creator who abhors injustice.

There are consequences for wrong behavior. The fallout may come soon or eventually, but it will come.

Returning to the painting in the Prado, I think the artist might have had the 90th Psalm echoing in his soul. At the bottom of the painting he placed an owl – a symbol of wisdom. It captures the final verse of our passage: "Teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart." I'm not encouraging us to dwell on death, but rather to be mindful of the precious nature of each day. May we not squander the time we have. May we live a rich, full life, even if it is not as long as we would like. Our attitude will be a deciding factor.

"Multiple sclerosis forced musician Jacqueline du Pré to stop performing at the age of 28. But by then, she was already regarded as one of the most gifted cellists the world had ever known.

Du Pré entered her first cello competition when she was only six years old. On that day, she ran down the hall, carrying her cello above her head, with a big grin on her face. Someone standing nearby interpreted the child's demeanor as elation with the relief of a successfully completed performance. He said to her, "I see you've just had your chance to play!"

"No, no," young du Pré responded, "I'm just about to." Her outlandish attitude characterized her short but legendary performing life."²

What a beautiful image to carry in our minds. What a beautiful way to end an early morning time with God as we prepare to meet the day: "I'm just about to..."

I'm just about to be with people I love. I'm just about to do the work I'm called to do. I'm just about to soak in the beauty of God's creation. I'm just about to make my loved one's day smoother. I'm just about to extend kindness to a friend. I'm just about to be surprised by what today will bring.

If we gain wise hearts, when we come to the end of our days, we will have fewer regrets, we will be at peace, and we will be ready for a loving embrace from the One who is our dwelling place in this life and the next.

NOTES

1. Quoted by Mike Slaughter in *The Christian Wallet*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2016), p. 4.
2. Kirk Byron Jones, "Living by the Word," *The Christian Century*, April 14, 2020.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Eternal God, the One who was and is now and is to come, we struggle with knowing that in the long stretch of history, our time on earth is but a day. We often live as if we have all the time in the world. But living in the midst of a pandemic that has snatched the lives of more than a million worldwide, we are mindful of the fragile nature of life. An illness, an accident, a defective gene, can sweep us or our loved one away at any moment.

Gracious God, may we not be crippled by such knowledge and fall into despair. May we not allow our feelings of victimhood to generate every thought and action. Rather, may we use our understanding of the brevity of life to seize the opportunities of each day to live beautifully. May we fully embrace the commandment of Jesus to love you, to love ourselves, and to love others. May we trek the path of the prophet Micah by extending kindness, striving for justice, and walking humbly with you.

May we be mindful of your gift of life and the opportunities that emerge each day. May we be awake to the impulses that harm and seek to replace them with powers that heal. May we overcome feelings of anger with love, envy with gratitude, greed with generosity, selfishness with compassion, and revenge with forgiveness.

Loving God, though our years are brief, may our spirits be alive; though troubles assail us, may we face them undaunted. Jesus revealed ways to make new music. May we have the wisdom to embrace beauty and to create moments of joy, so that we may have the comfort of being in harmony with you and live valiantly in hope.

And now we join our voices and pray together, saying:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.