



**“Teach Us to Count Our Days”**

**Scripture – Psalm 90**

**Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Gregory Knox Jones**

**Sunday, March 30, 2025**

Mary Luti, a United Church of Christ minister, shares a story about her mother. On Ash Wednesday, her mother went to church for the traditional service and walked forward, as many of you did for the imposition of ashes. Her priest did not mince words. He told her that she was going to die. Employing those somber words from Genesis, he said, “You are dust and to dust you will return.”

A couple of days later, a young doctor with a too-loud voice told her the same thing. He said, “You have stage four metastatic cancer and at best eight weeks to live.” As it turns out, it was only six weeks.

After receiving the blunt diagnosis, her mother kept repeating the same word over and over: “Unbelievable.” Even though she was 90 years old, she felt cheated.<sup>1</sup> Where had the time gone?

Like Ash Wednesday, Psalm 90 has a blunt message: We are mortal. Although we often tuck it away in the attic of our minds, we know at least theoretically, if not concretely, that life does not continue forever. We’ve been to memorial services. The harsh news of existence is that each of us comes with an expiration date – just like the milk carton.

The psalmist displays his poetic flair in addressing God: “You turn us back to dust and say, ‘Turn back, you mortals...You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning; in the morning it flourishes...in the evening it fades and withers.’”

For many of us, life feels as if it rushes by that quickly. One day it is morning and we are flourishing. Then before we have accomplished everything we hoped, it is evening and we wither.

Have you heard the views on aging by that astute theologian George Carlin? He points out the obvious: “The only time in our lives when we like getting older is when we are kids. If you’re less than 10 years old, you’re so excited about aging that you think in terms of fractions. ‘How old are you?’ ‘I’m 4 and a half!’ You would never say you are 36 and a half. You’re 4 and a half going on five!”

“Once you reach your teens, they can’t hold you back. You jump to the next number or even a few ahead. ‘How old are you?’ ‘I’m going to be 16!’ You could be just 13, but hey you’re going to be 16! And then the greatest day of your life! You become you know what – 21. Even the words sound like a ceremony. You become 21 yessss!”

“But then you **turn** 30. Ooooooh! What happened here? You **become** 21, then **turn** 30, and then you are **pushing** 40. Whoaaa! Put on the brakes! Before you know it, you **reach** 50! But wait!! You **make it** to 60. You weren’t sure you would!”

“So, you become 21. Turn 30. Push 40. Reach 50 and make it to 60. You’ve built up so much speed that you **hit** 70! After that – it’s a day-by-day thing.”

“If you make it into your 80s, each day is a complete cycle; you **hit** lunch; you **reach** 4:30; you **make it** to bedtime!”<sup>2</sup>

When we talk about aging; when we talk about “Times up!” humor helps. Dwelling on death is depressing. So, we say, “Let’s think about that some other day.”

However, every once in a while, we get a nudge, don’t we? – a little reminder that we’re not getting any younger. One of my reminders is my running watch. I go out for a three-mile run – marathons are way in the past. I time my three miler. When I finish, my chest still heaving as I’m gasping for breath, I look at my watch. What feels like an eight-minute pace is now a ten-and-a-half-minute pace. What happened? My body has begun its descent.

Another nudge. I go to my dermatologist and I expect him to say, “Looking good! See you next year.” But instead, he finds a spot and says, “HmMMM.” I’m thinking: what does he mean HmMMM? He finds another spot, then another. I coax out of him that HmMMM means pre-cancerous. He pulls out his spray gun and freezes several spots leaving me with unsightly blotches on my shining crown. I say, “Shall I come back in a year?” He says, “Let’s make it six months.” HmMMM.

Priest and poet John O’Donohue was asked if anything haunts him. Without hesitation he responded, “I can tell you exactly what haunts me. It is the sense of time slipping through my fingers like fine sand and there is nothing I can do to slow it.” And not only can we not slow it, but the older we get the quicker the days disappear.

The 90<sup>th</sup> Psalm says, “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.”

Most scholars believe that the psalm was written during or in the aftermath of the Babylonian exile. This is the time when the Hebrew people had been conquered, the Temple in Jerusalem had been leveled, and most of the population had been taken away as captives and forced to live in Babylon. No doubt for several generations, life was experienced as toil and trouble.

That may not be the evaluation many of us would pronounce on our lives. However, the psalmist’s other insight fits every generation: The years are gone too soon.

Writer Anne Lamott says that “when she was a child, one of the most important events of the year was the county fair. She and her friends would go on all the carnival rides and eat all the carnival food. But around 10 p.m., someone would notice the time. They had only one hour until their parents picked them up. Suddenly they had a new clarity of purpose. They stopped wanting to ride the Gravitron or eat more cotton candy. They wanted to grab one more funnel cake and head for the Ferris wheel. (Lamott says) This is what aging feels like. You suddenly realize you have one hour left at the fair, and you get serious about how you are going to live.”<sup>3</sup> This wise, but humble Presbyterian Sunday School teacher can really sum it up.

One of the great ironies of human existence is that death is what gives vitality to life. The knowledge that we will die accents the significance of each day. It beckons us to buckle down and take advantage of the opportunities that present themselves because we may not get a second chance.

Verse 12 of the 90<sup>th</sup> Psalm rises up in bold print to seize our attention: “Teach us to count our days so that we may gain a wise heart.”

While many of the initial verses sound like a plodding, depressing, beating of a bass drum, we reach a turning point at verse 12. The psalm changes its rhythm. Verse 12 strikes a hopeful beat. The monotonous pounding of the bass drum changes to the rat-a-tat-tat of the snare. Our lives are not merely a countdown to extinction. Teach us to count our days so that we may gain a wise heart.

We often live as if there’s always tomorrow, but if we lived that way all the time, the identifying theme of every day would be procrastination. It is the wise person who recognizes life’s limits and seeks to live each day fully. Once we recognize that life does not go on forever, we can direct our focus to what makes us alive: love and meaning and beauty and joy.

A colleague writes, “The older I get, the more I’m convinced that I should celebrate every little bit of good news that comes my way...You can have your skepticism and your calm, measured reactions; I want to develop an impulse for rejoicing. I’d like my knee-jerk reaction to the surprisingly wonderful to be deep gratitude for a grace I never would have expected. I want to be the first to exclaim, “This amazing thing just happened!”

“This takes a lot of intention, practice, and a willingness to be wrong, because life often teaches us the opposite: to develop a thick skin, to protect ourselves from disappointment, to distrust good fortune because life is hard and awful things happen to salt-of-the-earth people. Of course, there is more than enough horror and hurt to go around. But if we practice the presence of Love, if we ground ourselves firmly in God’s grace, goodness, and mercy, we just might find ourselves surprised by joy on a day-to-day basis.”<sup>4</sup>

Lord, teach us to count our days so that we may gain a wise heart.

One way to grasp the brevity of life is to take a stroll through a cemetery and peruse the headstones. You will notice that some people lived into their nineties while others only into their thirties. These are gentle invitations to ponder how you are living your life. Are you releasing the clutter and grasping the essential?

Once we learn to count our days and develop a wise heart, I suspect we will remember what matters. Every chance you have, telling family and friends that you love them; exercising your body and your brain; extending compassion to those who need it; advocating for justice for people in a war zone; developing a humble spirit; forgiving people who hurt you; respecting others; lightening someone's burden; giving generously to support medical needs in Gaza; laughing out loud; quietly diving deeper in your spiritual life; and expressing gratitude to our Creator every day for the gift of life.

The years whiz by quickly. Are you simply whittling away time or seizing vital moments?

#### NOTES

1. Mary Luti, "Terminal," posted on RevGalBlogPals, February 9, 2016.
2. Some sources claim that George Carlin wrote this piece, but others say it was written by someone else and attributed to Carlin.
3. Ann Lamott, "A User's Guide to Aging: Lessons for 70 and Beyond," *The Washington Post*, February 9, 2025.
4. Vicki Kemper, "Who's That Knocking?" *The Daily Devotional of the United Church of Christ*, June 29, 2024.

### **Prayers of the People ~ Randall T. Clayton**

O God, our help in ages past, and our hope for all the years to come. Sometimes it feels as if the world is spinning madly all around us. Alliances and connections that once seemed stable and dependable are suddenly in flux. Signs of spring that once appeared later and now upon us or past. Goodness and mercy seem to have gotten lost in a time of division and focus on personal gain and quests for power. All too often power in our world is used to divide and conquer rather than to bring life and hope to the least in our world. O God, for the ways that our world does not reflect the justice and love you show us, forgive us. And show us how we can use the gifts and resources we have to stand up for those who are pushed down, and to welcome those who are pushed out, as you have lifted us up and welcomed us home.

In the middle east, and Ukraine, and so many other parts of our world, war continues to decimate homes, business, lives and hopes. In Myanmar, earthquake has caused death and destruction. In places in Africa, diseases are left untreated and political unrest churns and kills. And in places in our own nation, the effects of hurricane, fire, and flood continue to create hardships. We pray, O God, for your healing and comforting presence in these places where pain and struggle are the threads that make up the fabric of life. And we pray for just and lasting peace wherever there is warfare. Recognizing that the number of unhoused people in Delaware has grown in recent years, we pray for those who do not have safe, affordable housing, for those who seek to provide services to unhoused people. We lift up to you also this day, those who struggle with addiction, and those who provide services to persons with substance use disorders. Where there is illness, where there is poverty, move us to compassion and care.

As our bodies change through the years, and our hopes and dreams mature, we pray that you will instill in us a sure and certain hope of your care throughout our days. Move us to use our time wisely, to do the things that nurture our relationship with you and with others, and give us the desire to be a people marked by love and concern for all of our brothers and sisters throughout the earth, regardless of nationality, or ethnicity or any other point of difference. As we make our journey through Lent, toward Jerusalem, the cross, and the empty tomb, enable us to discern how it is that we as a church might more effectively offer hope, joy, and peace here in this place, but also across the globe.

We gather this day, celebrating Jesus' love, and remembering the prayer he taught, **“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.”**