

## 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – November 8, 2009 – Remembrance Sunday

Ruth 3: 1-5 and 4: 13-17; **Psalm 90**; Mark 12: 38-44

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Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

You turn us back to dust, and say, "Turn back, you mortals."

For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night. You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning; in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.

For we are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance. 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.

Who considers the power of your anger?

Your wrath is as great as the fear that we owe you. So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.

Turn, O Lord! How long? Have compassion on your servants!

Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil.

Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children. Let the favour of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands – O prosper the work of our hands!

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### A WISE HEART FULL OF HOPE

Let's pretend for a moment that we are standing with Moses at Pisgah. He has come to the end and looks out over the Promised Land to which he has been headed all his life – *over Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar.* And as we stand there, the Lord says to Moses, *This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, "I will give it to your descendants"; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.* Moses will not go to the Promised Land. He embraces that painful reality – the reality that his life-pursuit of fidelity will stop short of fruition. He submits to God's will but that does not stop the yearning.

All of this is expressed in Psalm 90, which Adrian read for us this morning. It is attributed to Moses – called *a prayer of Moses, the man of God.* This title gives it an aura of supreme distinction but likely tells us nothing about who actually wrote it. The psalm is also defined as a sage's meditation on the human condition – a prayer for the whole congregation – a lament to cry out at funerals – a hymn to express our despair, our ache when we experience disruption and chaos.

The theme of the poem is the eternity of God in contrast to the transitory nature of human life. God is permanent. We are fragile and ephemeral. The shortness of life compels us to make wise use of our brief span of years. We are dependent on the compassion and steadfast love of God. The pivotal point of the text is the goal of a *heart of wisdom*. This is the point of the prayer – the essence of Moses’ yearning and our lament – the aspiration of true prayer, piety, and spirituality is finally to *live wisely and well* – to have a *wise heart* – to discern the purposes of God – to participate fully in divine love.

*Are we no more to our Creator than a wispy dream? No more than a blade of grass that springs up gloriously with the rising sun and is cut down without a second thought?*

Whoever we are, Remembrance Day Sunday, stirs up many emotions, poses many questions, and draws many issues to our mind. Mortality – the mortality expressed in this psalm and the mortality that calls out from our memories is one of these issues. It is about loss and limits, failure and finitude. It is about acknowledging our own fleeting selves and the lost innocence of humanity when it engages in war, violence, domination and cruelty.

*You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like a blade of grass that springs up gloriously with the rising sun... in the evening it fades and withers.* The psalm is talking about us. Though these thoughts may seem gloomy, they are honest – relevant and real. Think back to Moses as we imagined him gazing out over the land to which he has been led – his time is past even though his task feels incomplete. Think back to the “war to end all wars” and the seeming folly of that statement today. Think back to the peace promises of post war times – see them fade? – see them wither? – See them *cut down without a second thought?* Think back to the hopes and dreams of youth and wonder – where have the years have gone?

Time flies. Life is short. We are grass that thrives in the morning, but by the evening, we shrivel up. Our days pass, beneath the eyes of God, like a sigh.

Something about us wants enduring places, lasting memories, eternal events – yet things change, we get older, years slip away. Fewer and fewer people recall the significant events we recall or enjoy shared memories of better times and bitter times. Like all of human experience, is the honouring of those who died something too-soon a faded, dream-like blur?

On this day of days when we engage in a suspended moment of silence and seek to remember what people fought for – what they died for – hoped for; when we pause to consider sacrifice and loss and our prayers for peace; when we stand with Jesus outside the tomb of Lazarus and weep – on this day of days, what do we make of our mortality – our finitude – the passing of our days like a sigh? After a depressing reiteration of the fragility and impermanence of life, the psalmist has a memorable prayer: *teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart*. Teach us that our days are numbered. We are finite and terminal. None of this life, including us, goes on forever. All life is fragile. Get used to it. In fact, the very fragility of being, the fleeting quality of existence, makes each moment all the more precious.

“Time, like an ever rolling stream, bears all who breathe away.” What do you do with that? Is this the day? Is this the last day of our days?

The psalmist insists: *count your days to gain wisdom*. By facing that which our culture encourages us to deny – our finitude – our God-ordained human limits, we become wise – we have the possibility of walking through a door into a place of insight and understanding.

Wisdom is the result of looking at life honestly – particularly life's limits – taking stock, and living in light of that reality. You learn to savor the moment – a spring dawn, the loving words of a friend, a barely repressed giggle, a widow's copper coins, an evening filled with starlight, an encounter with another individual that changes you forever.

Only God knows what all these moments, assembled in our collective subconscious, mean. Only God knows the ultimate significance of what we do and say in this life. Therefore, the psalmist ends with a prayer: *Let 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!* We yearn for the wonder of the divine to rest on us, confirming the work that we do in this life.

It's finally up to God to gather all of our efforts, and moments – to make them mean what we ourselves can never, by ourselves, hope to accomplish. Most of us, most of the time, don't think much about it, and probably that's just as well. However, on days like Remembrance Day we do think about it – we step back – we take stock, and we wonder if things might have been different – could have been less tragic – if we had remembered our frailty and God's permanence a little sooner. There is sadness and pain and despair in our remembered past. There is joy in our memory too, combined with that regret. Do not waste much time in second-guessing or remorse because in the end Psalm 90 is not a meditation on futility and death, as much as on the constancy of God in the face of the human condition.

Being confident in the power of God does not lead us to passive acceptance but to insistence on transformation that only God can shape. The heart of wisdom that we seek leads us to a new way of living and being in the world – to a view of reality that delights in the gifts that God gives. With a wise heart, we call on our divine Creator to look lovingly upon us – to make something good out of all that we do.

Some might read this psalm as a prayer of deception and denial in a time of disorientation. However, I think it is a voice speaking truthfully about our situation and concluding that we are not ultimately defined by dust and grass but by the one who has *been our dwelling place in all generations*.

God is our home – before the mountains were born – before the earth itself came to life – from “once upon a time” to “kingdom come” – God is where we live.

The assurance that God endures – that God values the human creature – that God takes an active interest in the work of our hands, brings out our prayer of hopeful insistence that life can be new again. On this Remembrance Day Sunday as we contemplate our past, in the midst of today's reality, our Gracious God invites us to count our days with thanksgiving, that we may gain wisdom as we journey in hope. **Amen.**

This Sermon Copy reflects the style of the spoken word rather than the written word. Allowances should be made for grammatical style and sentence structure that are characteristic of the spoken word. The Rev. L. T. Kavanagh