

"How Do We Count Our Days?"

Psalm 90: 1-12

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First in a series *When Life Happens*

Psalm 90 is the only psalm attributed to Moses. It opens Book IV of the Psalter, which is concerned with the crisis of the Babylonian exile and its aftermath. In the Exodus story we heard first this morning, Moses beseeches God to repent from God's anger; we also see this in Psalm 90. We can imagine Moses reciting prayer to address the monumental crisis the Hebrews were undergoing: loss of their land, loss of their temple, and loss of their leaders.

Psalm 90 is a communal lament. As we begin this message series, *When Life Happens*, we consider our mortality. Psalm 90 gives us a unique perspective about time: the human span of time, and God's time.

**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 is due you. So teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart.**

Who would think that a Disney/PIXAR animated movie could be a profound commentary on mortality? (I apologize in advance for spoiling the movie for those of you who have not yet seen it. You may want to see it anyway.)

The movie "Up" begins with a tender, swift love story. Boy Carl meets girl Ellie. Next thing you know, they are all grown up and getting married. Both are adventuresome. Like all newlyweds, they have really big dreams. Ellie dreams of adventure---she wants to go to Paradise Falls in Venezuela. They settle for jobs at the zoo. (These will just be temporary, until they save enough money for Paradise Falls). Carl is a balloon man and Ellie is a guide. They first meet Grief when they dream of having a baby.

The years speed by. No Paradise Falls, no children, but they are completely devoted to each other. They grow old. Carl cannot forget Ellie's dream of going to Paradise Falls. He wants to fulfill it before it's too late. Carl's dreams are shattered when life happens in its inexorable way.

Carl is completely and utterly alone, and he wants to stay that way. He becomes more and more gruff and reclusive, not only grieving the loss of his beloved Ellie, but also wallowing in regret that he never took her to Paradise Falls for that Big Adventure. Carl faces Grief again when he is about to lose their home (the container of all their memories) to encroaching development.

Carl seems utterly defeated. But we soon find out he is not. He ties thousands of balloons to his house and sets off on a floating adventure. A solo trip to Paradise Falls. Only he's not flying solo. There is an accidental stowaway. Russell, a little boy scout who'd been trying to befriend Carl. Carl is not happy to share his adventure with Russell.

Through poking and prodding, joking and pushing, Russell nudges Carl out of his Great Grief. Suddenly Carl realizes he did not rob Ellie of her dream of great adventure, but rather their life together WAS her great adventure! Carl finally forgives himself, lets go of the past that never was, and ends up in Paradise! Once he is there, he realizes it was already waiting for him at home all the while.

Carl sees beyond his own private dreams, and ends up discovering a bigger dream Ellie had for both of them. It is a moment of grace and acceptance. It is a moment when Carl lets go of his need to create a future that is never going to happen. He appreciates what has been. It is a moment of pure gift.

There is much we can learn from Carl. In the great adventure that is life, we will always come up short. There is never enough time, there is never enough money; dreams always outstrip reality. Life happens. A child is hit by a car. A house burns down. What was supposed to have been a stop-gap job turns into a life-long grind. Doors are slammed shut.

Health fails. A parent dies of cancer, much too soon. Fill in your particular grief, your particular loss. These kinds of things happen to every single person. They are inescapable. We have no choice about such matters. We live in toil and trouble, we experience grief and loss, and then we die.

While we are still here, however, we can choose how we count our days. We can respond to God's desire for us. We can count our days, asking for God's wisdom. We can count our days seeking God's heart.

How do we count our days? How do we write our story? Do we live in and through God? Or do we stuff our dreams into a scrapbook, post our strategic plans, set our personal goals? Do we measure our days by how many pages we fill with things we want to do, how many things we achieve, how many toys we buy?

Psalm 90 tells us this is futile. We will turn to dust as certainly as our scrapbooks and our achievements **and** our toys. Toil and trouble await every turn. How do we count our days? By attempting to preserve ourselves? By clinging to the past? By pretending we are not going to die? God sweeps up our dust as though it is nothing.

God's time is completely different than our own. Our time is not what it seems. God's time takes precedence. Always has, always will. Like it or not, our time must be ultimately measured in terms of God's time, God's perspective. God knows everything about us. God knows exactly what goes on in our days. God knows every secret, every need, every inner thought, every dream.

This is the good news of the psalm set into the bigger, broader picture. God's ways are not our ways. With God's ways come acceptance, peace, the realization that the world (or our dreams or our scrapbooks) cannot give us what we long for.

We learn to number our days that we might gain a heart of wisdom. One thing about getting older, you begin to realize life is not endless. You either accept the inevitable with grace, or you grow bitter and you die fighting it.

If we use God's measuring stick to determine how full our days have been, we will find our lives overflowing: with love, and faith, and hope. We will see God's handprints all over the place. A smudge on our daughter's beautiful face. A brush stroke on an unexpected opportunity. A mark of the divine on what we had once thought could only be completely bad news. God's thumbprint, a reminder we are not alone. The unique handwriting of God which assures us this vale of tears is not all there is.

The more we allow ourselves to be open to God's dwelling within us, the more we experience God's eternal view. We do not fear aging, or loss, or even death. These very things which we have fought instead assure us of our complete and utter dependence on God. Strange as it seems, this is also good news! We are brought up short, reminded once and for all that we are not in charge! We cannot pretend we are! One Bible scholar put it this way. "Death is the final and ultimate "no" that cancels any pretension to autonomy from the human side." (Mays in NIB Commentary).

Can we see this as gift? We don't have to finish the scrapbook! God takes care of this for us. We don't have to be strong; our weakness rests in God's eternity. We don't have to figure everything out; God marks time for us. God knows every moment of our lives. In our frailty we see in a new way that our lives find their origin and destiny in God.

God redeems all time. Even the shortness of time.

When we accept the priority of God's activity and God's time it reshapes our activity and our time. It gives us wise hearts. It gives us calm hearts. It gives us courageous and even reckless hearts. We may decide we can set off in a completely new direction! On a crazy new adventure! A new job, a fresh perspective, a second chance when we long given up hope for that. A widower finds love again. A child is given a new home. A reclusive old woman is drawn out of her shell. An unemployed stockbroker starts a consulting business to help others who are beaten down by hard times.

When we rest secure in the knowledge that God's redeeming love is greater than human sin, there are no limits to what God can do in and through and for us.

The really good news is God helps us count our days. When I was a child, I thought like a child, I acted like a child. But now I am a grown up. I have put away childish ways. Now we see dimly, as in a cloudy mirror, but then we shall see face to face. Then we shall see how God counts our days, how God completes our story.