

Numbering Our Days

sermon digest

February 15, 2009

Psalm 90:1-6, 12, 14-17; 139:1-18

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We call it "Bible," but the presumption with which we read its pages render it anything but the "wonderful words of life" about which we sing. Its ready access in almost every room of the house and the very familiarity of its stories tempt us to take it for granted. The drama of doubt, grief and fear in its passages of turmoil and struggle can pass us unnoticed as we cut to the moral of the story, the quick fix that addresses our time and our issues without taking seriously the pain and struggle out of which the lessons come.

Consider, for example, Moses, the great liberator. After living his childhood and youth as something of an alien, he found a place to call home and settled down to raise a family. Only the suffering of his people in a distant land and a sense of a calling from God could tear him away from his new found contentment and send him on a mission that would consume the rest of his life. Yet when the time came to see his work come to fruition, he realized he would see it only from a distance. Premature death would rob him of the joy of standing with his people to celebrate the rewards of a lifetime of faithfulness. Can we feel the poignancy, the deep sense of unsettling as he sits looking into a promised land for which he had given the better part of his life, knowing he will never set foot on it?

Think of the man we call Job, a good man depicted as one who literally lost everything—health, family, home, livelihood and the esteem of friends. We speak of "the patience of Job," and yet this supposedly patient man rails at God. Refusing to let go of his trust in the faithfulness of God, he refuses to simply curse God and die. Rejecting the wisdom of the day that interprets suffering as the sure evidence of secret sin, he will not make his contemporaries feel safe by wrapping everything up into a neat package for them. "There is hope," he laments, "for a tree, if it is cut down, that it will sprout again. . . . But mortals die . . . and do not rise again" [14: 7, 10, 14]. Far from one who refuses to raise the hard questions, the story of Job is the story of a good man, a faithful man who looks torturous realities in the face and wrestles with them.

Consider, too, that Job's struggle represented the struggle, not just of one man, but of an entire people, who, thanks to the ruthless honesty of their prophets, could offer no pretext of being blameless for their situation of exile. Yet the passing of almost an entire generation and the extent of their losses were such that the easy equations that had sufficed in the past were no longer sufficient. The psalmist, reflecting on the exile of his people, recalls the faithfulness of the God of covenant who established the throne of the great King David into perpetuity. "*But now,*" the psalmist protests accusingly to God, "you have spurned and rejected him; you are full of wrath against your anointed. You have renounced the covenant with your servant; you have defiled his crown in the dust" [89:38-39, 44]. And then comes the anguished plea, "How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire? . . . Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?" [89:46, 49]. "Is the great God of covenant," the psalmist is asking himself, "to be trusted after all?"

The Bible, often referred to as a "book of answers," is also a book of questions and apart from our recognizing the gut-wrenching character of the questions, the answers are meaningless. "Remember," the psalmist cries, "how short my time is" [89:46]. The passing of time, the shortness of life, gives our questions a deep urgency. I recall an occasion a couple of decades ago when I was moderating a panel discussion of women in ministry. As each woman spoke to her sense of calling and the frustration of trying to live out her calling in a church that largely refused to acknowledge it, I began to hear in the anguish something of what I heard in Martin Luther King's response to suggestions that he be patient and wait. How could he wait when children were growing up all across the South under the demeaning and oppressive strictures of racism and segregation? The short space of a lifetime passes so quickly, and we find ourselves protesting with the psalmist, "Remember, how short my time is."

Speaking to the sense of urgency we experience in the numbering of our days, C. S. Lewis compared it to the seriousness that some say suddenly accompanies a game of bridge when money is bet on the game, compared to the lack of seriousness when money is not at stake. "Your bid—for God or no God, for a good God or a cosmic sadist, for eternal life or nonentity—will not be serious if nothing much is staked upon it. And you will never discover how high until you find that you are playing not for counters or for sixpences but for every penny you have in the world" [*A Grief Observed*, 43].

Consider, then, that this morning everything is riding on the questions with which we consider our own mortality. Consider that the questions that we raise are not just academic and that we are not just somehow dabbling in the morbid. Consider that they are not unlike the questions raised by Moses looking over into the promised land, Job fending off the helpful advice of his friends, or the children of Israel quaking before an uncertain future. Consider that the matter of our shortness of days puts the meaning of the days that we have to the question and that we must stake our lives on the answers.

We measure our lives by the eternal trustworthiness of God. Writing in the face of the sense of homelessness and dislocation brought on by decades of exile, the author of Psalm 90 expresses a contradictory sense of being at home. He begins with the doxology of his community of faith—Israel's doxology to the God of covenant. The God who has been a dwelling place in all generations provides a dwelling place even in a time of tragedy and loss, even when and particularly when surrounding evidence seems to point to the contrary. Home, Walter Brueggemann suggests, is not a *place*, but a *person*. It is not that God provides or makes a city, a temple or a land our home. God, *is* home, despite where we are or the circumstances in which we find ourselves [*The Message of the Psalms*, 111-112].

The eternal God, who precedes even the mountains and hills, is everlasting. By comparison, human life is like the dust that flies away and the fragile grass that springs up with the dew of the morning, only to be scorched by the midday sun. Struggling with the meaning of human existence without resort to anticipating the score being evened up on the other side of the grave, the psalmist

places his hope in the steadfast love of God and turns his attention to how we spend our lives. The very shortness of our lives bids us to spend them well; and so, with the psalmist we pray, "teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart" [12]. Wisdom resides in receiving life as a gift from God and acknowledging rather than denying or fleeing its finitude. In wisdom we recognize that life calls us to decision and the decisions of our lives constitute what we give back to God.

Experiences in life test our faith. Sometimes we must struggle to continue to believe in spite of evidences to the contrary. The prophet Isaiah reflects on anguished words apparently penned by the good King Hezekiah, who wrestled with God in the face of his own seemingly imminent death: "Sheol [the grave] cannot thank you, death cannot praise you; those who go down to the Pit cannot hope for your faithfulness. The living, the living, *they* thank you" [38:18-19]. "What sense does it all make?" the good king asks of God. "Death is the end."

Yet another psalmist raises the question, "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; *if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there*" [139:7-8]. Even in those moments of trembling and fear when he cries out, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," he finds that the darkness is as light to God [11-12]. This God, who knew him before he was even born, who, indeed, knew all of the days of his life before even one of them had been lived, this God is with him. "I come to the end," the psalmist breathes in thankfulness, "I am still with you" [18]. And that is enough.

Finally, with Job we pray, "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. . . . I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you" [42:3-5]. Thanks be to God.