

It's about time

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church
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Psalm 90

A prayer of Moses, the man of God.

Lord, you have been our refuge in every generation.
Before mountains were born
and you brought forth dry ground and land masses,
 from ages past and for ages to come you are God.
You bring human beings back to dust.
 You say, "Go back, children of Adam."
Because in your sight a thousand years
 are like yesterday when it has passed,
 like a watch of the night.
Like a flood, you sweep them away with sleep.
 They are like fresh grass in the morning.
In the morning it springs up fresh;
 by evening it is withered and dry.
Indeed, we are consumed by your anger
 and terrified by your wrath.
You have set our offenses before you,
 our secrets in the light of your presence.
Indeed, all our days pass away because of your fury;
 we end our years just like a sigh.
The extent of our life is seventy years –
 or, if we're strong, eighty years –
 filled with trouble and sorrow.
How quickly they pass, and we fly away!
Who knows the intensity of your anger?
 Fear of you fits your fury.
Teach us to count our days rightly,
 that we may gain a wise heart.
Come back, Lord!
 How long?
Take pity on your servants.
Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love,
 and we will shout with joy and be glad all our days.
Make us glad for the days you brought us low,
 for the years we saw trouble.
Show your deeds to your servants,
 your splendor to their children.
May the kindness of the Lord our God be upon us,
 and prosper for us the work of our hands –
 yes, prosper the work of our hands for us!

Children's Story

In the entire forest, no one knew how old the wise owl was. The bluebird did not know. The fox did not know. The deer did not know. Even the giant oak tree did not know how old the wise owl was.

Not that the owl looked old; not that the owl acted old. But the owl was old, older than anyone else in the entire forest.

The owl had been around as long as anyone could remember. And the owl had been wise as long as anyone could remember. And as long as anyone could remember, the owl's wise words had brought joy and peace to the entire forest.

As time passed, the joy and peace of the forest showed no sign of coming to an end. Bluebirds would come and go. Deer would be born and die. Even giant oak trees, born from tender acorns, would become weak and fall to the forest floor.

But the owl stayed the same, never getting older, never getting weaker, always speaking wise words, always bringing joy and peace.

To use one word, the wise old owl was eternal. And in a hard-to-explain way, the life of the entire forest, the joy and peace of the entire forest and of everyone in it, had always depended and would always depend upon the wise old owl.

Sermon

We had a death in the congregation last week. Eve Padavana died after eighty seven years and fourteen days. Her death was not a surprise. From a certain perspective, her death wasn't a tragedy. From a certain perspective, her death wasn't even bad news. From a certain perspective. Eve's death wasn't the tragedy of a young mother dying from metastatic breast cancer at age twenty-nine, leaving three children and a husband behind. Eve's death wasn't that. No, Eve's death, coming when it did, was expected by all who were nearby and understood by all who had been watching her steady decline. Yet her death was not welcomed — death is never really welcomed — by her family and her friends.

Beyond its impact on family and friends, Eve's death confronts us, once again, with the determined ravages of time. Time, given enough time, will do each one of us in. And time has plenty of time, because time goes on and on. What hope do we have before the relentless face of time? What hope? If we are to have any hope, it will come only from one place: from the one who "from ages past and for ages to come [is] God."

Let's agree, first of all, that nothing created lasts. That's what all our experience and our cultural memory teach us. All around us, big things and little things don't last. Ancient monuments crumble. Glaciers and polar ice caps melt away at accelerated speed. And battery back-up sump pumps fail two months after the warranty expires. Things don't last.

And we don't last either. We get old and wear out. "The extent of our life is seventy years – or, if we're strong, eighty years – filled with trouble and sorrow. How quickly they pass, and we fly away!" We get old and wear out. By the time we hit thirty, we can start to feel the wear. By forty-six, there's no doubt about it. And, as some of you now, after that it only gets worse.

Even by ordinary measures, we're momentary. "Like a flood, you sweep them away with sleep. They are like fresh grass in the morning. In the morning it springs up fresh; by evening it is withered and dry." Buildings outlast us. Tall trees outlast us. Giant tortoises and strange fish outlast us. We may make it to eighty. We may make it to eighty-seven years and fourteen days. We may make it to ninety. But there is a limit. There will be an end. It's hopeless. Nothing lasts — including us.

God, on the other hand, is eternal. Though there is some question as to what that means. It's not entirely clear just what God's relationship to time is. Speculations have abounded through the ages, from philosophers and from theologians especially. Some of them have said, "God created all things, including

time, and therefore God is outside of time.” They have said, “God dwells in a timelessness called eternity.” These philosophers and theologians then speculate that from eternity God has access to all time: to the Big Bang and the a solar eclipse that will occur in 3212, to the fall of Rome and to the emergence of peace and stability in Baghdad (assuming that happens some day), to the crucifixion of Jesus and to the gas chambers at Auschwitz, to your birth and to your death. Somehow all of this, and more, is “now” to God.

I have a hard time making sense out of that picture. If all time and history — all of the past and the present and the future — is “now” to God, then how does God act within time and within history? If all time and history — all of the past and the present and the future — is “now” to God, then is Jesus always being crucified? Is God always suffering that agony?

As I said, I can’t make sense of it. Maybe it’s just the limits of my reasoning ability. Or maybe I haven’t applied my powers of reason extensively enough. Or maybe no one can make sense out of it. That’s what some philosopher-types say, that it’s one of those “God is higher than us” occasions. I can’t make sense out of it. But I don’t let that bother me. Because the Bible is not interested in that kind of speculation.

Here’s what the Bible reveals to us. In general, God lives and acts within time. Yet God exceeds the span of time. Before anything we would recognize as time, there is God. And beyond anything we would recognize as time, there is God.

The psalm says that God relates to people within time: “Lord, you have been our refuge in every generation.” It says that God creates within time: there was a time before creation, a time “before mountains were born and you brought forth dry ground and land masses.” The psalm says that God endures within time: “From ages past and for ages to come you are God.” There is no time, and there is no time period, in which God is not present. And the psalm says that God has a unique perspective on time: “In your sight a thousand years are like yesterday when it has passed, like a watch of the night.” A child doesn’t measure time like an adult does. To a child, twenty minutes can seem like forever. Likewise God does not measure time like we do.

The Bible says there is no place and there is no time without God. When nothing else lasts, God is everlasting. Psalm 139 says that there is no place you can go to flee from God’s presence. Go all the way to death even, and God is there. Similarly, there is no time that allows us to escape from God’s presence. God is in all time, before all time, and beyond all time. We may not last; we do not last. But God lasts. And that is our hope.

That’s where Moses placed his hope. Psalm 90 is a prayer of Moses, uttered at the end of a long period of suffering. Moses prayed, “Make us glad for the days you brought us low, for the years we saw trouble.” It had been forty years, forty difficult years, of wandering in the wilderness, going nowhere, getting nowhere. Moses uttered the prayer at the end of a long period of suffering and in the midst of a time of personal despair. Moses asked, “Who knows the intensity of your anger?” But he knew that anger well, as reflected in his next words: “Fear of you fits your fury.” Moses knew God’s anger well. He himself was being punished because of his imperfect obedience. He would not be allowed to enter the Promised Land. The hope that had sustained Israel for forty years of wandering was not a hope that extended to Moses. He would see the Promised Land from a mountaintop, but he would not cross the river with the people.

All the same, Moses’s prayer was one of confident hope. Whatever troubles or disappointments, one thing remained unshakeable: “Lord, you have been our refuge in every generation.” Before and beyond every trouble and sorrow, you are our God. And so, in Moses’s prayer there is an expectation of better days, an expectation that the Lord will “take pity on [his] servants,” that as promised he will yet show “unfailing love.”

Here we are this morning, remembering one of the family who has died. Death was the inevitable outcome for our sister Eve. There was no avoiding it. In the last weeks, it circled closer and closer — until Monday afternoon, when it finished its cold work. And the same outcome, sooner or later, awaits us all. No matter the quality of our genes. No matter the quality of our doctors. No matter the quality of our faith. Death will have us.

But God . . . ! But God is eternal. God is everlasting. God lives forever. And on Easter, God shared that everlasting life with Jesus. Jesus now lives forever. He is forever on our side. And he makes us share in his life so that, by God's grace, we too shall enjoy life everlasting — as will our sister Eva Joan Padavana. God be praised.