

FOLLOWING CHRIST IN MEDITATION ON THE FUTURE LIFE

Psalm 90

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Pastor, Oxford Presbyterian Church on October 27, 2002

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Our next-door neighbor has a daughter, Megan Seefelt, who teaches in the area recently terrorized by the Washington D.C. sniper. Her mother was at our house Monday night a week ago and she talked about the stress she'd been feeling with Megan down there. A few minutes after she left our house she telephoned us. "Megan just called," she said. "The sniper struck again not far from where Megan lives." The random loss of lives in the Washington D.C. reminds us of our mortality. We are mortal.

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger defined human beings as "Beings Unto Death." Heidegger observed that human beings seem to be the only creatures on earth aware of the fact that one day we'll die. We *are* "Beings Unto Death". Long before Heidegger, the author of Psalm 90 expressed profound awareness of our human mortality. "You turn us back to dust," he writes. We are grass that flourishes in the morning, but by the evening it fades and withers. Our days pass, beneath the eyes of God, like a sigh. "Time, like an ever rolling stream, soon bears us all away; we fly forgotten, as a dream dies at the opening day." ~~How quickly time flies.~~

Our youth is "soon gone, and we fly away." Our days are numbered. Just as I had a first day, I'll have a last day. Therefore, the Psalmist prays, "Teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart."

We gain wisdom when we count our days. Living our lives without any thought of eternity is foolish; it's like taking a sea voyage on tall sailing ships without giving any thought about our destination. We're out on the ocean, far from landfall. We don't know where we're going and we don't know where to steer. We just drift day after day with the changing, prevailing winds. We look at the horizon and we see nothing. Maybe there's nothing beyond the horizon. ^{Or maybe sea monsters.} As long as we stay on the level of the deck our vision is severely limited. But if we climb way high into the crow's nest we can see a lot farther — we may even catch sight of a beautiful faraway land, unseen and unimagined from the deck. And maybe that sight will encourage us to change direction. Maybe it will give us a sense of hope for what lies beyond the horizon. Meditating on the meaning of our lives in the light of eternity is like climbing high into that crow's nest. Maybe you're afraid to meditate on eternity because you fear there's nothing beyond your last day — and that depresses you. But far from

depressing us, I hope that if we meditate on our lives in the light of eternity we'll leave the sanctuary with the words of the Psalmist in our hearts, "Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days." Teach us to number our days. There are at least two lessons to learn from counting our days.

First, counting our days teaches us to treasure the time God allots us. Remember the scene in Act III of Thornton Wilder's play, *Our Town*? Many of the townspeople we came to know in the first two acts have died and are in their graves represented by rows of plain wooden chairs on the stage on which they sit. The dead talk to one another about their former lives. Emily, one of the characters, wishes she could just live one day in her life again and her wish is granted. She chooses to re-live one of the happiest days in her life -- her twelfth birthday. As the day passes, Emily realizes how much was going on in her life she never noticed. At the end of the day she takes one last look at her hometown. She says, "Good-by, Good-by, world. Good-by, Mama and Papa. Good-by to clocks ticking... and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths... and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you."

Then she asks, "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? -- every, every minute?"

Our days are gifts to be treasured. Life is beautiful, even *more* beautiful for its brevity. Just as gold is more valuable because it's so rare, our lives are infinitely more valuable when we know our days are numbered. So - having numbered your days, go savor, risk, and delight in the gifts God has given you. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." And love your neighbor as yourself. Praise rather than criticize. Be considerate. Hug someone. Forgive someone - because you may not be able to tomorrow. Work for justice. Attack poverty and hunger so others may better enjoy life. Take time each day to thank God for the beautiful gift of life. "Rejoice and be glad."

For a second thing, counting our days teaches us that our true home is in God. The Psalmist writes, "Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations." The *Lord* is our *dwelling place*. Last week we sang "God of the coming years, through paths unknown we follow thee; When we are strong, Lord, leave us not alone; our refuge be. Be thou for us in life our daily bread, *our heart's true home* when all our years have sped." Our home is *in* God. Our home is *with* God. When we're with God, we're at home. When we drift far

we're lost (like a child who is lost & can't find his way home)

from God we suffer homesickness. We may not recognize it as homesickness. We may try all kinds of remedies to make us feel better but we have a God shaped vacuum that can't be satisfied apart from God who is our dwelling place. *Our God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come; our shelter from stormy blast; and our eternal home.*

I don't know what the Psalmist hoped for beyond death, but Christ's life, death, and resurrection enables us to say confidently, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever." Christ came from a far country bringing good news that God loves us and wants to welcome us home when our journey through life is over. "Let not your hearts be troubled," Jesus said. "Believe in God. Believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." "Heaven is our true home, a world of love. There we shall at last see face to face what we now only glimpse as through a distant mirror. Our deepest, truest delights in this life are only a dim foreshadowing of the delights that await us in heaven."

Preaching on Psalm 90 to prisoners in Basel, Switzerland, Karl Barth said, "To remember that we must die is to remember that *Jesus has died for us.*" He emphasized the brevity of life and admonished his captive audience to consider their own mortality. To make the matter vivid, he drew their attention to a painting which portrays a saint holding a skull in his hand. The saint is obviously meditating on his own mortality. Barth, however, pointed out that, although the saint was holding a skull in his hand, he was facing a cross with the figure of Christ on it. The saint's eyes are fixed, not on the skull, but on the dying Jesus. "Upon the cross of Jesus mine eye at times can see the very dying form of One who suffered there for me." The artist obviously knew that the right way to meditate on the future life is to meditate on the death of Jesus for us and trust him.

We believe that through Christ's life, death and resurrection he has given us the hope of new life; eternal life that begins here and now. God teaches us to number our days so that we might hold to God's grace alone in the hours, days and years we still have to live. Then we can know that in life and in death we belong to God and we can rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Lord, while our days vanish like shadows and our lives wear out like a garment, you are eternal. Although our earthly lives come to an end, help us to live in Christ's endless life and at length attain our home, the heavenly Jerusalem, where he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.