

## Teach Us to Number Our Days: A Wisdom Psalm

Psalm 90: 1-6, 12, 17

How shall we begin 2022? My proposal: By bringing our whole selves before God with the Psalms as our guide. Not just your “church” self but also as the hymn goes, “the you, you hide”. *All of who you are is safe with God.*

John Calvin said that the Psalms are “the anatomy of all parts of the soul.” We shall see they are, and help us bring our whole real selves before God. There is praise and thanksgiving and trust, yes, but also our fears and angers, our despair and doubt, our sin, guilt and regret. All parts of us.

Today’s psalm is a wisdom psalm: “Teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.” In Hebrew scriptures Wisdom is a female figure, *Hochma*, Sophia, God’s beloved daughter.

Diana Butler Bass says that people come to church not so much for answers as for wisdom. Wisdom is God’s practical guidance for how to live our lives.

In *Proverbs* we hear: “The beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord.” This is not an abject fear of God but the recognition that God is God and we are not, that God is the Creator and we are the creature, that there are limits to our power, goodness and knowledge.

Today's Psalm teaches us the wisdom of recognizing that our days will one day run out. We will not live forever. So, O God, *teach us to number our days so that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.*

## I

We might begin by addressing some unfortunate theology. It says that when we are born God has already determined how many days we will live. Such theology has been used to try to bring comfort to someone who has lost a loved one, especially when the death is tragic or untimely. "It's all in God's plan."

But this is my truth: to say that our days are numbered is not to say that God has fixed a number of days we will live. Rather it says that we all have a finite number of days to live, so consider how you want to live them.

Samuel Johnson, the sage who compiled the first dictionary of the English language said:

Depend on it sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.

I'm not thinking of such an extreme circumstance here, but to recognize that our days are numbered can help us become mindful of how we wish to live. It is not so much about *death* as about *life!*

Confucius, the master of wisdom teaching said:

“We have two lives. And the second one begins when we realized we have only one.”

So, teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.

## II

Psalm 90 may be best known by the hymn which is a paraphrase of the psalm, “O God Our Help in Ages Past.”

O God our help in ages past  
our hope for years to come,  
our shelter from the stormy blast  
and our eternal home.

Time like a flowing stream  
bears all who breathe away;  
they fly forgotten, as a dream  
dies at the opening day.

O God our help in ages past  
our hope for years to come,

be Thou our guide while life shall last  
and our eternal home.

### III

A survey was taken a few years back with older adults. They were asked, “If you had it to do all over again, how would you change your life?” The number one answer was: “Next time I would take more risks, be braver to live out my convictions.” That rings true for me.

A benediction I use says “Give us the grace to risk something big for something good.” We have all taken risks for things not so good! But to be braver for what is good, that’s how we want to live. To be truer to yourself. The poet e.e. cummings writes:

To be nobody-but-yourself  
in a world which is doing its best, day and night  
to make you everybody-else  
means to fight the hardest battle  
which any human being can fight;  
and never stop fighting.

### IV

So courage we want. It has been said of the seven classical virtues—wisdom, justice, courage, temperance, faith, hope and love—that without courage, none of the others can survive. So may the cowardly lion within us all find courage!

Jesus told a parable called “The Rich Fool.” The Bible talks much about the *Two Ways*, two paths, one, the way of *wisdom*, the other the way of *foolishness*.

Here is the parable:

The land of a rich man brought forth plentifully, and he said to himself: Self, what shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops? And he said to himself, I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build bigger ones; and there I will store all my grain and all my goods. Then I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry!” But God said to him. “Foolish one, this night your soul is required of you.”

Jesus added: “So are those who lay up treasure for themselves and are not rich toward God.”

I counted the words of the parable: 14 out of 31 were about *I, me, mine*. The man was trapped in the first person singular! The man was wrong; he did not have “many years”, and he was certainly not rich toward God.

What can this mean, to be rich toward God? In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said,

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven (Matthew 6:19-20)....”

We are talking about far more than money here. We’re talking about whatever it is you treasure. Do you treasure the things that endure or the things that can be gone tomorrow? Sue put it this way to me: Do you invest your life in things that endure or in things that “have an expiration date?!” Don’t bank your life of things that have an expiration date!

Your treasures in heaven are not the things you get when you get to heaven, they are the treasures of God you invest in in *this* life, treasures of the Spirit. They are the things that last, even into eternity. Paul spoke of these treasures of the Spirit as “fruit of the Spirit.” Nine of them:

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

So, invest in kindness. Invest in joy. The poet Mary Oliver writes

If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy  
don’t hesitate. Give into it...

Whatever it is, don't be afraid  
of its plenty. Joy is not made to be a crumb.<sup>1</sup>

Invest in peace, not war. I don't want to talk about *self-control* today; thank you for your understanding!

God is saying to us today

Invest in love.

Take time for beauty

Become a recovering work-a-holic.

Don't let your minds be stuffed with grievance or anger.

For 2022, Detox your mind. Instead, as Paul wrote to the Philippians:

...whatever is true, whatever is honorable, what ever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think on these things (Philippians 4: 8-9).

You won't likely find them in the newspaper or news shows on T.V. or Twitter. So it may take a few teeny weeny changes in your day to pull it off.

And as for feelings of regret and remorse, God doesn't want them filling your days. These are rarely constructive emotions. Let them go. Let God whisk them away.

*Teach me to number my days that I may apply my heart to wisdom.*

The last verse is a wonderful prayer:

Let the favor of the Lord be upon us,  
and prosper the work of our hands—

O prosper the work of our hands.

God is already on the way to answer that prayer.

Blessed be the year of our Lord, 2022, to you.

As our Benediction, here is the poem of the wonderful young poet, Amanda Gorman, who was the poet for the President's Inauguration, a poem for the New Year: "New Day's Lyric."

What was cursed, we will cure.

What was plagued, we will prove pure.

Where we tend to agree,

we will try to agree.

Those fortunes we foreswore

now the future we foresee.

When we weren't aware,

now we are awake;



Those moments we missed  
Are now the moments we meet,  
And our hearts, once all together beaten  
Now all together beat.

Amen

---

1. Mary Oliver, "Don't Hesitate"