

Teach Us to Number Our Days

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Last week I had the amazing opportunity to hike part of the Appalachian Trail in Virginia. I didn't do much of it and covered only five or six miles in the two days we hiked, but it was a magical place that took me out of my daily life and transported me into another time. A time out of ordinary time, where the worries and anxieties I carry in most of my daily life were pushed away and a new awareness took their place. I was more aware and alive than I had been in some time. I was aware of the wind in the trees, the vibrant blue sky and warm sun above me. My senses of hearing and smell were heightened, and I found myself pausing to identify sounds in the forest. There were so many! Many more than you would expect in the quiet of a fall forest, with only two humans wandering in it.

The trees were alive with bird sounds as they flew from branch to branch or pecked at the wood hunting for their dinner. The undergrowth moved and stirred as squirrels gathered the abundant acorns, chestnuts and walnuts that littered the ground. There was so much to see that my eyes were dazzled by it all. There were leaves of all colors. Some painted the ground in shades of yellow, orange, green, red, and my favorite bright magenta. Others fell in a slow silent dance as the trees released them to their final resting place on the soft earth. Still others fell in great abundance and were caught by the wind, swirled, and danced high above me. I could not help but be stopped in my tracks as nature showed me her beauty and abundant life, even as she was slowing things down and letting pieces follow the course of their life span and die.

Like the psalm from today's reading, I experienced a mixture of thoughts and feelings as I walked and stood in the forest. This psalm, like many, is both petition and prayer. It is filled with questions and longing, anxiety and expectation, commands to the Holy and words from the human writer. This psalm voices the experienced reality of the human condition as well as a hope that comes from being honest and having faith. There is a tense dance for the hearer of these words as well as a reality in the brief and transitory nature of life. There are petitions to God of hope and yearning. These petitions hold within them the fear and anxiety that do not readily accept the nature of our frail human lives and seek answers from God that will give us comfort.

There is a tension written about in this psalm that is an inescapable part of the human condition. Our lives are defined and marked by this tension whether we are aware of it or not. Whether we try to deny it or not. Whether we claim the reality or not. This tension is in how we live, decisions we make, what we choose as important and how we live our lives. While we are living, if we allow ourselves to acknowledge it, we are also preparing to die. There is no way out of this tension, which is defining for human life. Many of us want answers and assurances. If we have anxieties, we seek to be reassured that we are okay or that our circumstances will improve. We

are seekers of hope and in many times desperate for relief from situations and fears in life. Here the psalmist is doing this very thing. He is seeking an assurance from God, against the backdrop of the inevitability of death, against his own oblivion. There is a yearning and desperate need in this psalm for an assurance from God.

There is no denial in this psalm of the inevitability of the death that will come to us all, but there is a plea to God. A plea to help make meaning of the brief span of years we have as humans and a demand to God for compassion, care, and support in making meaningful lives that are lived with gladness and will make a difference. There is a seeking of love and generosity from God that is enduring and will be the foundation of the lives of the believers in the Holy. There is a desire for the psalmist to leave a mark on the world that will last long after they have died. This desire is one that many of us are familiar with as we strive to live lives that make a difference for ourselves and those around us. It helps us make meaning and move forward in our daily walk. With the desires and pleas in this psalm, we are reminded that our works alone are not enough to have us be remembered or have our achievements endure. It is only through God that we find truly lasting and enduring remembrance.

In the last fifteen months I have presided over fifteen funerals and graveside services. I sat beside two people and their loved ones as they took their final breaths and departed from this life, wrote the obituary and helped plan my own mother's funeral, and have walked the road of grief and loss with others as they have navigated the deaths of their loved ones. The frailties and brevity of this life have come upon me in ways that I had never before encountered. Many people are surprised and a little disconcerted when I tell them that one of my favorite things to do in my ministry work is conduct funerals. My favorite thing used to be doing weddings. I loved (and still do) the celebration of the love of two people and the promises and hope that weddings and celebrations bring. But I have discovered a deeper love of conducting funerals and graveside services, sitting with those who are leaving or preparing to leave this earth and helping the loved ones left behind.

I am honored and humbled every time someone puts their trust in me to help them cross the threshold from life to death, plan and conduct a funeral service, and help the grieving ones. I have been repeatedly awed by how many journeys from life to death are taken without fear and how ready people are when they take their final breath. How are they ready and how can they do it with such deep peace and grace? Yes, there are many who struggle and cling desperately to life until the very end and die fearful and anxious. We humans are a mixed bunch while living and in the dying we are no different, but I can understand the clinging and desperation, sometimes better than those who are at peace and ready to make the leap with gladness.

We need assurances and answers, and to know our lives have had meaning and purpose. Most of us want to know that we made a mark or that we will leave something enduring behind. The psalmist is petitioning God for those answers and assurances, but God does not answer. We are left, like the psalmist, with the transitory nature of our lives and to try and make meaning of our

brief span of years. How do we seek to do this when there never seem to be enough hours in a day and the years seem to speed up as we grow older? Maybe the answer is in today's scripture readings, which tell us that we'll reach 70 or 80 years of age if we're strong and live well. The psalmist was being optimistic, because the average lifespan for an Israelite at that time was actually 29 to 40 years. They clung to life and the hope of a long life despite knowing that most people did not live half that long. Why this span and this hope, and what does being strong and living well mean?

Both readings for today tell us we need to turn to God, and we are continually being told to be aware of God and be awake. Paul is telling us to have a life of watchfulness and respond to the hope of the return of Christ with awareness of the world around us. If we're aware and watchful, hopeful of the promise, we'll live fully awake. We are accountable to God for making our lives meaningful as we turn repeatedly to the life-giving Source that is God. Many people who believe in an imminent return of Christ spend their lives waiting for that day for their salvation. If all we are doing is waiting, how are we experiencing the lives that God intends us? How are we honoring the brief bright gift that is our life? Thessalonians tells us that the hope is not so much when Christ will return, but in the promises made about our salvation, and that accountability to God means being awake so that we may live with God. As people of faith, our hopes and lives culminate in the Holy. Our work, relationships, and every aspect of our lives should be lived with an attitude of expectation and wakefulness.

The psalmist is looking for meaning and connection to the Holy. Paul tells us that we are to encourage one another and build each other up. We are to support each other and help as we walk this road of life to the promise of some Other at the end of our days. We are to understand that we are connected to God and to each other. We are given repeated messages about interdependence on one another and the need to facilitate those relationships and support each other as well as our relationship to the Holy. We are to build each other up and to know the profound connection we have to each other as followers of Christ and children of God. In this connection we are to understand that building each other up means helping others with their needs and that our own needs are met as well. This is the answer to the psalmist's pleas for assurance and freedom from oblivion. If we do what these passages tell us to do, we will be living! We will be awake and aware, and we will be connected to each other, the earth and all of Creation.

When I am preparing a funeral liturgy, sitting with the bereaved or dying, there is an immediacy of awareness of the person's life and what it meant. There are so many questions and thoughts about the events of their lives, what was accomplished and what was left undone. Much of the time is spent defining what their lives meant and for some coming to peace with what they did or did not get accomplished. In writing about the deceased, I try to get to know a bit about who they were and what was most meaningful about them to those who are left behind. Those stories and memories are important, and the legacy is what those stories mean to the loved ones who remain. Universally it is about the connections that people are drawn to. I have listened to story after

story about how much time spent with the person meant to the living. Connection and love, conversation, and time, laughing and crying, contact and care. These are some of the things that people talk about over and over when discussing their loved ones. The fabric of their lives and what is held most dear are the moments when people were together and being most fully alive.

I like to spend time in cemeteries—the older, the better. I love to walk among the old stones and read the inscriptions. Some are funny. Some are sad. Some simple and some very elaborate. Despite the differences, there is always the same carving of a date of birth and a date of death. In between is a tiny dash. That dash is about an inch long. That dash always stops me in my tracks. It holds more awe and meaning than anything I have ever read on the stones because that dash represents the entire span of the life of that person who lies in the earth. That tiny dash is the span of our years, whether 20, 50, 70, 80, 90 or more. I am stopped short by that dash because I want it to count. I am stopped short by that dash because it reminds me of how brief and transitory life really is.

We are being called by God to be awake and not asleep as we live our lives. We are being called to support each other and to see the interconnectedness to each other and to all of Creation. We are called to pause in the forest of our lives and be still and listen to all the abundance of life there is around us. We are constantly called to awareness of the transitory and short nature of life for all living things and most especially ourselves. In that awareness is also a call for us to be connected to the Holy and continually turn our hearts and minds to God. In that attention and turning is where we find connection, lasting meaning, and salvation.