

# The Gift of Running out of Time

Psalm 90

October 23, 2011

Lord, you have been our dwelling-place  
in all generations.

Before the mountains were brought forth,  
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,  
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

You turn us back to dust,  
and say, 'Turn back, you mortals.'  
For a thousand years in your sight  
are like yesterday when it is past,  
or like a watch in the night.

You sweep them away; they are like a dream,  
like grass that is renewed in the morning;  
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;  
in the evening it fades and withers.

Turn, O Lord! How long?

Have compassion on your servants!

Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,  
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,  
and for as many years as we have seen evil.

Let your work be manifest to your servants,  
and your glorious power to their children.

Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,  
and [establish] for us the work of our hands—

O [establish] the work of our hands!

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Maybe it is because we cannot escape the constant stream of information – through 24 hour news cycles, phones that ring and buzz, weblinks to interesting stories, twitter feeds, email correspondence, and water-cooler talk – but it seems like we are living in urgent times...times that demand our attention and action and solutions to our most pressing problems.

Right now, in various places around the country, but mostly concentrated in New York, there are thousands of people protesting the growing gap between rich and poor in the Occupy Wall Street movement.

Thursday afternoon, I heard a remarkable man named Geoffrey Canada challenge our community to stop waiting for someone else to fix our city's schools. He urged us to take action in order to save an entire generation of children from being locked out of a future in which their education would not allow them to compete.

Everywhere you turn, there are opinions about what needs to happen to pull our country – and the world – out of our economic trouble. Whether it is the 9-9-9 plan, the flat tax, or the President's jobs bill – there are solutions waiting for us if we would just make up our minds and cast our vote for the right candidate.

One of my former youth who is currently working at as Young Adult Volunteer in Kenya just wrote me this week about the water-shortage crisis in one of the slums near her home; there are over 1 million people (or five Shreveports) concentrated in a part of Nairobi with no access to running water.

And it's not just exterior problems that seem urgent – they come close to home as well...

It is about that time to start the frantic, cutthroat process of helping our children get into kindergarten, or middle school, or high school or college.

If your aging parent isn't set up in a retirement home or with home health yet, you better start helping them making plans.

When is the last time you made a contribution to your 401K or updated your life-insurance policy? Especially for those close to my age who won't be able to count on social security?

Do you feel it? The pace of our lives and the pace of our world bears down. It feels urgent. It captures and holds our attention. It pressures us to act; to fix; to offer solutions. Now. Not later. Now.

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It is into this world that the Psalmist speaks:

*Lord, you have been our dwelling-place  
in all generations.  
Before the mountains were brought forth,  
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,  
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.*

*You turn us back to dust,  
and say, 'Turn back, you mortals.'  
For a thousand years in your sight  
are like yesterday when it is past,  
or like a watch in the night.*

We usually read this Psalm at memorial services. I wonder what it says about us if the time we can best hear the message of this scripture is on the occasion of death? Is that really what it takes for us to realize that we are not in control of the world around us?

One of life's hardest lessons, I think, is to realize that we are not as important as we think we are. And that the solutions that we invent for all of our urgent problems are not as effective as we think they are.

And that – one day – all of this...us, and our problems – will pass away...will wither and fade...like the grass.

That may sound fatalistic and dismissive. I certainly do not mean it to be.

I suppose one option for how to live in the knowledge that all of this...us, our problems...is temporary is to wallow in despair and see our journey through this life as pointless. There are plenty of French and German philosophers who give voice this despair, if you are so inclined.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Paul Sarte, for example.

But that kind of despair does not fit with our faith.

In spite of how fleeting this life is, Lord knows, we do face things in our world that are urgent; things that do require our immediate attention; problems that we have inherited, or created, or ignored, to the point that they threaten, not only our life, but the lives of millions and – even – our future as a people.

And, yes, God does call on us to act. Two weeks ago, Bishop Mankhin, our guest preacher from Bangladesh, made the strong and good point that if we call ourselves disciples of Jesus Christ, by definition, we must be committed to actively seeking the things that Jesus sought: social justice for all peoples, healing, peace, and fullness of life.

There can be no doubt that God calls us to action, but, if I understand a message of our Psalm for today, we are kidding ourselves if we think our efforts alone are going to affect the kind of change that is needed.

In our contemporary situation, I think the power of this Psalm is that it assumes and affirms something that we have a tendency to forget when we feel overwhelmed by the urgency of our problems: that God is *already* actively involved. That instead of the impossible task of us solving all the world's problems, our role – while we have temporary station in this gift which is our life – is to seek after God who has been, and is, and will be faithful and active in the *continual* creation of this world that we inhabit.

That's the danger in taking ourselves too seriously – that we miss the ways that God is present. That amidst all the urgency we feel, we miss and dismiss the places where God is working.

For even when we feel that things are urgent and in need of our attention; even when we wonder where God is amidst the problems in our lives – especially there, faced with our own limits, we are called...not to throw our hands up in despair, not to double-down on our misplaced self-importance, but to give ourselves over to seeking after the places where God is acting in the world.

And once we find those places - we participate. That is our role - as a participant in God's ongoing redeeming work.

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Let me get more concrete.

If you are a member of this church, you received a commitment card in the mail this week. Next Sunday during worship, you are asked to bring that card, filled out with a commitment of your financial resources for the next year, to support the ministry of our congregation.

Now, you could see such an action as paying your dues to this religious club you belong to.

You could see it as payment for a religious product you receive – quality worship, visits from the pastors, Sunday school for your kids.

You could do the math - look at the bottom line of the budget, divide by the number of “giving units” we have each year (about 300), and figure out what your share is.

Or, you could see a commitment to share your financial resources - the things that God has given and entrusted to you - as one significant, substantial, faith-filled way for you to *participate* in where God is active and alive in the world through the ministry of this church.

That’s the way I hope you will see it.

The act of giving is one of the clearest ways we can demonstrate our trust – not in ourselves and in our solutions...which are always fleeting...but in the faithful promises of God who is...and always will be...our dwelling place.

Our home.