

APOSTLES ANGLICAN CHURCH

# “Lord, Teach Us to Number Our Days”

Sermon, Proper 23

Sunday, October 13, 2024

**Texts:** Amos 5:6-15 / Psalm 90:1-17 / Hebrews 3:1-6 / Mark 10:17-31

## **Amos 5:6-15**

*Hear this word that I take up over you in lamentation, O house of Israel:*

<sup>2</sup> *“Fallen, no more to rise,  
is the virgin Israel;  
forsaken on her land,  
with none to raise her up.”*

<sup>3</sup> *For thus says the Lord GOD:  
“The city that went out a thousand  
shall have a hundred left,  
and that which went out a hundred  
shall have ten left  
to the house of Israel.”*

<sup>4</sup> *For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel:  
“Seek me and live;*

<sup>5</sup> *but do not seek Bethel,  
and do not enter into Gilgal  
or cross over to Beersheba;  
for Gilgal shall surely go into exile,  
and Bethel shall come to nothing.”*

<sup>6</sup> *Seek the LORD and live,  
lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph,  
and it devour, with none to quench it for Bethel,*

<sup>7</sup> *O you who turn justice to wormwood  
and cast down righteousness to the earth!*

<sup>8</sup> **He who made the Pleiades and Orion,  
and turns deep darkness into the morning**

**and darkens the day into night,  
who calls for the waters of the sea  
and pours them out on the surface of the earth,  
the LORD is his name;**

<sup>9</sup> who makes destruction flash forth against the strong,  
so that destruction comes upon the fortress.

<sup>10</sup> They hate him who reproves in the gate,  
and they abhor him who speaks the truth.

**<sup>11</sup> Therefore because you trample on the poor  
and you exact taxes of grain from him,  
you have built houses of hewn stone,  
but you shall not dwell in them;  
you have planted pleasant vineyards,  
but you shall not drink their wine.**

<sup>12</sup> For I know how many are your transgressions  
and how great are your sins—  
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,  
and turn aside the needy in the gate.

<sup>13</sup> Therefore he who is prudent will keep silent in such a time,  
for it is an evil time.

<sup>14</sup> Seek good, and not evil,  
that you may live;  
and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you,  
as you have said.

**<sup>15</sup> Hate evil, and love good,  
and establish justice in the gate;**  
it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts,  
will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

## **Psalm 90:1-17**

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

**2** Before the mountains were brought forth,  
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,

from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

3 You return man to dust

and say, "Return, O children of man!"

4 For a thousand years in your sight

are but as yesterday when it is past,  
or as a watch in the night.

5 You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream,  
like grass that is renewed in the morning:

6 in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;  
in the evening it fades and withers.

7 For we are brought to an end by your anger;  
by your wrath we are dismayed.

8 You have set our iniquities before you,  
our secret sins in the light of your presence.

9 For all our days pass away under your wrath;  
we bring our years to an end like a sigh.

**10 The years of our life are seventy,  
or even by reason of strength eighty;  
yet their span is but toil and trouble;  
they are soon gone, and we fly away.**

11 Who considers the power of your anger,  
and your wrath according to the fear of you?

**12 So teach us to number our days  
that we may get a heart of wisdom.**

13 Return, O Lord! How long?  
Have pity on your servants!

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

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

16 Let your work be shown to your servants,

and your glorious power to their children.  
17 Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,  
and establish the work of our hands upon us;  
yes, establish the work of our hands!

[Psalm 71:18 / Joshua 4:21-22 / Exodus 13:14 / Deut 6:4-9 (Shema)]

Nearing Home: Life, Faith, and Finishing Well – Billy Graham

### **Hebrews 3:1-6**

Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, 2 who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house. 3 For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses—as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself. 4 (For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.) 5 Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, 6 but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.

### **Mark 10:17-31**

17 And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 18 And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. 19 You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.’” 20 And he said to him, “Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.” 21 And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, “You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven;

and come, follow me.” 22 Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

23 And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” 24 And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” 26 And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, “Then who can be saved?” 27 Jesus looked at them and said, “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For **all things are possible with God.**” 28 Peter began to say to him, “See, we have left everything and followed you.” 29 Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, 30 who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. **31 But many who are first will be last, and the last first.**”

The great Corrie ten Boom, survivor of a WWII Nazi concentration camp has said, “The measure of a life is not its duration, but its donation.” There have been many short lives which were lived well and to the fullest and donated fully to others and to Christ, and many long lives which included abundant waste, accompanied mostly by self-satisfaction and self-glorification. Dr. E. Stanley Jones, a missionary to India said, “In old age...blossom at the end like a night-blooming cereus.” The cereus plant is a cactus that blooms only at night. Billy Graham, in a book written in his 93rd year entitled *Nearing Home: Life, Faith, and Finishing Well* (2011), reflected on Dr. Jones’ life,

Do we, the older generation, do the same? Are we producing fruit that replenishes others, or do we complain about our circumstances and drain others who look forward to living full lives? By our attitudes, do we make the younger dread the inevitable – growing old? (Graham, p. 34)

Remember, Abram was called by the Lord to a foreign country at age 75, having lived a full life in his father’s house on his father’s land. You are never too old to be about the Lord’s work. The Psalmist has said,

So even to old age and gray hairs,  
O God, do not forsake me,  
Until I proclaim your might to another generation,  
Your power to all those to come. (Psalm 71:18)

I don’t know about you, especially my fellow aging friends, but I so dearly want to spend the time I have left “proclaiming” the might of God, the power of Jesus Christ, and His Holy and life-giving Spirit to “another generation,” and not complaining, making life difficult for those around me, especially my loved ones.

You know, the word “retirement” is not found in all of Scripture. Rest, most definitely yes, but never retirement from the work the Lord has given us to do. Billy Graham has said,

No matter who we are, retirement presents us with two choices. Either we can use it to indulge ourselves, or we can use it to make an impact on the lives of others. (p. 42)

Some of us may be bedridden or confined to a wheelchair, but we still have important work to do...God forbid that we should ever retire from prayer, the sweetest work of the soul. (Billy Graham, p. 40)

We Christians should lead in our retirement years and in getting our affairs in order: financial, physical, medical, and spiritual. But, by far the most important is getting our spiritual house in order. Again, the great Billy Graham speaks with ultimate clarity:

God wants us to finish well – and one of the ways we do this is by passing on our values and our faith to those who will follow us...The greatest legacy you can pass on to your children and grandchildren is not your money or the other material things you have accumulated in life. The greatest legacy you can pass on to them is the legacy of your character and your faith. (Graham, p. 118-119)

I have officiated at well over a hundred burial services in my parochial ministry. As part of planning these services, I meet with the family and ask them to tell me about their loved one who has passed. In that discussion I always ask, “What was your daddy’s favorite hymn, or verse, or chapter or book of the Bible?” And, even though their deceased parent may have served on the vestry, or as a warden, or on some committee, taught Sunday school for decades, and never missed a Sunday of worship, these children of a patriarch or matriarch of the church, can rarely answer that question. They seem to not know anything about their parent’s personal relationship to Christ, other than the duty their beloved parent fulfilled to God.

Their daddy has passed along a whole plethora of vital information: how to fish the best hole in the creek, how to sail a boat, how to hunt quail and pheasant and white-tailed deer, which political party has got it right, and can recount the glory days of Tennessee football; but he seemed to never have talked much about the Holy Spirit’s activity in his life, what his favorite biblical passage was, or which hymns touched him deeply. Those of you who have children and grandchildren, I’m going to give you some homework. Tell your children and grandchildren about

your faith, your personal relationship to Christ, what He truly has meant to you and means to you, times when the Holy Spirit moved you and instructed you, what your favorite passages of Scripture are, and which hymns you can't wait to sing each Sunday. And continue to do that throughout the life that the Lord has appointed for you.

In his book on death and dying called *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, the self-avowed English intellectual and atheist Julian Barnes, laments what he doesn't possess, "What's the point of faith unless you and it are serious – *seriously* serious – unless your religion fills, directs, stains, and sustains your life?" Brothers and sisters, this is what the world, our families, our friends, is desperate for: Christians whose love of God and our neighbor "fills, directs, stains, and sustains" our lives. Faith that is serious and most assuredly NOT PRIVATE! Very personal, so personal that we are stained by it, and overflow all over those we love... but NEVER PRIVATE.

The beginning of every Anglican burial office starts with these words chanted as the body is born solemnly into the church,

I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord;  
he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live;  
and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die...

For none of us liveth to himself,  
and no man dieth to himself.  
For if we live, we live unto the Lord.  
and if we die, we die unto the Lord.  
Whether we live, therefore, or die, we are the Lord's.

I have proclaimed these words hundreds of times, but only in recent years have I begun to understand their full import. The worship service opens with a clear understanding, "Whether we live, therefore, or die, we are the Lord's." It is also a great comfort to know that the love of God extends up to, and even beyond, the grave: "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints." (Psalm 116:15) And that nothing can separate us from His love, as Romans 8 (35, 37-39) says so beautifully.



As children of faith, we must understand all human relationships, indeed all of our existence, not only as lived as Images of God, but within the framework of our finite life-spans gifted by God. Psalm 90 sums this up: “So teach us to number our days / that we may get a heart of wisdom.”

“Make us, in other words,” Bishop N. T. Wright summarizes, “to be people who know how to stand at the threshold of human time and God’s time, and there to learn both **humility** and **hope**. Our time is not worthless, but any worth it may possess will come from God’s goodness, **not our control of our circumstances**.” (*The Case for the Psalms*, 2013, p. 38).

I fear that generation after generation is becoming less and less wise, indeed more foolish, as we forget to number our days, and then grasp at our lives on this earth, even to the end. Ephraim Radner, in his magisterial work, *A Time to Keep*, says:

... Every time of our life is Christ’s time and is thus scriptural time. There is no ‘life’ that somehow exists apart from God...Creaturely life itself finally shows us that scriptural life is primordial to all other ways of construing life. (p. 8)

Every aspect of our lives, our consummation, our gestation, our birth, our sicknesses, our work, our worship, our relationships, and ultimately our death, is a gift from Him. Our lives have always been intended to be lived with this certain knowledge. As Billy Graham has pointed out,

...We have forgotten one of the Bible’s central truths: every day – without exception – is a gift from God, entrusted to us to use for His glory. This is true for your working years, and it is equally true for your retirement. (p. 43)

And, still, our advancing years also bring an inevitable decline, as the resurrected Jesus points out (John 21:18):

Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.

Several years ago, the British magazine, *The Economist*, sort of Britain's version of *Time* magazine, ran an article that caught my eye. The cover headline read, "How life ends: Death is inevitable. A bad death is not." Inside were a series of articles about how advances in medicine have been able to extend life, but far too often the life that is extended is a painful one. The authors bemoan the fact that oftentimes this extended life is, frankly, not worth living.

The authors state,

The paradox of modern medicine is that people are living longer, and yet doing so with more disease. Death is rarely quick or painless. Often it is traumatic....In the rich world most people die in a hospital or nursing home, often after pointless, aggressive treatment. Many die alone, confused and in pain. (p. 45)

Studies have shown that, in the Western nations, from 1/3 to ¼ of the total amount we spend on a lifetime of healthcare is spent in the last few years of life, often to very little affect.

And, it is for these and many other reasons,

Most people feel dread when they contemplate their mortality [it is what one author has called the "worm at the core" of our everyday existence]. (The Economist, p. 9)

This need not be so. In fact, we as Christians should lead in preparing for a good death, and the life to come, with a firm understanding that we are under the care of a loving and eternal God. We should make every provision, if possible, to ensure a long and healthy life...but, when faced with death, be able to give ourselves over to the care of our loved ones and our Lord. Again, Psalm 90, "So teach us to number our days / that we may get a heart of wisdom." The Rev. Billy Graham, then 98 years old, wisely counseled,

Christians are not to be preoccupied with death; God has put within each of us a will to survive. But neither are we to shrink from death or act as if we must fiercely resist it until the last breath. The time may well come, in fact, when life's burdens and pains overwhelm us so much that we will welcome death as a friend – and that is as it should be. If we know Christ, we know that Heaven is our true home, and (like the saints of old) we are “longing for a better country – a heavenly one’ (Heb 11:16) (Graham, p. 66)

But, even at point of death of a loved one, even possibly after a prolonged illness, we are shocked by the finality of it. “Death is always an intruder even when it is expected.” (Graham, p. 108) But, death is not to be feared.

As death has been hidden away in hospitals and nursing homes, it has become less familiar and harder to talk about. Politicians are scared to bring up end-of-life care in case they are accused of setting up ‘death panels.’ But honest and open conversations with the dying should be as much a part of modern medicine as prescribing drugs or fixing broken bones. A better death means a better life, right until the end. (The Economist, p. 9)

And we, as people of faith, should encourage these conversations between doctors, family, and priest.

Finally, if you have professed a saving belief in Jesus Christ, you need not worry about your future...it is secure in a place beyond all imagining. The Gospel of John, chapter 14, is crystal clear that there is only one way to the love of the Father, and that is through the shed of blood of Jesus Christ. And so, we must make this most important of all preparations, and encourage our friends and family to do the same.

Billy Graham says that the reason the Bible does not give us a clear vision of what Heaven will be like is because “Heaven is so much greater than anything our limited minds can ever imagine” (Graham, p. 170). What we do know about Heaven, and it is expressly stated again in the Gospel of John, often read and burials, is that Christ has gone there before us, he has prepared a special place for each and every one of us, and we will be surrounded by His love and grace into

eternity. And finally, at the end of all time, we have the promise of new physical bodies in a New Heaven and New Earth. Remember what St. John the Evangelist saw when Jesus Christ gave him a peek into heaven, what is happening in heaven right now and awaits us. From Revelation, chapter 7,

9 After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. 10 And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."...

13 Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?"

14 I answered, "Sir, you know."

And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. 15 Therefore,

"they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple;

and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.

16 'Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst.

The sun will not beat down on them,' nor any scorching heat.

17 For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd;

'he will lead them to springs of living water.'

'And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'"

"Lord, teach us to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom." Amen.