

Rev. Joan Pell
Byron United Methodist Church
Sermon: 11/16/14
Series: Fall Reflections: A Look at Some Psalms
Scripture: Psalm 90:1-12



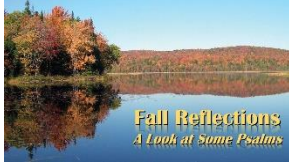
While Facing Frailty



<Read Psalm 90:1-12 NRSV>

Prayer of Moses, the man of God.

- ¹ *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 turn us back to dust,
and say, "Turn back, you mortals."*
- ⁴ *For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past,
or like a watch in the night.*
- ⁵ *You sweep them away; 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 consumed by your anger;
by your wrath we are overwhelmed.*
- ⁸ *You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your countenance.*
- ⁹ *For all our days pass away under your wrath;
our years come to an end like a sigh.*
- ¹⁰ *The days of our life are seventy years,
or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;
even then their span is only toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.*
- ¹¹ *Who considers the power of your anger?
Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.*
- ¹² *So teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart.*



In this Fall season we are spending some time reflecting on the Psalms. The Psalmists who wrote these songs and prayers were not afraid to show their feelings/emotions and they didn't shy away from difficult topics. And in today's reading the Psalmist is wrestling with our human frailty and the differences between God's time and human time. **How do we deal with life's brevity and frailty?**



We on the other hand don't like to talk about frailty and death. We prefer to talk about heroes and beating the odds, of miracles and 'making it.' And then when something happens we say "How can this be?" We like to be in control and not come face to face with any limitations.



So we fight aging with anti-wrinkle creams and hair dye. Our independence is so precious that relinquishing car keys is traumatic. And we hang onto our perceived sense of security by putting up with long lines at security check points at airports and tiny bags for travel supplies. We fight long and hard against disease rarely stopping to question the quality of that life. We hesitate to request that 'Do Not Resuscitate' status. Our loved ones wrack up enormous medical bills that give them only a few more hours or days of life, sometimes only because we are the ones that are not ready to let them go.



Our need for control is not all bad. Telling a stubborn person that they cannot do something is surefire way to get them to prove you wrong. Refusing against all odds to accept limits moves us to take a stand to push harder than we thought we could to accomplish what seemed impossible to fight for our healing and well-being and to create and innovate beyond our wildest dreams.



But, on the flip side our refusal to confront our limitations and to acknowledge our human frailty is also a **refusal to accept half of life. It is a refusal to see ourselves in our proper place.**

This Psalm is associated with Moses. Moses was not given enough time here on earth to enter the Promised Land. He had to face the same sort realities as we do.

Now this Psalm comes across as harsh when read through the lens of human control. The Psalmist described God saying: *"You turn us back to dust" "You sweep away a thousand years as if they were a dream" "Our days pass away under your wrath" The days of our life span are "only toil and trouble"*

That's a harsh point of view. But, the same words are freeing when couched in the constancy of God. God was here throughout human history, before the mountains were brought forth, before the universe began. And God will be here forever. Human life is fleeting but we are not the center. God's grandeur, God's limitlessness, God's eternity

are the good news that puts the perspective on our existence. The Psalmists asks **why not stand in awe at God's infinity and constancy?**

This Psalm encourages us to see limitation and frailty as an opportunity to depend upon God. It encourages us to recognize the seasons and the cycles of God's creation that are continually played out. Trees shoot and blossom and leaves sprout and fruit grows and ripens and leaves turn and drop, and the cycle repeats. Somewhere someone is getting married, while somewhere else a child is conceived, a child is baptized, a memorial is held, someone dies and someone else is given life with their organs.

Frailty is a part of life. Death is a part of life. And we can trust that God is always here. As the Psalmist started out (v1): *Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.*

Some conversations around frailty and dying are really hard to have (including this sermon) and yet having them during the good times makes it a lot easier when the seasons change and the bad times come. Meaning-making is better done when we are less emotional and have the capacity to think things through. Sure, some of our perspective may change later, but at least we have foundations to support us.

Set in the context of our faith journey it is a lot easier to have a discussion about DNR orders now than when we or our loved ones are in the ICU.

Thinking and talking about death is not just hard for those who are older. It is hard for young adults too. I know when we were younger it took some years after we were married with children before we wrote our wills, and we should have done it much sooner.

Postponing a discussion on your finances and what you want to have happen to your resources in the event of an unexpected accident or illness takes away the peace that you could have now. A peace that comes from knowing that should the worst happen, your family will at least know your wishes.

One of the books that I had to read for a Christian Ethics class at seminary was Richard Galli's autobiographical book *Rescuing Jeffrey*.¹ In the book he describes the first ten days after his son Jeffrey becomes a quadriplegic after diving into a swimming pool. During that time Galli and his wife are faced with decisions about Jeffrey's medical care. Jeffrey was five months short of his 18th birthday but until then all legal decisions about his medical treatment remained his parents' responsibility. It was a challenging book to read, but the conversations that we had around the family dinner table with my son who was a High School Freshman were very deep and spiritual.

Is death a problem to be overcome technologically? Should it be circumvented at all costs? What is our human responsibility in relation to God's will?

In the US, about 28% of the Medicare budget is used to pay care for folk who are in

¹ Richard Galli, *Rescuing Jeffrey* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2000).

their last 6 months of life. We are being kept alive now far beyond the point at which we would have succumbed in earlier generations. Medical procedures and medication are indefinitely extending the lives of very sick people who are never going to get well.²

Cancer is one of the illnesses where tough decisions have to be made. When do we use chemotherapy and radiation and when is it time to stop treatment and move onto hospice? And even on hospice the choices are endless as to what constitutes a good death. As a friend of mine said this week: ***Growing old is not for sissies!***



Over the last couple of months Brittany Maynard has opened up the discussion on the right to die with dignity. Diagnosed with an aggressive and terminal brain cancer at 29, she used Oregon's Death with Dignity law to end her life this month. She was young and newly married, and she looked unlike any stereotype of a dying person. She reminded us all, young and old, without saying it directly, that death could happen to any of us at any time. She articulated her desire to live, but in the end timed her death in relation to the debilitating symptoms she was experiencing with her family all graciously present and gathered around her.³

Christians have come down on both sides of her decision and a lot has been written and reported on it. It is a challenging issue for people of faith: We live with an expectation of answers to prayer, the hope of the power of resurrection, and see the gift of life as sacred and blessed by God. It gets very difficult to frame an understanding that satisfies and it is easier to avoid the discussion. Brittany chose to exercise what little control was left to her. She chose to skip the end stages of the disease along with the pain or the gradual fading in and out of consciousness and the idea that she would be a burden to others and they would have to watch the process. Instead, she was able to gather everyone she wanted to be with her and tell them what she needed to tell them and slip away while they held her.



By the technical definition of suicide, perhaps it was, but she did not take her own life in secret in a way that someone was left to find her unexpectedly with an impression they can never wash from their memory. While she took control to end it medically herself, she was also not letting the medical profession keep their control and extend her life way beyond its natural term. Brittany's decision was hers to make, not mine, and I do not cast judgment. Perhaps the only thing we can do is to turn like the Psalmist and come back to the constancy of God and stand in awe. The last verse we read (v12) said: *So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.* When we think about Moses in the desert and the manna God provided daily, and the line in the Lord's Prayer that says "give us our daily bread" perhaps this verse could be better translated as: *So teach us to live day by day that we may gain a wise heart.* To gain a wise heart is to trust in the cycles of life. To gain trust that human ability is not all

² <http://kaiserhealthnews.org/morning-breakout/end-of-life-care-17/>

³ <http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/brittany-maynard-and-the-right-die-dignity>

there is, to gain trust in constancy of God who is our dwelling place, and who is from everlasting to everlasting.

And let's finish on an up-note. May it also be a reminder to go out into the world and LIVE! Life is short, but life is also significant, meaningful and enjoyable. So, go and enjoy it!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Let us pray.

Everlasting God, You are the memory of where we have been and the anticipation of where we are going. Though we are not yet in possession of all we have been promised, here and there along the way we catch glimpses of our eternal home. You, O Lord, are our home along the way and at the end of the journey. For traveling with us, for rescuing us when we are lost, and for calling us into your holy place, thanks be to you, O God, our eternal home.⁴ Amen.

Resources

Bartlett, David and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Year A, Volume 4. Louisville: Westminster John Press, 2011.

Johnstone, Chuck. *E-pistle from Pastor Chuck for November 12, 2014*, San Jose, California: Evergreen Valley United Methodist Church.
<https://www.facebook.com/EVUMC?pnref=story>.

⁴ Sharlande Sledge, *Prayers & Litanies for the Christian Seasons* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1999) 31.