

New Year, Old Dust

*Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
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Scripture

Psalm 19

Sermon

When I buy milk at Meijer, I always check the expiration date. I don't want the milk to spoil before I have a chance to finish it. But sometimes there's too much milk left when the expiration date gets close. So I have cereal for breakfast instead of eggs. I don't want to waste milk. So the expiration date changes my plans and my behavior.

The way I read Psalm 90, each of us has our own expiration date. One of these days, and we don't know when, but one of these days, it's going to be all over for us. And that expiration date, it changes our plans and our behavior. Or it should.

Some of us treat that expiration date like a deadly enemy. We do everything we can to fight it off. We stay home instead of driving on icy roads. We eat salads instead of bacon cheeseburgers. We work out. We try not to get into fights. All because we want to live as long as possible. All because we want to drink every drop of sweet milk that life has to offer.

Then there's the rest of us. We have the best of intentions. But our follow-through? Not so good. We make New Year's resolutions. We say, "This year is going to be different." Because today is the first day of the rest of our lives.

But around the 6th of January, nothing sounds better than a bacon cheeseburger. And around the 6th of February, nothing sounds worse than another workout. And by the 6th of March . . .

It's amazing how soon a brand new year starts looking just like the old one! So we're doomed, all of us. Our expiration date keeps getting closer. And we start to look and smell more and more like spoiled milk.

I suppose there's nothing wrong with New Year's resolutions. There's certainly nothing wrong with working out. And there's nothing wrong with watching what you eat. But I don't think Psalm 90 is talking about our bacon-cheeseburger behavior.

Psalm 90 is brutally honest about our expiration date. But it doesn't treat that date like an enemy. And the point is not that we're doomed. The psalm only wants to focus our attention. The psalm only wants to give us some perspective.

"Teach us to number our days." That's the prayer in the middle of Psalm 90. It's about our expiration date. It's about those 70 or 80 years we have, or maybe less, maybe much less. "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom."

I wonder what that wisdom looks like. Well, here's a thought about that. You may know that the church has a season called Lent. And you may know that the first day of Lent is called Ash Wednesday. Lots of Christians have a smudge of ashes rubbed onto their forehead that day.

Do you know there are words that go with the ashes? “Remember that you are dust, and that to dust you shall return.” Those words are from Genesis 3 and from Psalm 90. I’ve said those words to old ladies and to little babies and to all ages in-between. “Remember that you are dust.”

Dust. That’s about our expiration date. It’s about not forgetting, about never forgetting, that we do not live forever. No, the truth is that we are here today and gone tomorrow. And that disappointing truth is the first part of the perspective that Psalm 90 gives us. It’s a perspective that leads us to wisdom.

Here’s the second part of that perspective. The psalm says God is “from everlasting to everlasting.” That means God has no expiration date. God is always. God is forever. God is before all time and after all time.

But that’s not the whole story. That’s not even close to the whole story. Yes, God is everlasting. And yes, we run out of time in a flash. But there’s more. And it’s there right at the beginning of the psalm. It’s the foundation of the entire prayer.

“Lord,” the psalm begins. “Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.” Did you hear that? “You have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.”

Psalm 90 is a psalm of Moses, the man of God. And here’s something Moses knew. He knew about God’s covenant relationship with Abraham and with Abraham’s family and with the people of Israel.

Now Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lived and died. Moses himself lived and died. All of them reached their expiration date. They all came to an end the same way we do. But God does not end. And God’s covenant relationship with his people doesn’t end either.

We come and go as individuals. We come and go as families. We come and go as congregations. But God maintains a relationship with his people. It’s a relationship built on God’s promises. It’s a relationship built on God’s faithfulness. And it’s a relationship that doesn’t end. Because God is from everlasting to everlasting. And because God is the dwelling place of his people generation after generation.

So you and I may come and go. You and I will come and go. But the church does not come and go. Because God is in a lasting relationship with the church. It’s a relationship built by Jesus Christ. And because Jesus is everlasting, the church does not come and go.

The church was here before any of us, and the church will be here after all of us. But while we are here, the church is our home. The church is our dwelling place. Because the church is the family of God.

Psalm 90 gives us perspective, a life-changing perspective. We are part of something so much bigger than ourselves. We are part of something so much more enduring than our brief lives. And that perspective supplies us with wisdom.

But it’s not the kind of wisdom that pays attention to expiration dates and that cuts back on bacon cheeseburgers. That kind of wisdom has its place. And it is practical for here and now. Following that wisdom, our cereal will taste better and we might make it to 80 years instead of 70.

But the psalm teaches us a different kind of wisdom. It's a wisdom that looks beyond the few years we have in this life. Here's the final prayer of Psalm 90:

*Establish the work of our hands for us—
yes, establish the work of our hands.*

That's the final prayer, and it makes so much sense!

I think it means something like this: "Lord, nothing we do lasts. And nothing we say lasts. Because we don't last. But please, Lord, let something about us, something we say, something we do—let something about us last. Let something about us endure longer than we do!"

A pharaoh builds a pyramid, because he wants a monument that lasts. A king sires dozens of children, because he wants a family that won't die out. And a real estate bigwig puts his name on a tower, because he wants a reputation that endures. But towers fall, dynasties collapse, and pyramids crumble.

So what endures? What can we do, what can we say, what can we build that won't turn to dust? In 1 Corinthians 15, the Apostle Paul urges the Christians in Corinth to give themselves fully to the "work of the Lord." Then he encourages them by saying that their labor in the Lord is not in vain. But what's this "work of the Lord" the Apostle has in mind?

Well, in 1 Corinthians 3 he urges those same Christians to build on the foundation of Christ. He tells them to build using gold, silver, and costly stones. In other words, he tells them to build with the best they have.

And what are they building on the foundation of Christ? They are building the family of God. That's what they're building. They are building the church of Jesus Christ.

At last, it all makes sense. We don't last. None of us do. But by God's grace, the church lasts. So if we work to build the church, then our work will last. It will be established by the Lord. And it will live on after us, because the church will live on after us.

So, brothers and sisters, whether you are on the inside or on the outside, give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, to the work of building the church. Build the church by your time, by your talents, and by your treasure. Build the church by your prayers, by your thoughts, and by your praises. Build the church by your helping hands, by your listening ears, by your obedience to the Gospel, and by your love.

Build the church. Because the church will last. Because Christ is forever!

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Glory and thanks be to God:
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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