

Sermon Title: "The Promise of Praise"

Text: Psalm 146

Preached At: Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

Date: November 4, 2012/23rd Sunday After Pentecost

Your time is running out!

Did that get your attention? It certainly got mine this past Thursday morning when the headline appeared on my computer screen.

It was the title of a blog post that I had arrived at via the usual meandering trail of online links from article to article, and was written by a wildly popular Australian blogger named Vanessa Katsooli.

Her blog is not particularly theological in nature, although she self-identifies as a Christian. She writes about her work in the nursing field, about relationships, and a wide variety of other things.

But this post was different. It was almost as if she had suddenly come to the realization that she was mortal, that she would die, that time only moved in one direction. Her tone was frenetic and filled with impassioned plea to make the most of the time that we have.

I want to read you a portion of the post.

Time...

The most undervalued valuable in the universe...

There is never enough of it. Even those who are afforded more time than their portion, who have lived to see presidents rise and fall and laws challenged and then changed and seen babies grow to be children, then turn into youngsters, then into adults....even those who have had their fill of every extremity of life possible, and even the good fortune of true love will lie grey haired and breathless in their final moments and whisper "No, it's too soon, It's too soon!!!"

But time makes no exception. When the hour is up, it is up. And yet the true value of it only becomes apparent when we are down to those last minutes. The irony of this makes me almost furious, the idea that the only time we can truly grasp the value of something is when it is too late to do anything about it...

But we all know this I suppose. We all have an intellectual understanding that we are all going to die one day, that the clock will eventually just stop, yet in those

last minutes we will still perhaps bare our teeth and bare knuckle fight for more but no more will ever come.

How many times have you heard someone say with regret 'If only I had more time' or 'If only I could go back....' In fact almost every regret we will ever have in our lifetime is related to how we used, or misused our time.¹

You can almost hear a kind of panicked anxiety, can't you?

Of course, she's tapping into a universal sentiment. All of us know that our days are numbered, even if we take refuge in the fact that we don't *know* the number...

Well, actually we have an idea.

According to the most recent data from Statistics Canada I could find, that number is 79 years for men, 83 years for women.²

According to these numbers, I have lived roughly 13 505 of the 28 835 days I will be granted. And the sands keep slipping through the hourglass.

Time is always leaving us, never coming.

Our awareness of our mortality can be a source of profound anxiety and regret.

This awareness is expressed in Scripture itself, most notably in the book of Ecclesiastes where the Teacher famously describes the human condition as "meaningless."

Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; humans have no advantage over animals. Everything is meaningless.²⁰ All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return" (Ecclesiastes 3:19-20).

¹⁰ I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. ¹¹ He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end (Ecclesiastes 3:10-11).

¹ <http://onethousandsingledays.com/2012/10/30/my-time-isrunning->

² <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/health26-eng.htm>

C.S. Lewis echoes this sentiment in the opening pages of his book *The Problem of Pain* when he says that human beings are unique among all of God's creatures for their ability to

“foresee [their] own pain which henceforth is preceded with acute mental suffering, and to foresee [their] own death while keenly desiring permanence.”³

This is the human predicament. We hunger for beauty, for eternity, but the shadow of death hangs over all of our days.

Perhaps at this point you are regretting coming to church this morning ☺.

I'm sorry. Kind of ☺.

I think these are important issues. And if we can't talk about issues of life and death in church, then where?

So what do we do, in light of our knowledge that our time is limited? How *do* we spend this precious resource we have been given?

And what does *any* of this have to with the Psalm of praise that was read just a few minutes ago?

We don't know who wrote Psalm 146 but I think we can be quite confident that he, like us, was aware of the brevity of life, as well as the hardships it often contains.

Like us, he could choose to complain about this. He could choose a life of bitter resignation. But instead, he chooses the response of praise.

The psalm begins and ends with the simple phrase, “Praise the Lord!”

Why *do* we praise God? Have you ever thought about this question?

Do we praise God because he commands us to? Well, maybe... Although there seems to be something more than a little problematic about God *telling* people to praise him.

Is God insecure? Does God have an inferiority complex? Is God some kind of a divine narcissist who needs to constantly have his ego stroked?

I don't think so.

³ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (Glasgow: Collins, 1940), 2.

The genre of this text is important (as it always is).

The Psalms are *songs* and *prayers*, not legal codes or commandments. We don't read a psalm the same way we read one of Paul's letters or a passage from Deuteronomy or even the Sermon on the Mount.

The Psalms bring the full range of human emotion and experience and locate it before God in worship. Reading a psalm is more like eavesdropping on someone's prayer journal or glancing at a hymnbook than it is a law book. It is the language of emotion and adoration, not moral duty.

But this doesn't really address the question of *why* we are to praise God.

What I want to suggest is that we praise God not for what it does for *God* but for what it does for *us*.

Praise shapes us as people.

Let's look at Psalm 146 in particular. What do we find in between the "Praise the Lord" brackets?

The (anonymous) psalmist points to:

- Creation (v. 6: He is the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them)
- Justice (v. 7: He upholds the cause of the oppressed)
- Mercy (v. 7: He gives food to the hungry; v. 8: He lifts up those who are bowed down)
- Faithfulness (v. 6: he remains faithful forever)
- Freedom (v. 7: He sets prisoners free)
- Healing (v. 8: He gives sight to the blind)
- Compassion (v. 9 watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow)
- Righteousness (v. 8-9: He loves the righteous and frustrates the way of the wicked)

Life is short and it has its share of trouble, but it is also filled with many *good* things, too.

I think all of us, in our own way, appreciate and depend upon the things listed above.

When we see a glorious mountain view or a sunset, when we experience mercy or forgiveness, when a human relationship seems to work exactly like it is supposed to, when we grasp the gift of freedom, when we see an inspiring example of human

courage in the face of injustice, when we witness someone who was wracked with illness—physical, mental, spiritual—come to new life...

In each of these cases, we feel something deep within us that wants to say, “Yes! Yes, that *is* good and true and lovely... Yes, that is how things are supposed to be.

Yes, I was made for this!”

In each of these cases, I think we have a hunger to do more than simply register that some fleeting experience made a positive impression upon us.

We want to locate this experience of goodness, of beauty, of justice, of truth in an ultimate context.

We want *somewhere* to direct our gratitude or admiration.

(There is a quote attributed to the nineteenth century English poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti: "The worst moment for the atheist is when he feels thankful and has no one to thank").

We want some kind of validation that these experiences are important and meaningful not just because *we* happen to subjectively find them so, but because they really *are* important and meaningful because they were *intended* to be so.

We praise God because praise is a way of locating what we value, what we were created for, appropriately—putting these things in an "ultimate" context.

There is no more ultimate context than God.

In a sense, by praising God and locating these things in the context of worship, we are affirming, with God, the value of these things and the conviction that these things, and not their opposites, will find their place in God's new creation.

When we praise, we add our “amen!” to these experiences.

Our testimony agrees with God’s—these things really *should be* and they really *should continue to be* and it is *these* things, not all that is ugly, violent, deceitful, false, and unjust, that will endure and remain in God’s new creation.

When our souls praise the Lord, they align themselves with the ultimate source and proper end of our deepest longings, hopes, joys, and loves.

So, a life of praise is a way of declaring our conviction about what we were made for—what the *world* was made for—and expressing our gratitude and adoration for these things to the One in whom they find their origin and goal.

It is the antidote to despair in the face of the limitations of human existence—it stretches our horizons beyond our 79 or 83 years and into eternity.

But praise is the antidote to something else as well. It is the antidote to idolatry.

Praise directs our attention *toward* God and *away* from ourselves or the many other things that we look to for meaning and security.

Psalm 146:3:

Do not put your trust in princes, in human beings, who cannot save.

In two days, the USA will hold presidential elections. It has been very interesting to observe the almost frenetic rhetoric over the last six months or so, the impossible expectations (fix an economy!), and the enormously misplaced hope.

Whoever happens to get elected on Tuesday, in four years we will be hearing the same rhetoric about the need for change, for hope, the same complaints that the president hasn't fixed everything...

Do not put your trust in princes, in human beings who cannot save.

We may not be tempted to put our trust in princes, but we have all kinds of substitutes, don't we?

- Money
- Education
- Status
- Accomplishments

Or even experiences. It seems that this is the big one for us today.

I think of this as a kind of “bucket list” approach to life—we grasp and catalogue and cling to whatever experiences we are able to accumulate as a feeble attempt to ward off the steady march of time.

The author of the blog post referred to above seems to fall into this trap. In response to the dawning awareness of her own mortality, she seems to resort to the predictable response of determining to squeeze more out of life.

More pleasure, more risks, more adventures, more time spent on relationships, more time spent pursuing dreams, more time spent on the things that make her happy, etc.

It's a common enough approach.

Go bungee jumping. Take a cruise. Spend the kids' inheritance. Run a marathon. Buy a sports car. Write a book (that's on my list 😊).

Each of these can be good—very good, even. But they can take over a life and become the ultimate horizon for our hopes and aspirations.

And, at the end of this frenetic accumulation of experiences, we are still faced with questions of eternity.

And the accumulated experiences of the individual self can never be sufficient to meet our deepest need.

The focus is still squarely on *me*. My experiences, my fulfillment, my validation, my... whatever. I am the sun around which my collection of experiences orbits.

This is a form of idolatry.

Praise keeps first things first and reminds us of our place.

Praise reminds us that the things that really matter in life—beauty, justice, hope, mercy, **salvation**—are bigger, more durable and lasting, beautiful and hopeful than our own individual lives and whatever we are able to accomplish/experience in our limited time on this planet.

These are what will carry on. These are what we were made for.

Praise turns us back around. It reorients us.

A life of praise preserves us from a life enslaved to ourselves.

I want to close with a poem written by St. Teresa of Avila, a 16th century mystic and nun.

God alone is enough.
Let nothing upset you,
let nothing startle you.
All things pass;
God does not change.
Patience wins

all it seeks.
Whoever has God
lacks nothing:
God alone is enough

God is enough.

We praise God to remind ourselves of this basic truth, and to be formed as people who live in right relation to our Maker.

May God help us to become people of praise—for all the right reasons.

Amen.