

COUNT OUR DAYS
Psalm 90

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on March 1, 2020, the First Sunday during Lent, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

A Prayer of Moses, the man of God.¹

*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.*

*For we are consumed by your anger;
by your wrath we are overwhelmed.
You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your countenance.
For all our days pass away under your wrath;
our years come to an end like a sigh.
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.*

*Who considers the power of your anger?
Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due to you.
So teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart.*

*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.*

¹ Moses is the only person in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible), called "man of God." Deuteronomy 33:1; Josh. 14:6; Ps. 90:1; Ezra 3:2; 1 Chron. 23:14; 2 Chron. 30:16.

*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 favour of the Lord our God be upon us,
and prosper for us the work of our hands—
O prosper the work of our hands!*

It is good to be back in this pulpit after a wonderful ten-day interfaith trip to Israel with 68 people from Westminster, from the surrounding community, and from other cities. We developed together a terrific sense of community and learning, and I am grateful for the interest and support the trip garnered. We will be sharing our experiences and learnings in Adult Education on April 19 and 26, and I hope you will plan to attend. Given the enthusiasm of this trip, I would imagine we will be going again! Thanks to all of you who participated.

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Next Sunday at our 11:00 a.m. service the choir will present a cantata written by Johann Sebastian Bach. Its English title is “God’s Time Is the Best of All Times.” Bach wrote the cantata when he was 22 years old, for the funeral of the mayor of the city in which he was living and studying music at the time. The cantata pairs scriptural passages from the Old and New Testaments to provide an overall perspective on *death*, but more importantly, on *life* in face of the reality that we shall all one day pass away.

For the next four Sundays, I plan to draw from some of the passages Bach wove together in his cantata. They are reflected in the upcoming titles:

- Count Our Days²
- Face to the Wall³
- Mine Eyes of Have Seen Thy Salvation⁴
- Today You Will See Me in Paradise⁵

Let us pray: *Oh God, during this season of Lent, may the words we read, hear, sing, say, pray and recite, so become a part of our hearts and minds that as individuals and as a community we may live fully in your days with the precious gift of life – for your time is the best of all times. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*

I.

On Wednesday’s twelve hours of flying from Tel Aviv to Dulles via Istanbul, I managed to read an article about a young Israeli writer whose name I had heard but with whose work I was not familiar.⁶ He is Yuval Noah Harari, a historian at Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Several years ago, he published a book in

² Psalm 90:12.

³ Isaiah 38:2.

⁴ Luke 2:30.

⁵ Luke 22:43.

⁶ All of what follows comes from “The Really Big Picture,” by Ian Parker, in *The New Yorker* February 17 and 24, 2020, pages 48-52.

Israel known as *A Brief History of Humankind*⁷ and later published in America under the title *Sapiens*.⁸ It has sold over twelve million copies, making Harari a speaker in great demand by corporations, universities, world leaders and the general public.

Harari's book is not in its essence optimistic.

- He believes humanity faces three great challenges: nuclear war, ecological collapse, technological disruption.
- Contrary to the assumptions many of us hold, he does not necessarily believe that history has brought progress.
- In fact, he believes that the “Scientific Revolution” in which we are currently living may well “end history and start something completely different,” bringing a time in which “all the concepts that give meaning to our world – me, you, men, women, love, hate – will become irrelevant.”
- He writes: “What we think of as eternal social structures – even family, money, religion, nations – [are] changing...Nothing is eternal...nothing has any enduring essence...nothing is completely satisfying.”

Harari is sometimes criticized for refusing to compromise the nature of his “big ideas” with involvement in politics or policy prescriptions. Yet while his message can sound dark and pessimistic, during the years in which he has been developing his ideas, he has sought to live creatively and fully as a human being searching many avenues for deeper meaning to life, from right-wing nationalism, to observant Jewish practice, to intense study, and finally to coming out as a gay man. In his searching, he bears some resemblance to the Biblical character Qoheleth, the “Preacher” in the Book of Ecclesiastes, whose search leads him to a call to “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth.”⁹ Harari's search has not yet led him to such faith.

But for the past decade, Harari has spent several weeks each year on a silent meditation retreat, usually in India. Once home, he begins each day with an hour of meditation and a half hour of swimming. He describes the serenity achieved through meditation as “so profound that those who spend their lives in the frenzied pursuit of pleasant feelings can hardly imagine it.” In addition, Harari declines dinner invitations involving more than eight people, so that he can listen, learn, absorb from each person around him. At the age of 45, he now describes himself as Pinocchio “freed from my strings...a real boy.”

II.

Discovering this writer a few days before being scheduled to preach on Psalm 90, I found similarities between the darkness in Harari's assessment of history and the psalmist's assessment of the universe.

The psalm begins with a beautiful affirmation of our life *originating* in God.

⁷ Yuval Noah Harari, *A Brief History of Humankind* (Israel: Kinneret, Zmora-Bitan, Dvir, 2011).

⁸ Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (United Kingdom: Harvill Secker, 2014).

⁹ Ecclesiastes 12:1.

*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.*

But then the psalm takes a sharp turn, describing how small and insignificant an individual life is.

*You turn us back to dust,
and say, 'Turn back, you mortals.'*

Time, so precious to us, seems *insignificant* to God:

*For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past,
or like a watch in the night.*

With almost cold, uncaring precision, our life comes to an end, again under God:

*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.*

Not only in this psalm is life depicted as *short* and *insignificant*, but it is marked as well by a *deep dread* we harbor concerning God's *anger*:

*For we are consumed by your anger;
by your wrath we are overwhelmed.
You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your countenance.
For all our days pass away under your wrath;
our years come to an end like a sigh.*

These words from one of our favorite books in the Bible sound no more hopeful than Harari's darkest thoughts. We are a far cry from "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want."¹⁰

III.

Are the ancient Hebrew psalmist and the contemporary Israeli philosopher saying the same thing? Is life ultimately dark, insignificant, meaningless, unnoticed?

Perhaps the psalmist and philosopher are in agreement on this matter. But after expressing the *insignificance* of the human being, created by God and yet marked by sin and fearful of God's wrath, it is the *psalmist* who turns to hope:

¹⁰ Psalm 23:1.

*So teach us to count our days [the psalmist prays]
that we may gain a wise heart.*

The psalmist seems to be saying that no matter how bleak or insignificant a human life seems to be, the most important thing is to seek *wisdom*, to seek a *wise heart*, to seek a heart that begins with *awe*, *reverence*, *respect* for the Lord as the *first principle* and *animating force* for life. This then leads the psalmist to burst into a warm, personal, energetic prayer:

*Turn, O Lord!...
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.*

Who can argue with this desire on the part of the psalmist to see redemption and hope? That is why we are here, to hear or to express:

- A prayer to experience the tender compassion of God
- A prayer to experience deep, human satisfaction in the face of God's steadfast commitment to us
- A prayer for gladness for as many days as evil and suffering have afflicted us.

That is why we are here.

IV.

The end of the article on Harari featured a Ukrainian woman born the same week as Chernobyl in 1986. "When I was a child," she writes, "I dreamed of being an artist. But then politics captured me."

She studied law and went into photojournalism. In 2013-14 she photographed protests in Kyiv, where more than a hundred people were killed on the streets. "You always expect everything will change, will get better," she said. "And it doesn't."

In the death of her idealism and hope, she read *Sapiens*. It revealed to her that she was "one of the billions and billions [of people] that lived and didn't make *any* impact and didn't leave *any* trace."

Upon finishing the book, she said: "You kind of relax, don't feel this pressure anymore – it's O.K. to be insignificant."

- She has disengaged from politics.
- She spends more time now on creative photography rather than photojournalism.
- She says this has led her to be "more compassionate" toward people around her, though less interested in their opinions.

- “I can choose to be involved, not to be involved,” she said. “No one cares, and I don’t care, too.”

V.

The photojournalist’s withdrawal from the world – and from politics – into her own private creativity is *understandable* considering the slaughter on the streets she witnessed and photographed for the world. But her withdrawal is also tragic. The bullets that took the lives of those on the streets also took her journalistic willingness to report the terrible facts through photography.

The psalmist understands the cruelty in the universe:

*...in the morning [the grass] flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers.*

But even with that *understanding*, the psalmist issues a *call*:

*So teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart.*

And the psalmist closes with a prayer of promise that serves as a charge, a continued call to action and service:

*Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us:
And establish Thou the work of our hands upon us;
Yea, the work of our hands establish Thou it.*

My friends, as a person of faith, I can only say to you, that in the fulfillment of our tasks and responsibilities, in the use of our gifts toward our calling, we will “be glad for as many days as we have been afflicted,” for “God’s Time Is The Best of All Times.”

Amen.