

August 23, 2020

Psalm 90: 1-6, 13-16

2 Corinthians 5: 16-21

Walking in balance...
The Reverend Mark Mares

“All of us, everyone here in this room, we’re are all dying. Only I know I’m dying faster than everyone else.”

These were the words my professor and mentor, Dr. J. Todd Billings said as he began a lecture on dying in the 21st century. Was it kind of a morbid way to begin a lecture? Maybe – but that was sort of his point. His lecture talked about how in the 21st century, dying had been removed from our gaze – we don’t want to talk about it, it doesn’t happen in our homes anymore, but in hospitals surrounded by medical machines.

Dr. Billings wanted to talk about death though, because, you see, he was dying – he is dying – and death was/is a daily thing for him. A tenured professor of Systematic theology @ WTS, a rising academic in the world of Reformed Theology, having written several books, working on another, at the age 39, Dr. Billings was diagnosed with incurable blood cancer.

When he was diagnosed, he talked about the numbness that followed hearing the news. How could this happen to him? He was young. He was married to the love of his life. He had two young kids. He was working in his dream job, teaching and writing theology.

The only thing he knew to do, was lament. Seven years ago, he underwent a stem-cell transplant. These many years later, Dr. Billings still has the cancer, but its levels remain low. And yet, lament still fills his lungs. Every day, death comes before his gaze.

Psalm 90, which Ava read for us this morning, is a lament. The psalmist invites us to imagine our mortality, so that it comes daily before our own eyes, by likening our lives to the grass that withers and fades. There is an old Jewish saying, “Everybody knows they’re going to die, but nobody believes it.” To recognize that our lives are fleeting, can sound a little morbid, but perhaps it’s also an invitation to a new way of living.

Psalm 90 begins with a beautiful reference to the God who formed the earth and the world, and in the final movement, this lament, balances that opening by becoming a prayer about human work. A prayer that frames

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our lives within the Old Testament creation narrative – where human beings are image bearers made for fellowship with the creator and one another.

“Each of us, by virtue of our humanity, represents God on earth and therefore, follows in the footsteps of the creator’s stewardship.”¹

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

Or as another translation reads, “O Lord, **establish** the works of our hands.” Like the psalmist, we have much to lament ourselves.

There’s a crisis we’ve experiencing and continue to experience firsthand, when all our plans for 2020 were upended by a global pandemic. Sure, it’s been unfortunate that we haven’t been able to go to the movies or fill restaurants and bars. It was unfortunate when professional sports were put on pause, our trips had to be cancelled or postponed, our schools and work places had to learn how to do things in a different way, and our ministries had to adapt – all on the fly. These were unfortunate, **and they were hard.**

Even harder, was the loneliness and isolation from not being able to visit friends or family, the lives that were taken from us too soon from a deadly disease, the trauma numbing our relationships, the lives upended by the loss of jobs. Anxiety seizing us. And things aren’t likely to change for a while.

Restaurants and businesses have adapted their strategies. Schools have developed a plan for a new way of learning. Our ministries are re-imagining what ministry in our particular context looks like. **Yes, we’re all learning how to canoe over mountains.**

And we’ll continue having to learn how to grieve, and teach our young ones how to do this as well. We’ve lost a lot... experiences, plans, milestones. One youth I had a conversation with, told me she just felt like the past five months have been wasted time in her life. All the things she thought she would be doing, learning about, experiencing, relationships built, and growing she would, have felt like they were gone.

These are unsettling times.

So, we come before God, and we lament. *God, who formed the Earth and the world, why is this happening?
How long, O Lord?*

But our prayer doesn’t **stay** there.

¹James Mead, [Commentary on Psalm 90](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3648), Working Preacher:
https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3648

We, don't stay there. We get to work.

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

I love the way Lana connected vocation with calling and passion, in our conversation with young disciples. And though Psalm 90 is usually associated with funerals, it also compels me to think about the work of our hands, our vocation.

The English word vocation originates from the Latin, *vocare*, which means “to call.” Vocation or calling implies “to be called” by someone—namely, God. So when we speak of vocation, we are always speaking about the “what” to which we are called by God.²

Throughout scripture and Christian tradition – especially in the early church, calling is typically connected to salvation or communion with God.

- Paul often refers to “being called” into the fellowship,
- Saint Augustine, described God’s saving pursuit of him in terms of a relentless call.
- There are the countless stories of God “calling” people to be in relationship.
- And the apostles referred to the church as the *ekklesia*, literally, “those called out,” a gathering of all those who respond to God’s call with faith and baptism.

Perhaps you see the pattern?

Christian vocation has always meant a universal call to communion with God, with one another, and even with our self.

In our passage from 2 Corinthians, Paul writes about how his own theological imagination has been filtered through a new lens, the lens of God embodied, in Jesus Christ.

² The Porter’s Gate Worship Project: Faith & Vacation Prayer Book

The same One, who taught with anyone who would listen, who looked over Jerusalem and wept, who broke bread with friends, strangers, and sinners, who suffered on the cross, who broke through death in resurrection. In Jesus Christ, we have glimpsed something of the future. And it is a future of reconciliation, justice, and love, in which all creation transforms into the redemptive purposes of God.

You see, this is a vision for a beautiful future. But it's a future that we are **called** to live into now. This summer we've been reflecting on "new beginnings." And in the midst of **so much, that leads us to lament**, it can be hard to imagine life any other way. But my friends, we are a people of new beginnings.

Stories of new beginnings fill our sacred scriptures, and animate our very lives. In Christ, we are a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! New beginnings, they're hard. It's ok to acknowledge that. But we don't have to be afraid. **We navigate them together.**

Paul's words to the Corinthians, invite us not only to see this beautiful future, but they remind us of our **vocation, as Christians**, in living this future out, here and now. All this is from God, who reconciled us to Godself through Christ, and has given us the *ministry of reconciliation*.

Our need for reconciliation, is the reality of our broken and sinful world. We live in a society filled with fear, manifesting itself as homophobia, transphobia, racism, sexism, division, hatred, and violence. And those in power often use fear to maintain power and control. We have seen this in our own country, in the creation of apartheid in our schools and educational systems; in the disproportionate incarceration of black and brown bodies; the treatment of those who worship differently than us; and the posture towards immigrants and refugees; the list goes on and on. **This isn't the way things are supposed to be.**

To be reconciled to one another, is to begin the process of **healing and restoration**. But this process can only begin when WE receive God's desire to be reconciled to US...

It's at that moment, when we recognize our frailty, when we come face to face with our maker, **that we open ourselves to that same life-giving power, that animates this table – and these waters.**

And if we as the church, believe in a future vision of love and peace, then with the aid of the Spirit, the church must live into that reality, standing in solidarity with the vulnerable, the marginalized, and the oppressed, seeking to be agents of **reconciliation**.

This is our calling and vocation, as followers of Christ – in which we become engaged at the heart of the struggle for justice and peace in the world... To say that God was reconciling the world in Christ is another way of saying that **God was busy restoring God's reign of justice.**

The way of love is to not be indifferent or silent, passive or timid, but to boldly act as people who are empowered by the Holy Spirit, to live out our calling – even in the midst of the struggle.



My professor, Dr. J. Todd Billings, continues to live out his calling -- his vocation – as a follower of Christ, as husband to his wife and father to his kids, as professor of systematic theology, and as a faithful steward of theological curiosity. He still laments. But he has found a way, to rejoice in his lament. A way to be grateful for each day, and the calling that leads him wherever he goes, for as long as he has. But his lament is also a prayer. Lord, establish and prosper the work of my hands.

With so much uncertainty around us, at the hands of a deadly disease; With so much division in our politics and our discourse; With so much fear that shapes our lives; With so much learning and unlearning we have to do; With so much pain and anger at the reality of the way things are; With so much longing for connection, and for purpose; With the death of so many friends and loved ones; With so, so much loss. **We lament.**

But our lament becomes a prayer.

*“Lord, establish the work of our hands,
prosper all that we do – for your
kin-dom and glory.”*

Friends, as we step into the unknown, **where questions have become our companions**, may we be confident in our calling and vocation, as followers of Christ – people called to be ministers of reconciliation, a people called to love God, our neighbor, and self, and may we find joy and hope in doing so.

The Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 1, asks:

Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

With this truth – this confidence, and the Spirit leading us, may we continue to sing out the song of our lives, and journey wherever our calling takes us.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Closing Sentences

Dear friends,

wherever you are –
whether you're young or old,
whether you're in full strength or your body is failing,
whether you are in the springtime of your life or the winter,
wherever you are –
wherever your calling leads you
may love, peace, and justice,
fill all your days.
Grace is infinite.
God is love.
Do not be afraid.

And may the God of all hope,
fill you with all joy and peace,
as you trust in Christ,
so that you may overflow with hope,
by the power of the Holy Spirit.
This day and always. Amen.

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