

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
October 10 & 11, 2015  
John Crosby  
Psalm 90**

[Video begins.]

Prayer to me is just communication, a conversation, and it's a continual thing. I'm not very good verbally with prayer, but simple is okay and God knows my heart. He hears the prayers of your heart. I'm a walker and I pray while I'm walking. Just being in God's creation is like a prayer to me. It's not just praying, I mean it's not a formal prayer. Prayer to me is as close as my breath. It's there. I find it harder to pray when I've had struggles in my life. I was 42 when I was diagnosed with cancer, but I was very hopeful and I had a lot of support and God really saw me through that. As the recurrence happened, I did lose some hope but God continued to bless me. Somehow there was always something I could turn to, a person or a word of Scripture that God would place in my heart, and I'm still hopeful. I think cancer has made my life and my relationship with the Lord so much deeper than it probably would have been had I not had the health issues I have had. Never give up. There's always hope and I think God wants us to fight. I think God wants us to be an example of perseverance. Hang in there. Stay tough. I won't give up until I know absolutely that He's ready for me, that He's ready to take me.

[Video ends. To view, see link below]

Last week we talked about the Bible as a story that meets with our story. I quoted that good stories begin with a lump in the throat. We learned this week that sometimes they begin with a lump in the breast or a cry in the night. That's when the next chapter of the story begins. When that chapter starts, how do you pray then? It's easy to pray, "Oh, thank You for those cute little first graders" but how do you pray when the future looks darker? I was with a group of you this week in D.C. and learned again that politics gets all the attention in our world. Everybody focuses on the headlines, on the politicians, but politics lives downstream from culture. In other words, our culture fills our lives, our minds, and our hearts with things. They flow down and politics comes out of that, so the important thing is what's going into our culture. But that's not what politicians do. That's why we need artists and storytellers and musicians and poets upstream, because they look downstream and say, "Oh, it could be different. This is what I feel."

One of those people who affects the culture is a gifted writer named Anne Lamott. She was from a very chaotic background, and in her adult years she decided that Jesus was real and that she should follow Him. She talks about what life is like as a single mom who then, frankly, becomes a single grandmom, and this August, I read this:

My six-year-old associate [that's what she calls her grandson], who sleeps down the hall about thirty feet away with both our doors wide open, wakes up on many mornings and

predicts, "This might be the best day ever!" Then, in the dead of night, a tiny voice calls out to me, "Nana, will you ever get sick or die?" Then he cries at the very thought. He terrorizes himself.

I think this says it all. If you are alive, conscious, and sensitive, which is to say, human, you're going to have incredible joy and terror this side of eternity. It's Life 101, life on life's terms, not on ours, all these things—fear, joy, grace, mess, isolation, community—all mixed up together.

Then talking about praying in that life, she says,

It is not helpful to tell each other cute things we saw on bumper stickers, whether our beloved people are six or sixty. It is condescending, and patronizing, and it may make us turn on you.

So how do we pray when that call comes in the middle of the night, whether that lump is in our breasts or in our throats? This fall we have been trying to learn from people who prayed before us and wrote down their prayers in that part of the Bible we call the Psalms. It's right in the middle of the book. We started by talking about how we pray with an example of somebody who, over the course of their 120-year-old life, learned how to pray in all different circumstances—as a prince of Egypt, as a refugee in the desert, as a terrorist leading a revolution. His name was Moses. Remember, we started this series in Exodus 33. The Israelites had escaped from slavery in Egypt and they set up a Tent of Meeting where everybody would go to pray. But when Moses went to the tent, the Bible says all of the people would stand at the edge of their doors and lower their heads because Moses talked to God as one speaks to a friend, face-to-face. He had learned how talk about the most important things in his life. I bet he talked to God about the lump in his throat, the lump in his wife's breast, the cry of his grandson. I bet he prayed just like you do and he learned.

At the end of his life, not at the beginning, but at the end of his life, this is how he prays in Psalm 90. Let's do this together.

[John:] <sup>1</sup> Lord, you have been our dwelling place  
throughout all generations.

[All:] <sup>2</sup> Before the mountains were born  
or you brought forth the whole world,  
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

[John:] <sup>3</sup> You turn people back to dust,  
saying, "Return to dust, you mortals."

[All:] <sup>4</sup> A thousand years in your sight  
are like a day that has just gone by,  
or like a watch in the night.

[John:] <sup>5</sup> Yet you sweep people away in the sleep of death—  
they are like the new grass of the morning:

[All:] <sup>6</sup> In the morning it springs up new,  
but by evening it is dry and withered.

[John:] <sup>7</sup> We are . . . terrified. . . .

<sup>8</sup>[for You see] our secret sins in the light of your presence.

<sup>9</sup> All our days pass away under your wrath . . . .

[All:] <sup>10</sup> Our days may come to seventy years,  
or eighty, if our strength endures;  
yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow,  
for they quickly pass, and we fly away.

Moses continues to pray.

[John:] <sup>12</sup> Teach us to number our days,  
that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

[All:] <sup>13</sup> . . . . Have compassion on your servants.  
<sup>14</sup> Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love,  
that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.

[John:] <sup>15</sup> Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,  
for as many years as we have seen trouble.  
<sup>16</sup> May your deeds be shown to your servants,  
your splendor to their children.  
<sup>17</sup> May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us;  
establish the work of our hands for us—  
yes, establish the work of our hands.

This is a prayer of Moses, a prayer I'd like to be able to pray, but it's the deep end of the pool. It's the prayer that you learn after not hearing God for a long time, but calling out to God anyway. It's a prayer like we talked about from St. Basil. Remember the first week when we talked about Basil the Hermit? I said that Moses was like Basil the Hermit. His life was like lightning because his prayers were like thunder. There was something different about his life because his prayers were like thunder. Not because his prayers were always answered the way he wanted, but because he talked to God so often that God's presence became a constant in his life. It was a touchpoint that other people could sense and see in the way he lived.

Moses was like Basil, but Moses was also like Anne Lamott. He knew that life is hard and filled with things to be afraid of and that life is short. Even if its 70 years long or 80 years long or like Moses who lives to 120, it's still the blink of an eye. When our kids cry out, "Will you always be here?" we can't promise because we know that we will die. Maybe that's the first lesson of the prayer. The first thing Moses wants to teach us is that we are not God. We are mortal. We don't have to pretend. When we pretend that we will live forever, we start to deny death. We start to pretend like we are eternally young. We start to miss the days that we do have, pretending that they will last forever. They will not last forever. The death rate hovers around 100 percent.

Moses may have heard what the writer of Ecclesiastes said that was captured hundreds of years later.

<sup>11</sup> 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 3:11].

You look out and see those turning leaves. They are beautiful in their time, for a short time, but He has also set eternity in the human heart and yet we cannot see the end from the beginning. We see just a little fragment of it. The first lesson of prayer is that we are not God, we are mortal and we are often afraid. God has a different clock than we do. A thousand years in His sight are like a day gone by or a watch in the night. To God, people are like grass that springs up in the morning, but eighty years later is gone. To live in fear of God or in fear of death is to miss life. Part of Moses' prayer is "Can you find joy in the gift of today?" He says,

<sup>14</sup> Satisfy us in the morning with  
your unfailing love,  
that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.

<sup>15</sup> Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,  
for as many years as we have seen trouble.

How do you find joy if you are afraid? Well, the reality is, I don't think you can. I think you can choose. Will I be joyful or will I be fearful? Henri Nouwen says we all have a choice. We can choose to live in the house of fear and death or we can move into the house of love and have God's joy. We can't live in both places. Many of you are huddled in the house of fear. Your denial of death is keeping you from experiencing the joy of the day, God's gift to us. Will we live in the house of fear or find the house of love because love casts out fear? So how do we pray when we are afraid? How do we pray our way from our fear of death and even our fear of God into the house of love and joy? I think you face the idea that you don't have eternity. You have this day! We face our mortality and we look at the Psalmist. Moses says,

<sup>12</sup> Teach us to number our days,  
that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

Don't make us count our days. Make our days count. You guys are great at counting your days. You've got calendars and appointment books and Day-Timers and little buzzers and beepers that go off. We break up our days into so many little fragments, but are we making our days count? I believe that I have the gift of eternal life. I believe we are meant to live forever and I believe that eternal life begins as our eyes open to it now.

I have talked to you a lot this last year about my friend Steve Hayner, President of Columbia Seminary. Steve said, "I've always been a maximizer. I've been a seize-the-day kind of guy, but today on my 66<sup>th</sup> birthday, because of cancer, I can no longer seize the day. So, I desire instead to embrace the day, to welcome the day with all its twists and turns, surprises and disappointments, delights and discoveries." He said, "I am learning to pray differently." Steve's morning prayer the last time we were together was this. He said, "Every day I got up and said, 'God, let me love the things that You love, break my heart with the things that break Yours and

help me not to duck” I love that last part, “God, help me not to duck.” Steve celebrated his 66<sup>th</sup> birthday and three months later, he died. But because he numbered his days, they were gifts to him. Sometimes I think you need to start your day like that. “God, today, just today, let me love the things that You love and let my heart be broken by the things that break Your heart and, God, help me not to duck. Give me the courage to live life the way that You want. Teach us to number our days and gain a heart of wisdom.”

In the same way that we start our day, we need to be reminded during the day, don't we? I forget. I start the day with God, it's a great thing, and by 10:30 I'm like, “Okay, we can't make this budget work without affecting this department.” God is absent from the conversation and I am filled with fear. Teach us to number our days all day that we might gain a heart of wisdom. Sometimes you need a midday reminder.

About 10 years ago when we were in the Upper Room generation experience here, it was a wild time. We called in a consultant who did a great job in part because she was never flustered. On the one hand she wasn't flustered because they weren't her problems, they were mine. But mostly, she wasn't flustered because she saw it differently than I did. I said, “How do you stay so calm?” and she said, “I've made it a discipline in my life that whenever I go to a meeting, when I get to the door, I stop for just a second and say to God, ‘I am a child of Yours. I have nothing to prove and nothing to lose in this meeting’” and the meeting turns out differently. She said, “It's not better or worse, but if I am a child of God and nothing to prove and nothing to lose, then the meeting will be different because I'll be different.” That's what prayer does. God changes *us*.

God is changing Rebecca Gladhill from the choir in the video we just saw. As the cancer has come back, He is saying, “Number your days and gain a heart of wisdom.” And she says, “I'm not going to give up fighting until God tells me differently. Each day is a gift from God.” How about you? Do you count your days and dissect them or do you make your days count? Are you waiting for the good times? A lot of people spend their whole lives waiting for the good days to come and they miss them. Eternity is breaking in today but we need to ask God, “Open my eyes. Teach me to make this day count. Give me a heart of wisdom.” And the house of fear moves toward the house of love.

Moses finishes his prayer for himself and for us. His prayer may be for his grandson. He says, “Establish the work of our hands, Lord. Please establish the work of our hands.” When Heather Hood and I were talking about this sermon, she said, “You've got to count on that. You've got to land there because all of our work has eternal significance, everything that we do, not just the things that we think are important. Everything that we do has eternal significance because everything we do is shaping us and the people that we come in contact with.”

Sometimes that's easy to see because it's in the great scope of history. Probably a couple hundred years from now when our great-grandkids are forced to study European history, the name Napoleon Bonaparte will be a lot less famous than it is today. The most famous French person of the nineteenth century won't be Bonaparte the conqueror but Louis the chemist. Louis thought that he could help people who were dying from chickenpox and measles and smallpox, but everybody else thought he was crazy. He had this idea that if we give them just a small piece of the disease, they won't catch the disease that kills them. He asked permission of some parents to try it on their kids and their kids lived. Thousands and hundreds of thousands and millions and probably now billions of people on Planet Earth are alive because Louis Pasteur

said, "God, establish the work of my hands." Literally, God did. Pasteur was a strong follower of Christ. "God, establish the work of my hands."

Do you know what I love about Pasteur's story? He got every award that France could offer and became one of the most famous people in the world in his day. He died wealthy, but nobody knew where he was buried. He had asked his family to make his burial plot so insignificant that nobody would know where it was. There are only three words on his tombstone beyond his name. Underneath "Louis Pasteur," it says, "Joseph Meister lived." That was the first little boy who was inoculated. Joseph Meister's life has the same eternal significance as Louis Pasteur's and as yours and mine. "Establish the work of our hands." I've got to tell you, those are the great stories the preacher always tells. Usually it's not like that. Usually "Establish the work of our hands" is something nobody else sees.

Some of you need to help me. I'm hoping this month that we can both honor and embarrass our founding pastor Roger Anderson. Roger is our first pastor. I'm the second one. Roger is turning 90 at the end of this month. At the first service he comes to, let's sing to him and just make him blush. Last month my wife Laura and I went to see Roger and Dottie at their little condo in St. Louis Park. We had a great visit. He's frail but still as peppy as ever on the inside. When we got up to leave, he said, "Let us walk you out." I'm thinking, "Oh, please don't. It will add a half-hour I will never get back in my life." I mean we're not talking roller derby. We are talking roller. But we go to the elevator and we go down and across this big lobby and I say, "Roger, we've got it from here. Don't go all the way to the car with us."

We get half-way through the lobby and a woman is coming toward us on her roller. Roger lifts up his hand and says, "Marietta, I want you to meet these friends of mine. Marietta, would you sing them that song?" If any of you know Roger Anderson, you would know this would be totally true. Right in the middle of the lobby, "Marietta, would you sing them that song in Swedish that your mother taught you in the Old Country." Marietta is almost ninety herself, and she's going, "Oh, no, no, no, I couldn't do that." "Oh, please, Marietta, they will love it." And in my mind I'm going, "Oh, yeah, sure, we'll love it." Then little Marietta stands up straight and starts to sing in Swedish while this audience of four just watches her. As we went to the car and drove away, I realized that Roger Anderson had blessed Marietta in a way that didn't just make her day. It made her feel like she had value, like she still was being used by God.

That's the way it usually happens. God establishes the work of our hands in little ways. When you go out of here today, look at the grounds of this place. There are a couple dozen people in this place who nobody ever sees. They spend hours and hours making this place look beautiful and changing it from season to season. God establishes the work of the hands of the people who get up at a quarter to seven to come here to start our diesels and drive them out to the places where the people who cannot drive to church themselves get picked up. That is an eternal work that God will bless. I don't know what the work of your hands is. All I know is that you should not miss it. It may be small but it is today.

Some of you have never stepped up. You've ducked. Don't go to your grave never having done something that will outlast your time on Planet Earth. It could be as small as reaching out to somebody in the sanctuary here who you don't know. It could be as big as writing a check bigger than you have ever written in your life and going, "Oh, Lord Jesus, please don't let this check bounce" and sending it where it will change lives. It could be something that only you know. Ask God to establish the work of your hands. That's how you pray for your grandkids.

That's how you pray for your grandparents. Let's end where we started with Anne Lamott, that little incident with her six-year-old associate, her grandson. Remember, he gets up in the morning saying, "Today might be the best day ever," and then he cries out in the middle of the night, "Grandma, please don't die." Anne Lamott said this,

I think often of the weeks after the end of WWII, in the refugee camps for orphans and dislocated kids. Of course the children couldn't sleep! But the grown-ups discovered that after you fed them, if you gave them each a piece of bread just to hold, they would drift off. It was holding bread. There was more to eat if they were still hungry. This was bread to hold, to remind them and connect them to the great truth—that morning would come, that there were grown-ups who cared and were watching over them, that there would be more food when they awoke.

Yesterday my pastor quoted Gandhi saying that there is so much hunger in the world that God comes to earth as bread.

Jesus Christ said, "I am the Bread of Life." You and I are to share Jesus, the Bread of Life, because all of us are so hungry. Lamott says that when we call out in the dark to our God and the people who love us, they will not be ticked off. She says,

When my darling grandboy cannot get himself back to sleep, I don't tell him I promise never to get sick or die. I just go fish him out of the fear and the dark, and tuck him in next to me.

Reach for me, Bread of God.

And then when the light returns, who knows? This might be the best day ever.

Let's keep praying.

Lord Jesus, when there is a lump in our throats, a lump in our breasts, a cry down the hall for fear of the future, I pray that You will bring Your living Word back to us. I pray that You will remind us that before the mountains were formed, You were already there and a thousand years from now, You will be there. When we talk to You, remind us to number our days, not to count them, but to make them count. Give us wisdom about what's really important. Lord Jesus. You taught Moses to establish the work of his hands. I pray that You will give each one of us work today, a task large or small that will give meaning to our lives and hope to others and point toward Your love. Teach us to pray like that. In Your Blessed Name. Amen.

Link to video shown during this service: <http://www.cpconline.org/news/> (**He Knows Your Name**, Week 4)

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*