

**“Our Dwelling Place in All Generations”
Matthew 22:34-40; Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17
Stewardship Dedication/Reformation Sunday**

Psalm 90

¹Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.

²Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

³You turn us back to dust, and say, “Turn back, you mortals.”

⁴For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night.

⁵You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning; ⁶in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.

¹³Turn, O Lord! How long? Have compassion on your servants!

¹⁴Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. ¹⁵Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil.

¹⁶Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children.

¹⁷Let 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!

Matthew 22:34-40

³⁴When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

³⁷He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

The Sermon

“Into this dark night souls begin to enter when God draws them forth from the state of beginners—which is the state of those that meditate on the spiritual road—and begins to set them in the state of progressives—which is that of those who are already contemplatives—to the end that, after passing through it, they may arrive at the state of the perfect, which is that of the Divine union of the soul with God.”ⁱ

So begins the classic 16th-century work of Christian mysticism, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, by the writer now known as St. John of the Cross.

There are at least three reasons why today is an opportunity to push the pause button on our disoriented lives and noisy surroundings—noisy with everything from the unending hum of appliances, traffic and leaf blowers to the stupefying barrage of panic-inducing bulletins from every imaginable medium and, of course, the pleasantries of a civil society in the lead-up to a proper and dignified election.

One reason to step back, take a breath and reset ourselves with some basic questions is that in our congregation’s annual cycle, today is the day we dedicate our intentions for our own stewardship in the year to come—financial and otherwise. If you are joining us as a visitor today, feel at ease. If you would like to make a pledge or a contribution, I won’t stop you, but that’s not what we’re about today.

A second reason for a deep breath and a moment to reflect is that in our branch of the Christian family tree, today is identified as Reformation Sunday, a nice opportunity to touch base with and maybe reassess why we believe and do what we do in our tradition.

I'm not going to do much with that today; I'm not sure this specific moment calls out for sharp delineations as to what makes us different from people of other traditions. If you're visiting us today, you are visiting a church that's part of the Reformed tradition of followers of Jesus, and joyfully welcomes you, as we celebrate life alongside every other tradition that means to be faithful to God and creation, which includes every human being.

And a third reason is that this day of the week, Sunday, is traditionally called The Lord's Day, but every day is the Lord's day, a day into which you and I have been called to live and embody what it means to be faithful to who we are and who God is. "This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." Let's not let this day or any day pass by without pausing to recognize the awesome improbability of any of us or any of this ever having been here in the first place, and re-commit ourselves accordingly.

I was just reminded the other day of Anne Lamott saying, "Try walking around with a child who's going, 'Wow, wow! Look at that dirty dog! Look at that burned-down house! Look at that red sky!' And the child points and you look, and you see, and you start going, 'Wow! Look at that huge crazy hedge! Look at that teeny little baby! Look at the scary dark cloud!' [And she says,] I think this is how we are supposed to be in the world—present and in awe."ⁱⁱ

Today, like every day, is an opportunity to remember that we people of the Way, people of the manger and the cross and the empty tomb, are about something infinite and vast, yet immediate, intimately personal, and consequentially interpersonal.

Today, like every day, is an opportunity to think again about the fundamental truth of who we are—who you are—and what God is, even now, inviting you to be and do.

The name of the field of theology literally means we are asking, and offering tentative answers to, the question of who and what God is.

The Bible seems a lot less interested in that question than in what theology tangibly means to all of us, on a daily, on an hourly basis—a question that God seems to find infinitely *more* interesting, which is:

who, and what, are you?

Along with the community that composed, recited, worshiped and lived by Psalm 90, we have a theology that generally can be *described* with certain images and concepts,

but at a deeper level, what we believe about God is more organically expressed by the fact that the psalms are written and spoken not solely as third-person treatises—God is this; God said that and does this—but just as much in second person, with the word You: saying something *to* someone else, and asking questions that are as much practical as they are quote-unquote “theological.”

Second person is the way we write a love letter,

or a message in a bottle,

or your private diary, your daily journal written to an indeterminate but somehow quite personal audience,

or the angry note you write in order to articulate your frustrations, but then—wisely—put through the shredder,

or a letter of request to a company with whom you do business,

or, like the unrequited and lovelorn protagonist of the old Moody Blues song “Nights in White Satin:” “Letters I’ve written / never meaning to send,”ⁱⁱⁱ

or fan mail,

or a letter of appreciation and esteem, written after decades to a long-retired mentor.

“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.”

The eternal God has given us the time we have here together.
In that time, we are about something infinite and vast,
yet immediate, intimate, personal and interpersonal.

What do you want that time to be?

We close many of our worship services by reciting a passage from Mark as our charge. Earlier we heard Matthew’s version of that passage, wherein the question is presented not as the benevolent inquiry of a seeker but as a mischievous test from a challenger.

Some Pharisees had heard that Jesus had outwitted another group known for their sophistication, the Sadducees, so one of them asked him what they may have thought they were proffering as a trick question.

As always, Jesus takes a conflictive, toxic situation, and brings light and hope:

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

“‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment.

“And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

What are the fundamental truths of what you are called to be and to do in the time that God has given us here?

“Into this dark night souls begin to enter
when God draws them forth”
from their meditations on the spiritual road,
to the end that, after passing through the state of contemplation,
they may arrive at the state of the perfect:
the Divine union of the soul with God.^{iv}

Litany of Dedication

O God,
You have given us the capacity for gratitude,
even when things don't feel like they're going very well,
especially when we're having a rotten day;
even when we notice what someone else has that we didn't get,
especially when envy starts to become bitterness and malice.
Even then, especially then,
you reawaken within us a sense of awe and joy and thankfulness.
How can we express our gratitude?

Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory,
for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.

we lift up our lives, our days and our moments to you.
What do you want us to do,
And what do YOU want to do, with the time you have given us?

Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory,
for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.

We give back to you the use of our hands,
and the tools we have at our disposal.
We give back to you the use of our feet,
or our wheelchairs, or the technology that can bring us
into the homes and lives of people far away,
even as it can bring their realities into our awareness
and their dreams and hopes into our consciousness.

Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory,
for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.

We give you our voices.
Help us to speak your truth in your way,
and to be mindful of both the damage and the healing
that our words can bring.

Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory,
for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.

We dedicate to you, and to your service,
the resources with which you have richly blessed us:
our financial resources,
our mental, intellectual resources of wisdom and knowledge,
our resources of power, on whose levers we hold enough power
to transform the hate, greed and bitterness of this world
into baskets of abundance, tables of equity, and peaceful streets.

Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory,
for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.

We open to you our will, our hearts,
asking you to keep leading us;
you know, O Lord, how easily we lost sheep can stray.

Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory,
for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.

We offer for your use, our love, and our very selves.

Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory,
for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.

Receive our offerings and our commitment to you,
and one another, and all creation,
today, this year, and always. Amen.

Keith Grogg
Montreat Presbyterian Church
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ⁱ St. John of the Cross. Dark Night of the Soul (Dover Thrift Editions) (p. 25). Dover Publications. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ Anne Lamott, Bird by Bird

ⁱⁱⁱ Justin Hayward,

^{iv} St. John of the Cross. Dark Night of the Soul (Dover Thrift Editions) (p. 25). Dover Publications. Kindle Edition.