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SERVING ATLANTA AND THE WORLD

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Don't Blink!

A sermon by the Rev. Canon David Boyd
The Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 28, Year A

Don’t blink!

If there’s any advice I got before and after my son Emory was born, it was this: don’t blink or you’ll miss it! He’ll be 3 months one day, and the next he’ll be in preschool, then middle school, then off to college. Time only gets faster and faster. Enjoy every moment, because they go by so quickly. The days are long, but the years are short.

I already know this to be true. Pictures flashing across the digital picture frame in the kitchen remind me daily of how quickly time passes. How is it that the tender little newborn I held to my chest in the hospital is already just a memory? Now I have a big bubbly baby boy, smiling and laughing, active and responsive, with new neurons connecting every day! Where did the time go?

Even though I marvel every day at some new development, even as I dream about what tomorrow will bring, there’s always a part of me that wants to go back to yesterday or at least remain here a little longer before the tides of time sweep me into the next stage of growth. Yes, the days are long right now, but why can’t the years be long too?

Do you remember when the years *did* feel long? I seem to remember that in elementary school, the agonizing wait from Halloween to Thanksgiving to Christmas took just about forever. Now, Christmas arrives in the blink of an eye! (Have you signed up for the Pageant yet?)

When the years felt long, life felt endless. There would always be more time, always more chances to become whoever we wanted to be. That’s one of the joys of youth: the illusion of infinitude. But illusions don’t last. Over time, we make decisions, create commitments, accumulate consequences. Then, after a long time that turns out not to have been long at all, we look around and find that we’re no longer someone who could be anyone. We have become somebody. Somebody with passions and loves, losses and pains. Somebody with a story, a beginning and an end.

God, of course, has neither a beginning nor an end. Psalm 90 draws a stark contrast between the eternal God and us mere mortals. God forms mountains out of dust over billions of years; we go back down to the dust after 70 or 80 years. To God, a thousand years goes by no differently than a single day. God is timeless; we are time-limited, acutely aware of our fragility and finitude.

It’s hard to hear about the shortness of life from someone who has all the time in the world. I wonder if the psalmist wrote this lament about the brevity of life with a little bitterness in his heart. Tradition tells us this is a prayer of Moses, and if anyone had the right to be a little bitter, it was Moses! He spent forty years wandering in the wilderness, buried an entire generation along the way, and died within sight of a promised land he never got to enter. Forty years of labor and sorrow - just a blink of an eye to God. So when he prays, “You sweep us away like a dream,” I hear something more than just pious resignation. I hear a wounded heart saying, “How dare you, God, put me under constraints you yourself don’t experience!”

I am glad this prayer is in the Bible. Our mortality stirs up all kinds of emotions in us. There’s grief, for the people we’ve lost and the years we can’t get back. There’s anger, when a diagnosis comes too early or a life ends too soon. There’s fear, of our own dying and, perhaps even more, of losing the ones we love. And there’s that aching feeling that shows up in ordinary moments, at a graduation or a wedding or in front of a picture

frame in the kitchen, when we realize just how fast it's all going. Sometimes we're ashamed of these feelings, as if real faith would have made its peace with death by now. But here they all are, prayed before God generation after generation in the psalter! What a comfort it is to find out that we don't feel these things alone. We have Moses, we have the saints, and we have each other. But I think what we long for most is to know that God is in that company too, that God knows what it's like on this side of things.

"*My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.*"(Matthew 26:39)

That is Jesus' prayer, whispered to his Father on the last night of his life. He knows his time has run out, and he has thrown himself on the ground to pray a prayer of grief and fear, a prayer born of the very human desire for more days. That is not the prayer of someone untouched by time! That is the prayer of someone who knows exactly what it is to be us. In Jesus Christ, the eternal God stepped inside the limits of our mortality and lived the way we live, one day at a time, with a beginning and an end. He was a newborn held to his mother's chest. He grew up. He knew labor and sorrow. He tasted death. So we don't have to wonder whether God understands. God, in Christ, knows what it means to live a mortal life.

With that in mind, hear again the very first line of Psalm 90: "Lord, you have been our refuge from one generation to another." At first, the vast difference between eternal God and mortal humans may make God out to be a harsh absentee master of the universe. But, through Christ, we can see that God's eternity is the very thing that makes God a refuge for his children. To take refuge in God means abiding in the presence of the one who abides: to bring God our grief and our fear, to rest our restless hearts in him, and to find that only he remains when everything else passes away. Time will take a great deal from us, but it cannot take us from God.

"So teach us to number our days," the psalm prays, "that we may apply our hearts to wisdom." This is not a grim reminder that the clock is ticking. It isn't an invitation to live as though we will never die, and it isn't a call to clutch at every moment, afraid to blink, or to bury what we've been given because we are so afraid to lose it. People who have made their home in God's eternity can look at their own mortality without flinching. We can count our days as few and still receive each one as a gift, entrusted to us for a while. We can love people we know we are going to lose. We can give of ourselves freely, because our lives were never ours to hoard. And there will be a day when our Lord returns, when we stand before God with the whole story of our lives laid open, the faithful parts and the wayward parts together, "our secret sins," the psalm says, set "in the light of your countenance." But the one who will look upon us that day is the same one who has been our refuge all along. Our judge is our savior and our friend, and what he has prepared for us is joy. When the last of our days is spent, we will still be in God's hands. Our going down to the dust is not the end. The end of creation is not un-creation but re-creation - resurrection!

The days are long, but the years are short. Emory won't be three months old for long, and no amount of not blinking will change that. I can't slow down the years, for him or for me and I don't have to hold on to every moment as if it were mine to keep. I can receive this day with gratitude and entrust both of us to our God who has been a refuge to every generation before us and will be to every generation after. "O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, be thou our guide while life shall last, and our eternal home." Amen.

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