

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“Sermon on a Rope”**

Rev. David K. Groth  
New Year’s Eve, 2011

*“Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (Ps. 90:12).*

At its heart, Psalm 90 is a complaint to God about the brevity of life. It’s too short, the psalmist says. Sure, the psalm begins with the required adoration and praise. “You’ve been our dwelling place for generations. Before the mountains were born, before you formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.”

But then, the psalmist gets down to business. “You turn us back to dust.” We’re about as substantial as dry grass. Therefore teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom. “Teach us to number our days.” That is, know what time it is in your life. Be aware, be mindful of how short life really is. And then be deliberate about how you spend your days.

Right now in the United States, the average life span is 78.1 years. Of course, there are tons of variables. Very few of us will live to be exactly 78.1 years and then expire. But that’s the average. Interesting enough, verse 10 of the psalm says “The years of our life are seventy, or if we have the strength eighty” which, given our average lifespan, is right on target.

If every year was represented by an inch of rope, this is what 78 years looks like. Here’s year one. Here’s year 78. Where are you on the rope? I know some of you are over here somewhere (beyond 78). Good for you! That’s great. Give thanks to God. He still has plans for you. You are a blessing to the rest of us. And if my hunch is right, even if you’re in your 80’s or 90’s, most would say the years went by very quickly.

At least that’s a common theme I hear making hospital and shut-in calls. And that’s a common them from the Christmas cards sent us, one of which opened with the statement, “Though the days are long, the years are very short.” And that’s the complaint of Ps. 90. When all is said and done, our lives are but a flash in the pan. So teach us to number our days so that we may gain a heart of wisdom. Help us appreciate how short life is, and help us live it out then to its fullest. At the end we don’t want to look back and regret how we used our time.

According to the Nielsen Co., (that’s the company that closely monitors what Americans are watching on T.V.) . . . according to Nielsen the average American watches more than 4 hours of T.V. each day. That’s 28 hours a week, or 2 months a year of nonstop T.V. So, if you live to be 78. 1 years of age, you will have spent about 13 of those years glued to the T.V. Friends: that is time you will not get back. That is time watching other people live rather than you living your life. Is this how you really want to spend 13 years of your life? Is this how God wants you to burn 13 years of your life? Or is there something more purposeful you can be doing, more meaningful, more enriching to yourself and others?

When calling to recruit people to volunteer at church, the most frequent response we hear is . . . “I don’t have the time.” It seems to me given this truth, we do have the time. It’s more a matter of how we choose to use it. If for 78 years you spend one hour a week volunteering at

your church, that would equal half a year all told volunteering at church. Can you spare half an inch of these 13 to serve in God's kingdom? "Teach us to number our days aright that we may gain a heart of wisdom."

I'm thinking now of a bunch of teenage boys and girls I know who spend a lot of time playing video games, monitoring facebook, watching T.V., and trolling the web for funny videos and cool music. According to Businessweek Magazine, the average 8 to 18 year old in America spends 8 hours a day doing these things! Eight hours a day . . . and that number is rising. Kids, if you live to 78 years of age that's 26 years of your life playing video games and surfing the web. Do you really want to throw away 26 years of your life in that way?

When you're young, say 12 years old, you're looking at all this time ahead of you and it feels like an eternity. Time loses some of its value when you have lots of it. But you might not have all this time and time does fly. Am I saying "Don't watch any T.V. or play any video games?" No, I'm not. But I am saying, "All things in moderation". Eight hours a day is not in moderation. God does not smile on that.

So, what are the alternatives for your time? I wonder how good you could become at piano, for instance, or another instrument if you reduced that number 8 by an hour and used it to practice. Practice an instrument one hour a day every day and I suspect you will soon be one of the finest musicians in the area. Adults, who of you took piano lessons as a youngster? Who of you talked your parents into letting you quit and regrets now that you did?

Kids, I wonder how much better your grades would be if you reduced that 8 hours of screen time and put some of it into your homework. Better grades usually lead to better scholarships. I wonder what would happen if you started reading one really good book after another, books that will entertain but also enrich your life. I wonder how much happier and healthier you would be by using some of those 8 hours to engage in new hobbies. I get so much pleasure out of golf, tennis, beekeeping, gardening, cooking, reading. Without these things, life for me wouldn't be nearly as rich and rewarding and pleasant. What hobbies might you be interested in learning?

And I wonder how much happier you would be and how much happier another person would be if you used some of those 8 hours to find a way to serve your neighbor, or to serve in your church, or to volunteer in your community. Kids: Clearly you have the time; it's a matter of how you choose to use it.

I wonder how much more employable you would be if you spent some of that time learning a new skill. No potential employer will ever ask you in an interview, "So what level did you reach on Modern Warfare 3?" And I promise, at the end of your life, you will not look back and say "I wish I had spent more time playing video games."

Parents: a lot of this is on us, isn't it? Maybe if we reduced the time we spend in front of the screens, and re-engaged with the children, good would come of it on both ends of that equation. "Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom".

When you're young, still in school, you feel like you're going to live forever. The age of 78 seems like a very long ways off. But it's really not. If you're over 40 raise your hands. And if you feel those forty years generally went by pretty fast, keep your your hands up. And if you would like to recommend to the children here that life is too short to waste so much of it playing video games put both your hands up and shake them.

Teach us to number our days so we may gain a heart of wisdom. Once you know that life is finite, once you know you're going to die, you learn how to live.

What else? If for 78 years you come to church once a week for worship, again you will have spent about half a year in church. Half an inch to thank and praise him for 77 inches . . . and for the eternal life to come! Half an inch during which God promises to feed and nourish and sustain your faith through Word and Sacrament! In the grand scheme of things, half an inch is not much of an infringement on your time.

If you retire at the age of 65, on average, you're going to have 13 more years and quite possibly a lot more than that. This is not a time to waste, is it? If anything, this time is more precious because there's less of it. You'll set yourself up to be miserable if you think "I'm going to fill this with golf." That's no better than playing video games all day. (Don't take my word for it. Kids, where are you? Raise your hands. If you agree that it would be a terrible waste for grandpa to do nothing but golf for the rest of his days, leave your hands up.) There you have it. All things in moderation.

Experts say if you want to be happy and healthy in retirement, don't think of this as a long vacation, but more as a career change. Live with a sense of purpose. This is a time of promise and productivity. This is time to take all those experiences you've accumulated, all that training, and put it to good use. Turn your passions into purposeful living. If you love to read, help a youngster learn to read. If you love to work with wood, help a grandchild learn a new hobby. Be a big brother or big sister. Volunteer more in the community and at church. Remember Pastor Seegers? He once told me, "The older one gets, the more he understands and appreciates the grace of God in Jesus Christ." In retirement, you can tap into that gratitude and let it express itself in joyful service.

What else? If you work 40 hours a week from the age of 18 to 65, you will work about 100,000 hours in total, which will equal about 12 years of your life if you did nothing but work. That surprised me. I thought it would be much more. And at times it feels like it. But I checked and rechecked the math and it still adds up. We certainly want to make good use of that time. But again, it's only 12 or so years of your life. It's not enough time, in my opinion, to define who you are on the basis of your work. Your work is one part of who you are. You have many callings in life: father, daughter, citizen, neighbor, student, worker . . . First and foremost, however, you are a Christian. The question is how are you going to live out that calling?

On tombstones there's always a birth date and a date of death and a little dash between. That little dash is your life. This dash is your life. How are you going to live it out?

The lesson of the rope is that no part of life is superfluous, or unimportant. There's no part of your life where time can be wasted. Martin Marty, a Lutheran theologian, keeps on his wall an inscription about time. "Life is short and we have not much time for gladdening the hearts of those who travel the way with us. Oh, be swift to love, make haste to be kind." No part of life is cheap. All of it is full of potential and possibility. All of it has been redeemed. All of it has been forgiven by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. So I put this rope under the cross to show His blood covers over and forgives all, also the sin of wasted time. And if you look closely, the baptismal candle has 2011 on it and will soon be replaced with a 2012. In baptism you were God's child in 2011 and in baptism you will remain God's child through 2012. He loves you and died for you. Therefore the nails in the candle. He has washed away your sin . . . therefore the

water. From everlasting to everlasting he will remain your God. Therefore the alpha and the omega. If you die at age 78.1, life is not over. Life is changed, not ended. Eternal life is yours by grace; therefore the circular wreath (without beginning or end) a wreath that is green (living). Some of you are feeling like you're at the end of your rope. Do not fear. He knows where you're at. "Precious in his sight is the death of his saints." "Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life" (Rev. 2:10).

What a gift life is, this life and the life to come. He created your life. He redeemed it. He has plans for it, for all of it. No part of it is to be cheapened or wasted. Therefore, "Teach us to number our days so we may gain a heart of wisdom." Amen.