



**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School**

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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**New Year's Eve/Day**  
**December 31, 2016/January 1, 2017**

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**“For all the Marbles”**

*(Psalm 90:13)*

Rev. David K. Groth

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

**Collect of the Day:** Lord God, You made Your beloved Son, our Savior, subject to the Law and caused Him to shed His blood on our behalf. Grant us the true circumcision of the Spirit that our hearts may be made pure from all sins; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

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At its heart, Psalm 90 is a complaint to God about the brevity of life. It's far too short, the psalmist says, and then, "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 is. And then be deliberate about how you spend your days.

Right now in the United States, the average life span is 78.7 years. Of course, there are tons of variables; most of us won't suddenly expire at 78.7 years. But 78.7 years is the average lifespan. To make things simpler we'll round up to 79. Interesting enough, verse 10 of the psalm says "The years of our life are seventy, or if we have the strength eighty." Even after these millennia since the psalm is still on target.

If every year was represented by one marble, this is what 79 years looks like. Doesn't look like much, does it? Kind of unimpressive. Here's to you! And that's precisely the point. We wish it were more, something that looks more like this, provided most of them were strong, healthy years. But this is what we get, and they go by quickly. And we wouldn't characterize all of them as good years, either. There's certainly good to be found in all of them, things for which to give thanks to God in all of them, but we don't want to overlook the difficulties lurking within. Job said, "Man who is born of woman is of few days and full of trouble" (14:1).

Now I know some of you are well over 79. That's great! Your cup runneth over! Give thanks to God. He still has plans for you. And we give thanks to God for you because there's a certain wisdom and seasoning that only

comes with years. But 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.

And that's the complaint of Ps. 90. When all is said and done, our lives are 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 very short life is, and help us then to live it out to its fullest. At the end we don't want to look back and regret how we used our time.

According to the Nielsen Company (which monitors what Americans are watching on T.V.), the average American watches just over 5 hours of T.V. each day. That's 35 hours a week, or if we were to clump all those hours together, that's 2 ½ months a year of nonstop T.V. So, if you live to be 79 years of age, you will have spent about 16 ½ of those years watching T.V. So, let's take away 16 years of your life spent in front of 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 16 plus years of your life? Is this how God would want you to spend 16 plus 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." I'm beginning to think that's not the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Perhaps it's more a matter of how we choose to use the time given us. If for 79 years you spend one hour a week volunteering at your church, that would equal a half year all told volunteering at church. I don't have half a marble, so we'll just put in a small one. Can you spare half a marble to serve in God's name? Can you spare half a marble to make what could be an eternal difference in someone else's life? "Teach us to number our days aright that we may gain a heart of wisdom."

Now, let's throw in the time we spend with social media and surfing the web and using an app on your phone

and listening to radio. In 2015, the New York Times said we spent 9 ½ hours each day consuming media in one fashion or another. In 2016 that number went up by one full hour a day to 10 ½ hours a day. It's still climbing, but for now, that's 34 ½ years of your life consuming media. We already have 16 marbles in this glass representing just the hours we spend in front of the T.V. Let's bring that number up to 35. You can count with me: [16, \*\*\*]. I don't hardly know what to say about that, but those are the years of your life spent consuming media. Have I lost all my marbles, or does that seem like a tragic waste?

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 trust the common wisdom of our elders: time flies. 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". This is not moderation. God does not smile on this.

So, what are the alternatives for your time? I wonder how good some of our kids could become at piano, for instance, or some other instrument, if you reduced that number of 10 hours a day spent consuming media by just one 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.

Kids, I wonder how much better your grades would be if you reduced that 10 hours of media time and put some of it into your homework. Better grades in grade school and high school usually translate to better grades in college, which often leads to better jobs with a greater salary, and that often affords a more comfortable and secure lifestyle. That's good.

And I wonder what would happen if you started reading one good book after another, books that entertain but also enrich your life. My grandfather was a small time dairy farmer- a quiet man who spent most of his working hours with the cows or in the fields. He had to quit school after 8th grade which was common for farm kids in his generation.

But in the evenings he was an avid reader, which made him interesting and articulate and well-educated in ways that I don't think he would ever would have been if somehow he had spent all that time on Instagram or Snapchat.

Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom. I wonder how much happier and healthier you would be by using some of those 10 hours a day to learn a new skill. I get so much pleasure out of my hobbies: cooking, reading, golf, beekeeping, sugaring. Without these things, life for me wouldn't be nearly as rich and rewarding and pleasant. What hobbies might you be interested in learning? Woodworking, fishing, stained glass? If you really wanted to, I bet you could find a way.

And I wonder how much happier you would be and how much happier another person would be if you used some of those 10 hours to find a way to serve your neighbor, or to serve in your church, or to volunteer in your community. 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. Kids, no potential employer will ever ask you in an interview, "So what level did you reach on Call of Duty or Battlefield 1?" 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 kids, 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 79 seems like a very long ways off. But it's really not. If you're over 40 raise your right hand. And if you feel those 40 years generally went by pretty fast, raise your other hand too. (Keep them up.) And if you would like to recommend to the children here that life is too short to burn up a lot of it on the media, than shake both your hands. 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 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 have been much more. But I rechecked the math and asked Ron Wille to do the same 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, not enough time, in my opinion, to let it define who you are. Your work is one part of who you are, but God has given you other vocations, such as father, daughter, citizen, neighbor, student, worker.

Suppose you're planning to retire at the traditional age of 65. On average, you're going to have 14 more years to live [show the jar]. For some it will be considerably more, for others, considerably less. But for argument sake, let's go with the average. 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" "with fishing." That's no better than playing video games all day. (Don't take my word for it. Kids, where are you? If you're 18 or less, raise your right hand. 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. What's good for the goose is also good for the gander.

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 those skills, and put them 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 in the community and at church.

What else? If for 79 years you come to church once a week for worship, again you will have spent about half a year in church. Half a marble to thank and praise him for the 79 other marbles. Half a marble to thank and praise him for the eternal life to come! Half a marble during which God promises to feed and nourish and sustain your faith through Word and Sacrament! In the grand scheme of things, I don't think that's too much of an infringement on your time. You know, I ought to start preaching longer sermons to turn that half marble into one big one, something like this one . . . or maybe this one!

On a more serious note, it does make me wonder how on earth the church can ever compete. If you're an average American, you spend about 81 hours each week being fed a constant stream of modern American media. If you come to church, that's about an hour a week. 81 to 1. How can the church compete with that? We kid ourselves if we think 81 hours a week of modern American media doesn't have a massive impact on what we believe, and the values we hold. And what does this mean for the one who only comes sporadically? If someone comes just once a month, he will have consumed roughly 140 hours of media before we have a crack at him for about an hour. I don't like those odds.

My only consolation is the fact God's Word is stronger. Once he said "Quiet! Be still", and it was just three little words, yet they settled an angry sea. Once he said, "let there be light", and there was a canopy of stars above our heads. God's Word is stronger. It is living and active.

So, this is your life. Count your marbles. [Combine the two left jars and take away the two right jars.] How are you going to live it out? It's never too late to make God-pleasing changes about how we use our time. The lesson of the marbles is that no part of life is superfluous, or unimportant. There's no part of your life where time can be wasted. 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. I'm glad we're celebrating communion tonight, because his blood covers over and

forgives all, also the sin of wasted time. And if you look closely, the baptismal candle has 2016 on it and will soon be replaced with a 2017, a reminder that you are God's child now and will remain so in the New Year. He loves you and died for you. Therefore the reminder of the nails in the candle. He has washed away your sin . . . therefore the water in the font. From everlasting to everlasting he will remain your God. Therefore the alpha and the omega on the candle.

Moreover, if you die at age 79, life is certainly not over. In a sense, it's just begun. Life is changed when we die, not ended. Eternal life is yours by grace. Not just another one of these [small jar of 79 marbles]. Or even just one of these [big jar of marbles]. And not just a sanctuary full of marbles. But everlasting life with him in paradise.

What a gift life is. 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.