

*Lightweights after All*  
Psalm 62  
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As part of my doctoral dissertation, I interviewed a number of pastors who were within three years of ordination. I also separately interviewed a small group of members from each of their churches. (I was exploring how pastors coming out of progressive seminaries made the transition to our often more conservative small churches). One interview was in Cambridge, WI – a small town on a country highway which leads between Madison and Milwaukee. So, the day before the interview, I drove from Davenport, IA where I lived up to Dubuque and across southwestern Wisconsin to Madison. After settling into the motel for the night, I walked to a nearby Perkin’s Family Restaurant. As I perused the menu, I noticed a note – *Senior Discount – age 55 and above*. Here was a new wrinkle in my life. I was at the time 58 – my very first Senior Discount.

Our text this morning is Psalm 62. As it true for the psalms in general, we have no way to date this psalm nor do we know who the author was. Psalms are poems or songs some of which were clearly written for worship in the community. Some psalms offer community expressions of faith or praise; lament or thanksgiving. Still others express individual feelings of lament or thanksgiving or petition or praise. Psalm 62 is a bit hard to classify with scholars disagreeing about whether it is primarily a lament or an expression of faith and hope, or both. The actual lectionary reading (the assigned reading) for today is only verses 5 through 12, but we miss something when we cut off the beginning of the text. The psalmist opens with a word of trust in the Lord, “For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation.” For God *alone* – the word “alone” applied to God is repeated throughout the first sections of the psalm. The author is very clear that God and only God is the source of salvation, the rock, the fortress, the granter of deliverance. Salvation here refers to life, not specifically to an afterlife. After an initial statement of faith and trust, the psalmist speaks about some trouble he (or she) has encountered, “How long will you assail a person, will you batter your victim, all of you, as you would a leaning wall, a tottering fence? Their only plan is to bring down a person of prominence. They take pleasure in falsehood; they bless with their mouths, but inwardly they curse.” As is usually true in the psalms, we have no way of knowing what troubles the writer is having – only that there has been a breach of trust with other persons, that he is feeling attacked and has been done some damage.

After this statement of trouble, trust is again expressed using some of the same language with which the psalm began: God is my salvation. God is my rock, my deliverance, my fortress, my mighty rock, and my refuge. After this statement of deep faith and trust, the psalmist shifts into a didactic mode, teaching her audience, “Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us.” All hearers (or readers) are encouraged to learn from this author’s experience and are invited into the refuge that God provides. The teaching continues, “Those of low estate are but a breath, those of high estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath.” Although the language is very different, the sentiment is reminiscent of the prophet Isaiah’s statement “All people are

grass.... The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass” People are grass which withers; people are lighter than a breath. We weigh nothing on the scales. God, on the other hand, is a rock, a fortress – the very opposite of our lighter-than-breath existence.

Put no faith on extortion or robbery or any ill-gotten gain. For that matter, even honestly gotten gain is not worth much – “if riches increase, do not set your heart on them.” What really matters is who God is, “Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God, and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord. For you repay to all according to their work.” The message of this psalmist is clear – depend upon God alone. We have all heard that for years; we know that we ought really to depend upon God – alone, well, maybe chiefly, well.... It is so very hard to lean into that teaching is it not? Depend upon God alone? Well, that hardly seems reality based! Maybe the world was a much simpler place when the psalms were written. They did have fewer resources, less knowledge, far, far less medical care, so depending upon God alone may have been their only good option, don’t you think? In the 21<sup>st</sup> century we tend to take folks who take that literally, such as the Christian Scientists, as kooks. When they refuse to get modern medical care for their child we sometimes charge them with a crime. Depend upon God alone? Let’s get real! Look around our world – so many good people suffer for no good reason – poverty, hunger, violence, illness, kids being shot, children dying of cancer or even dying of diseases we could treat if they had access to medical care. Depend upon God alone? Will God help our kids get better grades or get into Harvard? No! Will God help with the mortgage? No! Will God fund our 401k? No! Will God help us build our professional reputation or cure our loved one’s depression or stop the cancer which invades our bodies? No! Will God get us that promotion we so richly deserve? No! Depend upon God alone? Why, we are Americans with a streak of the old Wild West in our blood and a firm belief in individualism. The idea that anyone, even a coal miner’s son can grow up to be president has long been a part of our cultural truth (never mind that it is not true so far for women, non-Christians, and most people of color). In that truth, the culture is positive that one gets to such lofty places by individual effort, cleverness, and determination alone – God alone has nothing to do with it! True and false. When we speak of depending upon God alone, we are not suggesting that God will manipulate the world to the advantage of some rather than others. God will not get us our next promotion or help with the mortgage or keep our loved one from all illness. That’s true. Depend upon God alone.

The idea is anathema to our perceptions of how we should live. Most of us think that we have “made it” in life when we have a variety of self-produced successes. We see ourselves as important in a variety of ways. We want others to know how important we are, so we brag about our jobs, homes, kids, vacations and successes. Some of us point out where we have come from to communicate how far we have come – all on our own initiative, of course. Some of us point out where we have come from to be sure everyone is aware of our pedigree – whether that involves wealth or an ancestral university line or long term residency in the upscale environs. Although we don’t like to think about it because we are ‘nice’ people, most of us also have a sometimes subtle, sometimes not, superiority attitude. If we were good students and valued

education, some part of us likely sniffs with disdain when someone says, “He had went” or “She don’t got” or uses some other grammatically incorrect construction. In our minds we put them in a different category from the one we cherish for ourselves. Others of us feel superior to those folks who live in a less desirable neighborhood or who have unruly kids. Those of us who are on the slim side and reasonably fit often carry an attitude towards those who are overweight or obese, as if body size and fitness were simply a matter of good character and effort. We are ‘good’ people, so much of this attitude is subtle and not openly expressed, but it is there. Those of you who are just now thinking that you personally do not have such attitudes, I will just point out that that too is a comparison which credits yourself with superiority.

All of that is interesting and a bit amusing because when we think we are important we are suggesting that we carry some weight (metaphorically speaking). Yet, the psalmist and the prophets are pretty darn clear that compared to God we are but grass (here today, gone tomorrow) or a breath which cannot even tip the balances a nanometer. When we assume that having succeeded at some things and having more in the ways of the world makes us more of a somebody, we might note that the psalmist says, “Those of low estate are but a breath, those of high estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath.” How we kid ourselves!

That Senior Discount at the Perkin’s Family Restaurant was my very first senior discount. Being still in my 50s, I was not at all sure how I felt about it. On the one hand, the interviewing I was doing involved a number of overnight trips, which were expensive. Any savings were welcome. On the other hand, it was a “senior” discount – I certainly did not think of myself as a senior citizen or as old. I had only been ordained 6 years and was working on an advanced degree. Besides, I really wasn’t planning on getting old – other people did that! None of us really plan to get old. Yet we all move through the stages. Getting old rarely crosses our minds in our teens and twenties. Our grandparents may become frailer or die, but that’s what grandparents do. Then, for most of us, as we move through our thirties and forties, getting old is something our parents and their friends do. We begin to grapple with the ravages of aging – from the outside. We hear about stiff backs and sore knees. We may be impatient with the complaining; we resolve never to let our bodies deteriorate that way. We watch our folks having increasing difficulty getting out of a chair or bending over. We drive them to increasing numbers of doctors’ appointments as we begin to worry about them driving at all. We notice that the vacations they now take are of a less active sort. At the same time we notice that our vision is changing – or our prescription needs adjusting or, if we never had glasses, we play trombone with the book (and complain, ‘the light in here is terrible,’ ‘why do they make this print so small’) until we finally admit that we need glasses and buy ourselves a set of ‘cheaters’ so that we can actually see what we are looking at.

Then, as we move through our forties and fifties and into our sixties, things start to happen: joints hurt or get stiff; our hearing is less sharp; our muscles complain more readily and more often. We have ‘senior moments.’ For you youngsters among us, senior moments are like blank walls – when the name will not come there is no ‘it’s on the tip of my tongue’ or ‘it starts

with' – just a complete blank – which the brain will helpfully fill in an hour or a day or a week later.

Those of you who are still under say, 45, may find all this depressing. Many of us over that age have found it depressing at times, too – sometimes we still do. But as time goes on it becomes very clear that the psalmist is right. We are like no more than a breath. We have all come into the world; we are all headed out someday. A funny thing started happening for me a few years ago. I developed a short-timer's attitude towards life. Don't be alarmed; I have no plans to die any time soon. What I noticed, though, is my reaction to the information that this country will be less than 50% white by the year 2050. While interesting I found myself thinking that that was likely literally beyond me. I was born in 1949, so I figure I'd either be gone or be too old to care – it won't be my world anymore.

We are but a breath in comparison to God. We are grass - here today; gone tomorrow. In the overall scheme of things, in God's eternal time we aren't even a breath. We are barely a very short puff. The older we get, the more we realize that that is actually OK. While we may make bold protestation about living forever or living even to 120, in truth life has a cycle which has a beginning and a natural end. For some of us, that cycle lasts longer, for others it certainly seems far too short. For those of us lucky enough to grow old, which is most of us, life itself and all of our experiences, loves, losses, and wisdom gained along the way, help us to see that that end is as natural as was the beginning. As backs become stiff and knees give out; as our appetite diminishes, our skin dries and our hair thins, as our vision declines and our hearing isn't so sharp, our understanding of what really matters comes into ever clearer focus. We see like we never saw the importance of the simple pleasures – time with loved ones, a cool drink when we are thirsty, a good meal, a child's laugh, a simple 'thank you' for a kindness, the kindness of a stranger or a friend – we see the importance of simple pleasures; we treasure time and people rather than money, status and things. We are indeed as weightless and fleeting as a puff of wind, sisters and brothers, but our God is a rock and a fortress, a refuge in times of trouble. When we reach the last decades of our lives, all the trappings of success and things of importance measured in the ways of the world fade into lovely memories. It all becomes the past, but for us the future is the light of the God of Jesus Christ – a light which draws us on into the care of our God who offers an eternity of steadfast love.