

To the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise be honor and glory forever and ever, Amen.

Psalm 90: 1-2, 8-12, 14-17

Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations.

*2 Before the mountains were brought forth,
Or ever You had formed the earth and the world,
Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.*

*You have set our iniquities before You,
Our secret sins in the light of Your countenance.
9 For all our days have passed away in Your wrath;
We finish our years like a sigh.*

*10 The days of our lives are seventy years;
And if by reason of strength they are eighty years,
Yet their boast is only labor and sorrow;
For it is soon cut off, and we fly away.*

*11 Who knows the power of Your anger?
For as the fear of You, so is Your wrath.*

*12 So teach us to number our days,
That we may gain a heart of wisdom.*

*Oh, satisfy us early with Your mercy,
That we may rejoice and be glad all our days!*

*15 Make us glad according to the days in which You have afflicted us,
The years in which we have seen evil.*

*16 Let Your work appear to Your servants,
And Your glory to their children.*

*17 And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us,
And establish the work of our hands for us;
Yes, establish the work of our hands.*

In the Name of Jesus, the Lord of the Church who has blessed us with faithful ministers to proclaim His Gospel and equip the saints, dear fellow redeemed:

Today, we are gathered together to celebrate an incredible ministry. A flawless and perfect ministry. We celebrate a Man who never shied away from speaking the Law and who faithfully and lovingly proclaimed God's path to free and full salvation. A Man who never thought about himself but only about those He was called to serve. A Man who sacrificed everything for the ones He loved.

We are, of course, also gathered to give thanks for the Lord's gift to His Church in Pastor Mark Gullerud, but before we get into that, we must first ponder the immovable foundation that our gracious God has laid for His Church and where Mark received the guidance and motivation to faithfully serve his God and ours these many years. And we will also see from God's Word today how the Lord has wisely and powerfully promised to uphold and maintain His Church until Christ returns. To that end, our sermon theme today is. . .

OUR YEARS OF SERVICE ARE YEARS OF GRACE

I: 3 years

II: 50 years

III: 6,000 years

Now, you might have guessed already that the perfect preacher I referred to earlier is not named Mark. I wish it were true that pastors are perfect and never make mistakes. That they never run out of steam. That they are waiting right by the phone for every emergency that arises and that they say all the right things. But you know as well as Mark knows and as well as I know that pastors are not perfect. They get tired. They get frustrated. They often spend more time feeling as though they have failed than feeling like a smashing success.

Moses, the writer of Psalm 90 and an imperfect pastor himself, answers the question about why our pastors so often fail, beginning in verse 8ff, *You have set our iniquities before You, Our secret sins in the light of Your countenance. 9 For all our days have passed away in Your wrath; We finish our years like a sigh. 10 The days of our lives are seventy years; And if by reason of strength they are eighty years, Yet their boast is only labor and sorrow; For it is soon cut off, and we fly away. 11 Who knows the power of Your anger? For as the fear of You, so is Your wrath.*

I currently serve a very supportive congregation up in Spokane. My members at Trinity will say things from time to time like, "you're the best", "how did you get so wise?", and "do you ever sleep?" I'm sure that you, also Mark, have been blessed through the uplifting Christian fellowship and support the Holy Spirit lends His servants through those you have been called to serve. I have no doubt that we sit in a room full of people that are astounded that you are so willing and able to come out of retirement, don the gown once more, and continue to faithfully tend Christ's flock here at St. Stephen as their vacancy pastor.

But looking back on 50 years since first being ordained into the pastoral ministry, only you know fully the many ways that you failed. Just as I have and continue to fail. Just as every Christian alone knows their service and the many ways they have failed in their duties. Well, that knowledge is not ours alone - as verse 8 says, our iniquity is laid bare before the Lord. Not just the sins of pastors but the sins of each of us are evident

to the Lord in His all-knowing wisdom. Our iniquity is so well known by God that none of it is hidden from His sight. 50 years is a long time, Mark, and how many of those years did you finish with a sigh, looking back on your toil with sorrow and frustration, thinking, “not enough! Never enough!”

This is why we turn, somewhat ironically, to consider a much shorter ministry first. The perfect ministry of our Lord, Jesus Christ. For three short years, Jesus of Nazareth equipped His disciples for their work in the Church, providing them with the Word of God they would need to succeed in their own ministries. For three years He did not cease to proclaim God’s Law and His Gospel. For three years he sacrificed comfort, wealth, fame, and earthly glory to obey His Father’s will and to be homeless, divisive, hated, and rejected for the truth He spoke. And when this had been accomplished, He returned to the city of God so that the people of God might crucify the Son of God. There, those precious drops of the blood of God Himself poured from His brow, His hands, and His feet.

Most people would look at that as a failed ministry. But that’s only because they have not searched the Scriptures to find that this was the primary purpose of Jesus ministry - His service was not only to proclaim God’s Word but to fulfill it on our behalf, becoming the sacrificial Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world - who takes away your sin and mine.

Because of this, you, Mark, and every pastor, and, indeed, every Christian can confidently pray verses 14-17 of our sermon text, *Oh, satisfy us early with Your mercy, That we may rejoice and be glad all our days! 15 Make us glad according to the days in which You have afflicted us, The years in which we have seen evil. 16 Let Your work appear to Your servants, And Your glory to their children. 17 And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us, And establish the work of our hands for us; Yes, establish the work of our hands.*

Mark, have you suffered affliction these past 50 years? Have you seen evil in your years as Satan strives against us and our sinful flesh writhes within us? I know you have. And the rest of you have seen evil at work against the Church of Christ and against you individually every day of every year. And yet our prayer remains that God would satisfy us with His mercy. And He does. Our prayer is that He would give us days of gladness in the midst of our afflictions. And He does. Our prayer is that we might behold the beauty and glory of God through His Holy Word and receive His promises through the sacraments despite ourselves and our sinful nature. And we do. This is a prayer that is always answered! God promises in Isaiah 55:11 that God’s Word NEVER returns empty and ALWAYS accomplishes God’s Holy will, prospering in the thing for which He sent it.

Your ministry has not been perfect, Mark. And it continues to be imperfect as you continue to serve. But because Christ’s ministry and His sacrifice were perfect, because

His Word is perfect, and because He promised in His great Commission to be with those He sends even until the end of the age, your years of ministry have been and continue to be years of grace. Your years of service have all been years of God's grace, working through weak and sinful people so that the pure beauty of His Gospel and the glory of His powerful love might shine all the more. Perhaps not every member walked away from every service thinking what a great pastor you were, but every Sunday when the Gospel went out and Christ crucified was proclaimed, no one could walk away without realizing what a great God they had and what a loving Savior was and is theirs. And that's precisely what is so great about being a servant of Christ, as Paul eloquently phrased it in 2 Corinthians 12, *And [the Lord] said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

And the best part of all? This strength God gives us in our weakness is not restricted only to His servants in the public ministry. And Mark's exemplary years of service in God's grace are not the outlier. This grace is consistent for all God's children who serve Him, and it always has been! As verses 1-2 of our text states, *Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations. 2 Before the mountains were brought forth, Or ever You had formed the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.*

From generation to generation, God has been the dwelling place of His people, giving us relief from our guilt and shame and guiding our service by His almighty hand. Think of how much has changed in the world since Moses would have penned these words 3,500 years ago. But you know what hasn't changed? What will never change? God's faithfulness - to His Church, to His ministers, and to all His people. 2 Timothy 2:13 says, *If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.* For 6,000 years, since Creation, the ministry of all who serve the Lord by faith has been so richly blessed that we cannot help but give thanks and have tremendous confidence in God's promise to continue to sustain and guide His flock every day of every year until Christ returns. As Jesus said to Peter in Matthew 16, even the gates of hell shall never prevail against God's Church.

What special comfort this affords us Christians as we wrestle with trials and tribulations like the pastor shortage and shrinking congregations. If the Church of Christ belonged to us, it would fail. But the Church is God's - the Bride of Christ, as Scripture calls us. The Church belongs to God and so we belong to Him. And so what belongs to us in Him? The free gift of eternal life. Forgiveness for every sin. Strength in every trouble. Hope in deepest darkness.

Mark, these 50 years have been so blessed by God's grace because your ministry was never about you. It was only and always about Christ crucified. And so you can look back and see not your failures, not your sins, not your regrets, but the constant heart beat of the Gospel coursing through your life and the lives of every soul you have served and still serve. You members of St. Stephen, your ministries, too, (for you also serve the Lord) have been so richly blessed because it has been God establishing the works of your hands. And, God help us, His Church will continue to function in the exact same satisfying, successful, and special way that it always has.

Our years of service are not years of regret, though we do have regrets. Our years of service haven't been years of failure, though we have often failed. These are not the defining characteristics of our ministry. That defining characteristic is contained in one word: grace. Our years of service are years of grace. Thus it has been, is now, and will be forever. And so today we thank God for your service, Mark. We thank God for your service, members of St. Stephen. We thank God for all the blessed service He works among all His people who guide others to the cross of Christ and shine the light of salvation into a world which so desperately needs it. And we look forward in hope and confidence, not simply because there is a new pastor on the way - he will not be perfect either. Our hope comes from God, who promises to perfect the labors of those who He has made perfect and righteous by faith. In Jesus Jeremiah 29:11, *For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*

And so we pray:

Lord of the Church. *Let Your work appear to Your servants, And Your glory to their children. And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us, And establish the work of our hands for us; Yes, establish the work of our hands.*

In Jesus' saving Name, Amen.