

With Thanksgiving for the Life of
Irene Josephine Rasmussen
September 1, 1919 + July 13, 2016
Ex20:9-12; Ps23; Rev7:9-17; Jn14:27-28

"How long?" is a familiar question amid the Bible's Psalms, a repeated refrain, even a persistent demand. I'll come back to the Psalm later, because it takes a different tone, but let's stick with the phrase "How long," as it's been on my mind in these weeks and months for Irene and since her death.

"How long!" might well begin as an exclamation for Irene. Her nearly 97 years made her the second-oldest member of this congregation, and well above most any expectation for life.

That time stretches back to the kind of farm life that hardly exists anymore and a Norwegian identity that has mostly been melted and blended into American culture. "How long" was such a length for her that it involves the increasingly rare trait of being shaped by the Great Depression, with thrift and endeavoring after careful and wise living. Irene could remember when their large garden produced almost all of her family's food and that she didn't have store-bought clothes for years, but only those made by her mother. She could recall when her father traveled to have a job with the Works Progress Administration, and—maybe even more remarkable for its contrast to this current culture—the overwhelming sense of optimism that went with hearing a speech from FDR. It sure feels like it must be a long time ago for somebody to say they were inspired positively by a politician!

The "how long" isn't only a distance in the past, though, but also a duration. We can certainly celebrate that Irene and Paul's marriage lasted for 65 years, which likely didn't feel too long at all. And we can celebrate all

they enjoyed through the course of those years, especially in travels to camp: Maine, the Black Hills, Montreal for the Expo, and much more. A couple weeks on the road each summer, and almost a month of the year spent camping out. That's a lot, a long time to be outside. On those voyages, following after "are we there yet," "how long" may also have been a question from a son in the back seat.

Those camping trips inspired a couple of the hymns (*How Great Thou Art* and *Beautiful Savior*) and Bible passages we heard this morning. The Exodus reading is actually part of the 10 Commandments given to Moses while the people were camping in the wilderness at Mount Sinai. I like the part about honoring father and mother because it offers an encouragement, a blessing: "so that your days may be long in the land." It's such a good biblical phrase for the "how long" of life and enjoying the world.

And the previous commandment about honoring the sabbath with rest also seems to fit with the recreation of those camping trips with Irene, of pausing to enjoy the world around you, of breaking from regular routines of life, and observing nature and the glories of creation and life around you.

Similarly, the vision of Revelation isn't a description of the heaven we are destined for, but is a grand assurance and broad insistence that in spite of all that goes wrong, we share the blessings of life with a multitude, humans from all times and places, and all creatures, on earth and in the skies and under the earth and in the seas, as it says. A beautiful notion of praise, I expect it is part of the worship that Irene found on camping trips.

It's also a vision that fits this occasion, of being brought back together with those who have been through ordeals and suffering, of God's ongoing striving for redemption and to

wipe away tears, of the baptismal springs of resurrection to new life. Good words, carrying us into the "how long" of eternity that stretches out in front of Irene and awaits us.

But before we get there, we also need to pause with the Psalm's sort of "how long," asking "How long shall I have perplexity in my mind and grief in my heart, day after day?" (13:2) It's not a cheery question, but that "how long" was more the sense that I knew in my brief months with Irene, and which she had been headed toward over the past several years.

Sometimes "how long" is a lament, a prayer to God, a question of yearning. That certainly must have been the case for Irene at the tragedies of death, for her son David, and grandson Jonathan, and when she lost her husband, and her siblings, and so many friends. That is certainly a hard down-side to longevity.

And we wondered the question for Irene, too. How long will dementia worsen? How long until she isn't able to recognize me? How long before a worse fall? How long will she be able to last? How long will this life go on?

Asking those harder parts of "how long" isn't to say the situation was desperate. "How long" also meant important time of care from Paul and Maria. Irene did remember family and longtime friends. She remembered her childhood. She delighted in the visits from her church circle and could relate very well. She eagerly welcomed me as her new pastor, often over and over again during our visits. She continued to be eager to receive communion.

And maybe that's part of our answer to the question, that in some ways we don't know "how long." We don't know what will last or what's coming next. Besides good times, we have plenty of anxieties that surround and lurk after us. Yet this faith turns us continually back to God and repeated assurance of hope,

inspiring us perhaps with patience, but also promising the peace that surpasses all understanding, such as the world cannot give.

So that is for you now, for the "how long" of these ongoing days without Irene and for the rest of life: the peculiar assurance that your hearts need not be troubled or afraid. Somehow, in spite of it all, your "how long" is held in the promise of God's embrace, that Jesus is with you forever and always.

I want to conclude with a couple words about our next hymn (*When Memory Fades*, ELW 792). For "how long," we could've sung *Amazing Grace's* notion that "when we've been there 10,000 years...we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we'd first begun." Instead we'll sing this hymn with its strong text, perhaps almost too strong. In that, there's some yes and no of how these words do and don't apply to Irene and for our gathering today. I'm hoping that you find value in them for what they do say, perhaps even in spite of the hard honesty of the laments of "how long." But if it doesn't exactly make you feel like the resurrection praise we heard about from all creation in the Revelation reading (and our opening and closing hymns are probably better for that), still this one is a great tune, and for Irene's love of symphonic music, it's worth singing with gusto.