

- How warmly I have been welcomed as your guest. And how eagerly I greet you in the name of the Father, and of the son, and of the Holy Spirit. The textual passage is Psalm 73. I begin with verse 24. Thou dost guide me with thy counsel. And afterward, thou will receive me to glory. There is in this text at least four gifts to which I call your attention. They are gifts from God which are pertinent for your journey and mine. Not only during this year, the first month of which is almost over. But during the rest of this year and for the rest of our lives here. I speak of gifts, mindful of what Martialis once wrote, Gifts are like hooks. He said that lamenting the craftiness of humans who give in order to seduce by such a favor. And in turn win favors from those to whom the gifts were given. But God's gifts are never hooks. They're always helps. And I am eager to share the enumeration of these four gifts with you this morning. First of all, for your journey and mine, there is the obvious gift of guiding counsel. Thou dost guide me with thy counsel. The counsel of God issues from his wisdom and appeals to our need because of our constitutional ignorance as George Buttrick used to put it. We humans do not know how best to proceed with the living of our days, apart from the wise counsel which God grants for our guidance. The counsel issues from wisdom, yes. And immediately relates to our condition. And it does so, honoring our freedom. But we need the counsel because we are free, since we humans are chronic mistake makers when left entirely to ourselves. God offers and gives this kind of counsel because we need such direction. Mark you the counsel of God is not mere advice giving, it is always conversational. He offers. We have the freedom to accept or reject. But even when we reject, we do not do so in an absolute freedom, but in a relative one. Because always there is human freedom bounded by divine sovereignty. Roger Hazelton used to say, "God has a controlling interest in the course of our living from day to day. It is an interest on which we may rely and with which we may in some real measure cooperate." The psalmist understood that. And in the text which I read, he was affirming his openness to receive the guiding counsel of God as he would make his journey on through life. This theme of divine counsel is highlighted in the psalms. Psalm 16, verse 7, it's a near parallel to the text I read. I bless the Lord who gives me counsel. While in Psalm 32:8, God is quoted as promising, I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go. I will guide you with mine eye upon you. As for the watchful eyes of God, Howard Thurman put it like this. The burning stare of the eyes of God, pierces my innermost core. Beyond my strength. Beyond my weakness. Beyond what I am. Beyond what I would be until my refuge is in Him alone. Those who rightly value life, want God's counsel. And they follow it with a very responsible freedom. Aware, as the Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore, grippingly put it, Emancipation from the bondage of the soil, does not mean freedom for the tree. It means death. Fullness of life comes in receiving this gift that God offers for our journey. The gift of guiding counsel. Thou dost guide me with thy counsel. That counsel ensures a wise use of the second gift which I enumerate. Namely a personal share in Time. Capital T. For the text goes on to say, Thou dost guide me with thy counsel, and afterward thou will receive me to glory. You and I are not there at that ultimate point to which the psalmist pointed when he spoke of glory. That essential estate toward which we are heading, which is held out for us as a benefit to crown our years and to grant us that privileged position for which we were born. Glory. That weighted existence that means more than we could ever imagine. For no eyes have ever seen it. Nor any ear heard fully about it. But the heart yearns for it. And the psalmist knew he would reach it if he followed counsel and wisely handled his days as he invested his personal share in

Time. As a sharer in Time, you and I are affected by one of the most profound riddles to which the human mind has ever been directed. It's very difficult to define time precisely. But yet all of us know what it is, We experience it daily. And in such intimacy that we fear it. For the more time we experience, the more we tend to be bothered about living. All of us know time as a constant that is universal. It's everywhere. It touches everyone. It is relentless in its pace. And it is unavoidable in its effects. We experience time as a succession of moments. And as we move from one moment into another, or as the moments move within us, or pile up in us, we're usually anxious to see every moment confirm the one that went before. And then complete the one that went before. And then connect meaningfully with the moment that comes afterward. We're anxious about time. We wonder about time. We are proud of time, As when we count our age. Or we hide time as when we don't want to betray our age. Time is something we take, something we use. But time is also something that takes us forever onward and finally takes us away. As Isaac Watts put it in the hymn we sometimes sing, Time, like an ever rolling stream, bears all its sons away. They fly forgotten as a dream dies at the opening day. What is time? Something that puzzles the mind and ages the body. Frenchman Blaise Pascal admitted the riddle that time poses. And he stood in awe before God as he contemplated his own personal share in time and wrote in his *Pensées*, When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after. The little space which I fill and even can see, engulfed in the immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant, and which know me not, I am frightened. Who has put me here? By whose order and direction have this place and this time been allotted to me? He knew the answer just as you and I know the answer. God. He was not raising this question out of his doubt. He was raising it in the spirit of awe. Because he wondered about the grand privilege of sharing in time in such a personal way. And he remembered also that eventful moment in time when he surrounded to the claiming touch of God upon his life. And he wrote in his diary about the fire that had come into his life as he considered and prayed to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and Jesus Christ. There is a way to handle time rightly. It is by receiving and obeying the guiding counsel of God. Two mysteries intersect within you and me. Being and Time. And we need divine council for the handling of both. I have only just a minute only 60 seconds in it forced upon me. Can't refuse it. Didn't seek it. Didn't choose it. But it's up to me to use it, give account if I abuse it. And suffer if I lose it. Just a tiny little minute. But eternity is in it. Thou dost guide me with thy counsel and afterward will receive me to glory. There's a third gift about which this text speaks, but one senses this gift only as one reads the entire psalm from which the text emerges. It is the gift of perspective, which steadies the mind while we live. As you begin the psalm you discover, that he arrives at this point, which is verse 24, after a very crucial encounter with life and with an experience which made him wonder about God and about the meaning of things. It begins with an affirmation, something he had learned while hearing the generations of worshipers sing or chant at the temple. But now life has brought into his awareness some problems that he cannot solve, and he wonders did he learn rightly. This is what he had heard and perhaps himself had sung with the thousands of others as they came in their pilgrimage to Jerusalem to praise and honor God. Truly God is good to the upright to those who are pure in heart. That was the affirmation. He states it. And then tells how he had been forced by life to reconsider it. Verse 2. But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled. My steps had well nigh slipped. Because I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. Here is a man who looks out on life and he sees that those who are godly are having a hard time of it. While those who don't profess any godliness, nor do they seek it, seem to be moving through the world with great prosperity. The inequity here disturbs his thought. He goes on to describe these who seem to be the prosperous ones in the world, they have no pangs, their bodies are sound and

sleek, they're not in trouble as other men are, they're not stricken as other men. Pride is their necklace. Violence covers them as a garment. Their eyes swell out with fatness. Their hearts overflow with fatness and follies. They scoff, they speak with malice. Loftily, they threaten oppression. They set their mouths against the heavens and their tongues strut through the earth. The people turn and praise them, finding no fault in them. These are the wicked. Always at ease. Always increasing in riches. So all in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken and chastened every morning. As he thinks this, he just won't say it. He keeps it under wraps. But keeping it under wraps bothers him greatly. You know how it is when you keep inside, something that you want to speak, but because of wisdom, you know it shouldn't be said. Yet it haunts you. So in verse 15, he goes on. If I had said, I will speak thus. In other words, I'll blurt it out! I'll tell the world what I'm thinking. I would've been untrue to the generation of thy children. But when I thought how to wrap my mind around the problem, it seemed to me such a wearisome task. Until I went into the sanctuary of God, then I understood. There are some problems we learn how to deal with them only when we find perspective An angle by which to view the problem, in order to see it holistically in relation to everything else that is. This is what I mean by perspective. This importance of perspective is steadily stressed for those who are seeking skill to become an artist, or a sculptor, or an architect. And they learn how to use lines and angles and colors and a point of approach. Learning how to rightly plan these and achieve these so that realism and depth can result for the viewer. You recall standing back from some portrait or work of art. In order to catch just that angle by which to view and see what the artist intended to convey. And so the psalmist finds that point in life by which to view all other aspects in life with perspective. And now, he's ready to live. This instance of perspective comes to us in a poem by Paul Lawrence Dunbar. A poem which he simply entitles, Life. Two stanzas. The first A crust of bread and a corner to sleep in, A minute to smile. An hour to weep in, A pint of joy to a peck of trouble, And never a laugh but the moans come double; And that is life! So he began, this gifted black bard born to slave parents in Dayton Ohio in 1872. A man who was lamenting what had been a hard and sometimes tragic existence. But here's a man who had, at some point in his life found perspective. And so he continued, adding a spiritual note because of his faith. A crust in a corner that love makes precious. And a smile to warm, and tears to refresh us. And joy seems sweeter when cares come after, And a moan is the finest of foils for laughter; And that is life! Please notice that in the instance of the psalmist, perspective came when he was in the sanctuary. While he was giving attention to the reality of God. While he was pondering the meaning and the rightfulness of the affirmations he was hearing sung, the questions raised by life or rather the questions he'd experienced in life found an answer in the setting where answers are normally expected. What better place than the sanctuary of God, where religious meanings are known and valued, and voiced, and rehearsed, and sung? What better place than the sanctuary where burdened questioning minds are most apt to find heaven's help and counsel? What better place than here to see what is the meaning of here in the light of hereafter? What better place than here by which to see life in the light of eternity? And now the ancient song becomes his song. Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart! Exclamation point! It is out of this that worship emerges. For we praise because we don't sing our way into praise, we sing and praise because God is good to the upright. He sees now that the future does not happen for those who are selfishly alive, but for those who are spiritually aligned. In his novel, Candide, Voltaire raises the problem of human suffering. And he has Candide put this question to Martin, "But what was this world created for?" And Martin replies, "To drive us mad." Right perspective rids us of this kind of protesting complaint against God. It lets us see, however dimly, what we see clearly enough in order to see and know

what we are seeing. That God is working his purpose out. As year succeeds to year, God is working his purpose out. And the time is drawing near. Nearer and nearer draws the time. The time that will surely be when the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea. Do you see life by this perspective? If you do, then the details of your living can be handled with a sense of privilege and purpose. Now the forth gift, with which I close. It is the unspeakable gift of God's presence with us. Thou dost guide me with thy counsel. And afterward, thou wilt receive me to glory. God is best known and understood as a companioning Thou. It makes prayer so meaningful when we know that when we speak out of our spirit to address our creator, we're addressing the ultimate person who regards us out of an ultimate love at the level of our personhood. There are happenings in life during which only the presence of God can sustain us. You'll meet some of those happenings. You have met some of those happenings. The awareness of the companioning presence of God steadies us for whatever life brings our way on our journey. One year ago, on this very Sunday, I was taken to the hospital right from the chapel deathly ill. Week's later, I had an operation in that hospital. It was touch and go. I did not know, nor did the doctor's know. Certainly my wife did not know if I would last to go home. But I am here today. Whole. Healthy. In that hospital room, I experienced the underside of life that dark, unknown aspect of life which people normally experience when they are about to die. I have come through that. And I stand before you with a grateful heart thanking God for a longer share in time. And with a deeper awareness of the meaning of his presence to help me handle those aspects in time which make me wonder whether I will have any time left. Through what have you passed within the past year? What are you facing now? Notice the affirmation of the text, Thou dost guide me with thy counsel. Wherever you are in your befuddlement, in your puzzled state of mind. In your doubt. In your severe questioning. In your deliberation about an illness. As you wrestle with some perplexity. As you raise your prayers. As you drown in your tears. There is the eternal Thou to whom you can address yourself. Know that you are valued as a thou. Thou dost guide me with thy counsel. T.S. Eliot wrote about some of those happenings which you and I lament. And he wrote about them in his poem, Little Gidding. Here is a man with great aptness of mind. Filled with anxiety about the effects of time and aging. And he said these effects of time are usually experienced as gifts reserved for age to set a crown upon our lifetime's effort. But as a believer, he knew that there was more to look forward to in life than just what time does to us. The psalmist understood that long ago. Thou dost guide me with thy counsel and afterward thou wilt receive me. To what do you look forward as you face each day? Given the gift of God's grace, there is for you and for me additional gifts which rightly appreciated can grant us a lifetime of meaning so that on through life's long path, we can chant as we go. From youth to age by day and night. in gladness and in woe, we can rejoice! Rejoice! Rejoice! Give thanks! And sing! So let it be. (organ joyfully plays)