Sermon given by John H. Kemp
Pilgrim Congregational Church
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OUR GOD OUR HELP IN AGES PAST

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Psalm 90:1-6, 12, 17

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Over six hundred hymns - that's prolific! And, for those of us who'd like more variety in our hymns, remember Isaac Watts - outspoken dissident two and a half centuries ago! When it was long Congregational practice to sing by "lining out" psalms - ponderously reading a line, then singing it back, on through an entire psalm - Watts made a radical proposal: "We preach the gospel and pray in Jesus' name, why not have hymns based upon the teachings of Jesus and in the language of our day?" Doesn't that warm the hearts of any of us today who advocate inclusive language, or Jane Huber's contemporary hymns to familiar settings, or hymns with a more modern "beat" or from non-Western traditions - or all of the above?

Sharply criticized by the venerable church leaders who denounced European hymnody as unbiblical, young Isaac Watts wrote his hymns, at first only modestly departing from English tradition, setting or, at most, adapting psalms to singable tunes. In time his hymns reflected popular religious ideas - God's creation, Christmas, the Crucifixion, Resurrection, and other great themes. In his lifetime he would transform church music in the English-speaking world - while, at the same time, serving as popular pastor of a Congregational Church in London for almost fifty years. When he died, England honored him as one of its great writers by burying him in Westminster Abbey. We see his enduring legacy in our own Pilgrim Hymnal with eighteen of his hymns, including some of our most beloved, such as those we're singing this morning.

Of all 600 hymns, possibly still most popular - it's #1 in our hymnal for good reason - is "Our God our help in ages past." Just before Queen Anne's death, England was wracked by turmoil and change. Watts, convinced of both God's timeless nature and sustaining love, turned to the powerful 90th Psalm. Instead of simply giving it a musical setting, he allowed it to inspire words he freely wrote. Over the generations, English Christians have sung it in times of decision or distress. At the beginning of World War II during the terrible blitz, it was all but their national hymn. "Our God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come. Be thou our guard while troubles last, and our eternal home." We Pilgrims often sing it at times of death and remembrance.

The hymn is really about God, us, and time. Of course, we don't have time to talk much about time this morning. In fact just an hour in time from now, I have to be in Bayfront Park to go back a century in time! But Psalm 90 speaks to us of God's time, and of our time which, when we add it up, amounts to what we call our lives. Those lives, the psalmist, honest to confess, often are burdened by trouble and confronted with God's judgment. We might read a sense of despair into our hymn, for compared with the eternity of God's time, our time is but a grain of sand.

But Isaac Watts, far from succumbing to despair, kept faith. In God's time he found a constancy in a world where everything whirls in continual change. We fear being overwhelmed by "momentous issues," which are, literally, "issues of the moment," whether it's separation from a loved one, the crisis of a tough choice, the risk of a new direction in our lives, or a great national or global issue of the moment.

There is also truth in saying a person either has not enough time or too much of it. Fortunately, most of us of reasonably sound mind and body have the former problem. Only should we have no interests or sense of purpose, feel helpless and hopeless, or see no future in life, only awaiting death, does time hang heavily.

Watts, however, knew "our God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come" offered certainty for all seasons of life. His hymn sets our human frailty and transience against God's eternity - a call not for despair, but trust and hope.

In another sense, his words give thanks for those concrete times in our lives when we've felt God's presence. We may talk about time's brevity, but we also use time, not in the "passing of time" sense, but about particular moments of time. Our lives are are made up of personal, unique moments that add up to our life stories, that make us who we are. Think of yours. Some of mine: a big dog jumping on me when I was two, the day my dad died when I was nine, leaving home for college - and forever, my first taste of ministry - with migrant workers in southern Minnesota, my first day as teacher - in far-off Turkey, becoming engaged on a Valentine's Day and the wedding that followed, my first Sunday in the pulpits of the four church's I've served - and the last Sunday in three of them, the arrival of our children in our home - and the joys and struggles of raising them, the death of a close friend in a car accident and the deaths of many friends in my churches, experiencing the Grand Canyon for the first time. The list goes on. So many events in time, the totality of which makes up our lives.

We'll do well to keep Isaac Watts' spirit before us: our God, our help, our hope, a thousand years in your sight are like an evening gone. And time rolls on, our mortal time and eternal time, like an ever-rolling stream. But God remains our presence, our strength in every moment that is ours to have. So we can live with hope, today and in all our time to come!