

Sermon for October 20, 2019
“The Second Letter to Westwood: God’s Word to an Aging Church”

Texts: Isaiah 46:3-5, 9b-11; Exodus 6:28 – 7:7

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Brothers and sisters, in my previous letter we spoke of faithfulness as the foundation for our own lives, as well as for our church, as we move into the future that God envisions for us. As we turn again to the question of faithfulness and what faith looks like as we grow older and face seemingly insurmountable problems, I offer these thoughts...

Above all, we must read Scripture. We do this now, yes. But we must go deeper into the Word of God; engaging the text in fresh ways, paying particular attention to what it has to say about aging, which is a great deal more than we may realize. We will do this during our worship services and in our Christian Education offerings. We read in Scripture that length of life is a blessing from the Lord. However, with age comes the inevitable physical decline and other social problems; challenges which today makes living longer, at times, a mixed blessing.

Yet, scripture also tells us that there is a promise of the renewal of the inner person, day by day; even though the cracked and decaying earthen vessel remains. The challenge is to find those aspects of life which are renewed by the gospel. The restoration of the image of God puts the focus on the restored relationship with God for which humans were created and the consequent renewal of relationship with each other. As we grow older, we struggle to maintain this perspective. Being created in the image of God and loved by God, each individual person is of infinite worth; not necessarily for what we are at any given moment, but because of what we **may** become in God’s purpose. That potential is a fundamental ground for our care of all people.

We are created to be in relationship with God and with one another. This is the root of our spirituality and, by extension, our faithfulness; the way in which we live out our faith. The gospel, though rooted in the past revelation of God in Christ Jesus, is oriented to the future if we believe that the future belongs to God – One who is always making all things new.

When we are young, we learn to live open to the future. As we grow older, there is no reason to close our minds to the future, if we believe that the future belongs to God – who is the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end. This is an important perspective for us to retain as we age.

Our brother Paul reminds us, as I alluded to earlier, that we have this treasure in earthen vessels. He recognized the fragility of the human condition which – at the same time and as a contrast – illuminates the treasure of the transformed life. It shines out more brilliantly from the earthen vessels and the reality of the treasure of the gospel is revealed precisely in human lives. What is amazing is the way frail human lives sustain the hardships of the challenges and transitions of aging with amazing strength and endurance. This is the way the believer participates in the death of Jesus, even as it manifests the power of His risen life.

Therefore, we do not lose heart, Paul goes on to say, for even if our outward person is wasting away, our inner person is being renewed day by day. This has profound implications for how we are to live and how we go about the mission/ministry of the church.

Looking to the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament), we find over 250 references to old age. In one, the psalmist reminds us that, **“The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of the Lord. They flourish in the courts of our God. In old age they still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap, showing that the Lord is upright.”** We are told that the Lord **“...shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age...”** and that even to our old age – to our graying years – God will remain the same. **“Even to your old age I am he; even when you turn gray I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear. I will carry and will save.”**

The Hebrew Scriptures recognize that growing older as inevitable, as part of God’s plan for human life, telling us that **“For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die.”** Far than resenting old age, the Old Testament sees length of days and years of life as a sign of righteousness, of God’s blessing, and is, therefore, highly desirable. Among the proverbs is the reminder that **“Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life.”**

The image of an older person as a vessel full of years, having fulfilled its capacity and purpose, can be particularly helpful in coming to terms with aging and perhaps in making certain difficult end-of-life health care decisions. Still despite its basically positive valuation, the many losses associated with growing older, especially the decline of physical vitality, are honestly and openly acknowledged.

The Old Testament contains numerous stories where older people are central characters in the story and those through whom God acts. These stories are, most likely, very familiar and part of our faith formation. We read in Genesis that father Abraham was seventy-five when first called by God. Later at their respective ages of 100 and 99, Abraham and Sarah were able to conceive a son – the first of a new nation.

Consider, in the Book of Exodus that Moses, prophet and giver of the Law, was 80 and his brother Aaron 83 when they first appeared before pharaoh. Abraham and Moses both hear and respond to God’s call, beginning their journeys as older men, to whom God speaks differently. Abraham hears God tell him to go forth. Moses hears God calling his name.

In beginning a spiritual journey at an older age, both Abraham and Moses have a great deal of life experience. They have passed through childhood and adolescence. They have worked and married. They have been part of a community and family. Both men hear God’s commanding voice and it is important to understand that being older brings with it a unique ability to explore spirituality.

At the same, and equally important to understand, is that Abraham and Moses are two men who faced many of the challenges of aging, yet largely **remain** faithful to God’s call **throughout** their lives. In responding to God’s call, Abraham embarks on a journey with little more than God’s promise to accompany him. These are difficult decisions, difficult journeys, and difficult transitions for both men.

The resilient faith that Abraham and Moses exhibit in all these transitions can be a great example as we make the difficult transitions that **we** face growing older; whether we are down-sizing – moving from larger homes where we raised our families to smaller homes that require less upkeep – or to retirement facilities. These transitions are difficult even in the best circumstances.

One of Abraham’s challenges, perhaps his greatest, is legacy. How someone will be remembered; whether or not they felt that they have done anything worth remembering; whether they have been able to leave something behind. For most people, this means children.

Abraham is without children, in a time and a place where there was a certain stigma for both men and women attached to being childless. It would not be a stretch to imagine that Abraham was very aware of this, perhaps even anxious, as his attempt to fulfill God’s promise himself by having a son by Hagar, Ishmael, would seem to prove.

With no children – especially no sons – Abraham had no one onto whom he would pass on the family name; no lasting legacy. God would certainly change that and this would be reflected in the changing of the name Abram “exalted father,” to Abraham “father of a multitude.”

Moses confronts the challenge inherent in finding and accepting a new identity and in that new identity, finds new meaning and a renewed sense of self-worth.

In the New Testament, we find the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Like Abraham and Sarah, they become parents in their old age, to John the Baptist. We have heard the stories of Simeon, described as righteous and devout, and Anna, a prophet, who worshipped in the temple night and day. Both were blessed in their old age to literally see the fulfillment of God’s promise of salvation, spoken through the prophet Isaiah.

Because of their faithfulness, they were able to lay their eyes on the Christ-child, brought to the Temple. These stories remind us of the worth, in God’s eyes, of the individual, regardless of age. More importantly, they remind us that there is no point in our lives – no age – where God cannot **use** us; where God does not **call** us. While this may sound daunting as we grow older, as energy wains and skills diminish; the truth is that if we trust in God, there is very little that we cannot accomplish. Indeed, as our Lord Jesus said, “**...with God all things are possible.**”

Having gone deeper into Scripture, reacquainting ourselves with what it has to say about aging, we must bring this renewed understanding, these stories of faithfulness in old age, to bear on our **own** stories, as we seek to respond to the changes/challenges we face in a similarly faithful manner. In other words, we must see our own stories as part of the on-going biblical story; as part of the new thing that God is doing. We must, as Scripture reminds us, “**...remember the days of old, consider the years long past. Ask your father, and he will inform you, your elders, and they will tell you.**”

Undeniably, as each of us grows older, the aging process brings many changes. That is no secret. But despite the physical and cognitive challenges, there are also tremendous opportunities in our later years, to enrich our lives and sharpen our awareness of God’s

presence. Spirituality often becomes more important to us as we reach out to God and strive to deepen our relationship with the Creator.

One of the well-known metaphors used to describe the aging process is seasons of life. The Teacher in Ecclesiastes, as mentioned earlier, reminds that **“For everything there is a season...”** And as it is throughout Creation, each season of life offers its own special blessings from the Creator. In the Spring, we enjoy the newness of life, opportunities to learn and grow, from childhood into early adulthood. In the Summer of life, we take on new responsibilities: work, marriage and family. In the Fall, the days grow shorter, colors become more vibrant and it is a time to enjoy the fruits of our labors and prepare for the coming winter.

In Winter, however, the nights are longer, darker, colder and our energy diminishes. The pace of life slows and we have more time for family, friends, as well as for new opportunities for learning; more time for reflection and review. As winter deepens, the strength we knew in previous seasons decreases. We often need assistance doing what we once took for granted. In this season, many need more care and often struggle with loneliness and isolation.

There is no shame in this.

Winter can also be a season of peaceful contentment and reflection; an opportunity to be transformed by the renewal of our minds and spirits; to cultivate the inner life and develop a more reflective spirituality.

We look back over our lives. We consider the imminence of death and dying and we become more acutely aware of the promise of the Resurrection. Though some trepidation exists, we prepare for the new life to come, at last to truly experience God’s presence, knowing fully as we are known. This spiritual quest is an important part of our final season of life. However, too many find themselves wandering through a spiritual wasteland. A most excellent way of avoiding this is to discover the meaning of our lives.

We are helped in doing so by reviewing our lives and by remembering our story; connecting with God’s story as it unfolds in the pages of Scripture. We are helped also by listening to one another’s stories. When we remember our stories together, the acts of listening and telling help us move beyond the normal boundaries we impose on ourselves. We gain deeper insight into the ways of God’s grace in other people **and** in ourselves.

Brothers and sisters, there is still much more that I wish to share with you, but I must end here. I will write again as soon as I can.

My love be with you all in Christ Jesus.

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.