

Psalm 71:1-6, 9
Titus 2:1-8

You're Only Old Once
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham
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Psalm 71 is often called "An Old Person's Prayer" . . . the song of an aged musician who has sung God's praises for many years . . . who gives thanks for God's faithfulness through all of life . . . and who prays:

*"Do not cast me off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength is spent ...
O God, from my youth Thou hast taught me, and I still proclaim Thy wondrous deeds.
So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me,
till I proclaim Thy might to all the generations to come."
(Psalm 71: 9, 17-18)*

I don't know who first said it, but I hope you join me in affirming: "I'm going to live until I die, then I'm going to live forever." Jerry Abbott recently told me about reading what he calls "one of his trashy spy stories". In it the question was posed: "If you are really a Believer, why aren't you perfect now? The author's answer was that "believing is a PROCESS ... not just a NEW PAINT JOB!"

The last hour of the Today Show features Kathie Lee and Hoda. In a recent interview Kathie Lee Gifford tells about asking Paul Newman near the end of his life: "Paul, I haven't seen you in so long. How are you?" Gifford remembers that Newman answered: "I'm 80 years old. I have a pulse." Kathie Lee said that has become her mantra: "If you have a pulse, you have a purpose." She adds: "Every morning, before I get out of bed now, I take my pulse. If I have one, that means that God's not finished with me yet. I still have work to do on this planet." (1)

Sometimes the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes is regarded with skepticism, some feeling it's too pessimistic. Ecclesiastes has a second title. It is also known as "The Preacher", and "The Preacher" closes with an extended meditation on the discomforts of aging. In chapter 12:1-7 "The Preacher" describes what happens with wide-eyed honesty. "Like an old house, human beings get run down – strong backs are bent, bright eyes are dim, we begin to be afraid of falling down or of stumbling on pathways, our hair turns white, we shuffle our feet along ..." (2) Yet, It is equally true that those of us in our latter years still have wisdom and values to share with the entire community.

Even the apostle Paul acknowledges that "our outer natures are wasting away..." (2 Corinthians 4:16) You know you're getting old when almost everything hurts, and what doesn't hurt doesn't work anymore." You know you're getting old when it feels like the morning after and you didn't go anywhere the night before.(3) What's so good about getting old, since it's both inevitable and irreversible?

Luke tells us that Jesus, as a child, increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and others. (Luke 2:33) Even though our physical growth may be over ... even if we older adults are physically declining faster than we want because of abuse and disuse, the other areas (mental, spiritual and social) are still capable of increasing and improving throughout the advancing years ... barring any kind of disease or accident.

We don't think of children as aging. We say that they're growing or they're developing. As they move into their teens and early adulthood, we continue to notice their growth and development. At no age, at no midpoint in life, should we choose to think folks are declining.(4) Many older adults, myself included, read more now than ever before. Many take advantage of opportunities for travel and

enjoyment of the arts . . . for classes and discussions. I have lunch weekly with my retired pastor friends in Sylacauga, where we're always sharing books we've read, discussing things we've either learned or have questions about. (By the way, every Thursday at noon we solve all the world's problems.)

Part of Robert Browning's poem, Rabbi Ben Ezra, begins:

Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made ...

But are you familiar with the next lines? Listen:

Our times are in His hand Who saith, 'A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid!'(5)

So, remember verse 4 from Isaiah 46: "... even to your old age I am (God), and (even) to (your) gray hairs I will carry you. I have made (you), and I will bear (you); I will carry (you) and (will deliver you)."

Not long ago I was watching Coast Guard Alaska on the Weather Channel. Usually it is about rescues at sea or transporting those injured or ill. On this episode a man was retiring after twenty-plus years in the Coast Guard. A young seaman read "The Watch". May I quote a couple of lines:

While some of us lay about our bunks at night: This sailor stood the watch.
... even before many of us were born: This sailor stood the watch.
For many years, he stood the watch, so that our countrymen and we could sleep.
Soundly, in safety, knowing that a sailor would stand the watch.
Today we are here to say the watch stands relieved:
relieved by those he has led, guided and trained.
Sailor, you sir stand relieved. We have the watch.(6)

That stirred my thinking. On one level those of us older believers are "standing the watch," so to speak. Only we haven't signed up for a term of service, from which we will retire. In the words of the psalmist "to old age and gray hairs" we are asking God not to forsake us as we "proclaim God's might to all generations to come." On the other level those of you of the next generations, who are being "led, guided, and trained" - you are approaching the moment when you will tell us that "the watch stands relieved" ... when you say, "Beloved, we have the watch."

Between the two levels picture the many doors that serve as entrances and exits. Think of these doors opening and closing. From the nursery to the mortuary, doors play an important part in life. What a story of the doors in our lives have to tell!

A magazine editor was working at home and tells how he and his five year old daughter, Judy, had begun to irritate each other. It seems Judy had a little nurse's kit with the stethoscope and the nurse's hat and the little bag. Annoyed with the way things were going at home, Judy put on her nurse's outfit and announced that she was going next door to take care of her friend's doll that was very sick. Judy left, but as she left, she slammed the door. Annoyed, her father called her back: "You march right back in here little lady and close that door properly." Without saying a word, Judy returned, closed the door quietly and left. An hour or so later, he noticed that Judy was back home, and he said, "Hi Judy, how's

Patsy's baby doll?" Judy looked up at him and said, "She died." And her father asked, "How come she died?" Looking her father eye-to-eye, Judy answered, "She died while I was closing that darn door." (7)

A fascinating thing: doors have two sides. Doors can shut you in and embrace you, as with the love and warmth of a home ... or doors can shut you out and alienate you ... making you an outcast.

For instance, think about the **door of memory**. This door opens silently, as if on noiseless hinges ... and frequently it opens when least expected. Sometimes we do our best to barricade this door so that it will not open, will not reveal what we don't want to remember. Still it opens. For all of our lack of control over this door, it can be a strong door of comfort and hope. A lady once told me, "I've nothing left now but my memories. But," she added with a twinkle in her eyes, "they're good memories."

The psalmist says: "I remember the days of old ... I meditate on what Thy hands hath wrought." (Psalm 143:5) While memories can bring a crisis of emotions, most of the time memories are part of the process of reflection and learning, of analytical thought and reasoning. Memories help us "take stock" of who we are and where we are. There are cherished memories that inspire us, uplift and motivate us.

At the first of this year a young friend's 87 year old mother died. At the time she thanked those of us who traveled to Aberdeen, MS, for the funeral. Just the other day she emailed another thank you ... (in her words) "to all the wonderful, inconvenienced people who had never even met my mother, but came for us. It meant the world to me, but more than that it taught my children something about showing up. They, too, marveled that most of the people in attendance weren't friends of my 87 year old mother ... they were friends of ours." She concluded: "It's one of those life lessons that I couldn't have taught them by myself." While you wait to make a grand, heroic gesture that might be remembered, why not stick to the small inconveniences that let you share in life's inevitable occasional calamity? As one father kept reminding his children: "You can't come in without going out, kids. Always go to the (visitation or) funeral."(8) Remember that good memories for tomorrow depend upon our use of today.

Another door is the **door of temptation**. We never seem to have much trouble finding it ... at any age. However, you'll discover, as you age, that you don't become more moral as you grow older --- you just choose your sins more carefully. It is also true that the older we get, we attend more funerals ... consequently, we find that the peer pressure around us is less and less.

The door of temptation can be a most attractive door on the outside, but you never see how shoddy it really is until you want to leave. The writers of both the Old Testament book of Genesis and the New Testament book of 1 Peter knew about this door. They warning is that "sin is couching at this door," meaning that it is like a lion, always waiting to spring upon us. (Genesis 4:7 and 1 Peter 5:8)

There's no question as to what waits behind the door of temptation. Only you can decide whether or not you'll open it and go through. Just remember that a lot of happiness and peace in your latter years will depend upon the decisions you make about this door today.

There is also the **door of tomorrow**. It's the door of hope ... the door of another chance ... the door of thrilling opportunities. Sunlight streams through it as if a new dawn were breaking. Nevertheless, for some, this door has been so neglected that almost no light comes through. It's so easy to miss this door ... all we have to do is never to use it.

A note of extreme caution: sometimes, we spend so much time just looking through the door of tomorrow that the door of death opens first. At whatever age, the door of tomorrow is there. It may

need to be washed, and it certainly needs to be used, but it is there. At whatever age we need to have a confidence in tomorrow. Remind yourself every day that God isn't finished with you yet.

No matter how old you are, you haven't reached your peak. After all, as the writer of Hebrews (11:12) points out: if God can take a one-hundred year old man (Abraham), and him as good as dead, and make him the father (not just of Isaac) but the father of descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore --- then, watch what God can do with you! But, while it's one thing to see the door of tomorrow, even more important is to step through, and with God's help to find achievement beyond anything we could have believed ... to face the future with an abiding faith in God. There are some wonderful, undreamed-of potentials in your life and mine.

Proverbs 20:29 tells us that "the glory of youth is their strength, but the beauty of the aged is their gray hair." Some 25 years ago, Carlotta Hunter rejected the idea that recreation was just for the young. So, she wrote a recreation book for older adults entitled, "Gray Hair And I Don't Care."

Willa Lowry is known in Memphis as "The Cap Lady". She is a member of the church I served for 18 years. In 1989, at the age of 73, she began a knitting ministry. She gathered up unwanted yarn and found individuals and groups within churches and retirement homes that would knit or crochet caps. While some would lap robes and booties, but the real need was for caps for the homeless. As of January 1st this year, over 75,000 caps have been distributed to the homeless in Memphis. By the way Willa is 97 and still knitting: when I talked with her in July, Willa said she had done 75 caps since February.

We older adults have the time and the energy to see about those whom busy people neglect. We can contribute wisely of our time and resources to the life of the church. If nothing else, we can offer our prayers. Every Tuesday at 11:30 a group of 8-10 of us meets in the Church Library to pray for the needs of this congregation, community, and nation. The average age of our Tuesday Prayer group is 81. Life should end in hope and joy as we keep believing in God and keep doing for others as long as we have breath, whether it be offering a kind word or just saying a prayer.(9)

The Psalmist was right in his Prayer for Old Age: "Do not cast me off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength is spent ... O God, from my youth Thou hast taught me, and I still proclaim Thy wondrous deeds. So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, till I proclaim Thy might to all the generations to come."

Just a moment ago I made a reference to Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 4:16, but I only gave you the first half of that verse: "Though our outer nature is wasting away..." The entire verse says: "So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day."

There are plenty of other doors that we could talk about: yes, there are doors of frustration, of anger, suffering ... but there are also doors of humor, of gratitude, of friendship, and of love, just to name a few. Remember that each of these doors has two sides and that you get to choose which side you will stand on ... either with the door open in front of you or the door closed behind you.

How to grow old: our choice is to either do it gracefully ... or do it disgracefully. Like the psalmist, we all come to the point of realizing just where we are in life. God calls us to live to the fullest as long as we live ... to witness to our faith ... and to let our hair turn gray gracefully.(10)

Dylan Thomas suggests: "Do not go gentle into that good night, old age should burn and rave at close of day ..." (11) But instead of Dylan's "rage, rage against the dying light," our hope should be this:

Let not the fear of aging
Consume our future days
Give us the daily courage, Lord,
To serve in untried ways.

Keep us from weak complaining,
Of years that now are gone,
May insights gained each passing year
Be light to lead us on. (12)

- (1) AARP Magazine, June/July, 2013, p. 65.
- (2) Carl, Jr., William J. (ed), Growing Gracefully (Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), David Buttrick, "Before the Stars Go Dark," page 44.
- (3) Carl, op cit., William J. Carl III, "What's So Good About Getting Old?" p. 14.
- (4) Carl, op cit., William J. Carl, Jr., "Graying Gracefully to God's Glory", p. 139, 137
- (5) Browning, Robert, Rabbi Ben Ezra, lines 1-6.
- (6) Anonymous, The Watch, United States Coast Guard Retirement Ceremony.
- (7) Peelor, Harry N., Director of Outreach Ministries, Guidepost Associates, 1975-1977.
- (8) Sullivan, Deidre, "This I Believe," 2005 NPR.
- (9) Carl, op cit., William J. Carl III, p. 18, 17.
- (10) Carl, op cit., William J. Carl, Jr., p. 140.
- (11) Thomas, Dylan, "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," 1951.
- (12) Lanier, H. Glen, 10 New Hymns on Aging and the Later Years (Ft. Worth, TX, Hymn Society of America, 1976), no. 4.