

## **Old Age in the Old Testament**

**Gen. 21:1-7, Ps. 92:12-15 by Patty Friesen (Jan.16/17)**

I'd like to begin with Genesis 11:10-26, in which we have a delightful genealogy of the aged so bear with me in this reading... These are old parents but if you notice, they decrease in age from 500 years to 119 years old. God is putting an age limit on humans but Abraham's dad still had him when he was 70 and Abraham was called to leave his homeland at age 75. He had Ishmael at age 85 and was circumcised at age 99 and finally at age 100, Isaac, the promised son was born.

Age is a major theme in the Old Testament and God uses older people time and time again to mentor the next generations: Abraham and Isaac, Eli and Samuel, Naomi and Ruth. The psalms are clear that God has purposes for us through our entire lives and even as we age, God isn't finished with us yet. There is no such thing as retirement in the Old Testament.

In the New Testament as well introduces the faithful aged through Zechariah and Elizabeth who birth John the Baptist in their old age. Then there is Simeon in the temple, who was aged and called righteous. Not pious but just and hopeful, waiting for the consolation of Israel. Here is an older man sensitive to the Spirit's leading. Here is an older saint who envisages the global expansion of the kingdom of God beyond Israel to the whole world. And there is Anna in the temple, an 84-year-old widow who had devoted herself to prayer. She was the first evangelist since she shared the good news of Jesus with others. Is there something about a long obedience to the Spirit that makes one especially open to the revelation of God in senior years?

Jesus' mother Mary was present with the disciples at Pentecost and even the disciple Peter would survive to an age when he would be carried about and someone else would lead him but he was faithful to the end. John, the beloved disciple, after surviving exile on the island of Patmos spent his senior years in Ephesus, according to church tradition. And the apostle Paul, writing to the slave owner Philemon, declares that he is now an old man but is still pursuing the Kingdom of God, saying, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race. I have kept the faith." Even in the New Testament, aging means increased sensitivity to the Spirit of God and valuable leadership in the early church.

Aging brings the most fruitful and most reflective and perhaps the most valuable of our stages of life. The only mention of retirement in the Bible is in Numbers 8:23-25 when "The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: This applies to the Levites: from twenty-five years old and upward they shall begin to do duty in the service of the tent of meeting; and from the age of fifty years they shall retire from the duty of the service and serve no more." This obscure passage suggests that Levites retire from ministry at age 50, which I wonder about but otherwise there is no retirement plan in the Bible.

Retirement is a timely topic for us as we have had 11 people retire in this last year and a half – that's more than 10% of our congregation has now entered a new stage of life. Retirement can be a mixed bag. For some it is an anticipated, "can't wait for retirement," and for others retirement is forced through health or work circumstances. Whether one is ready for retirement or not, it is a huge life change. One married woman described her husband's retirement as: "twice as much husband, half as much money."

Retirement is a time of fruit basket upset and can cause a bit of a crisis upon reflection. What have I contributed to the world through my work? Have I let my work define who I am? What I have also contributed to my family and community outside of work? What is most important in my life? The questions raised by this fruit basket upset and be fruitful and can guide what we do for the rest of our lives.

Retirement can help us grow in the awareness of our past work and relationships and turn what's left of our lives over to God's purposes. It might be at this stage that we really get to do what we were made for and called to do, where we find new purpose and meaning in serving others and mentoring the next generations. How do we turn aging into sage-ing – turn our life's experience into a guide and help for others?

Perhaps the best definition of spirituality comes from South American liberation theologian, Segundo Galilea: All spirituality springs from this fundamental fact of a God who loved us first. If Christian spirituality is, before all else, an initiative by and a gift from God who loved us and seeks us, spirituality is then our recognition and response, with all that entails, to this love of God that desires to humanize and sanctify us. This path of spirituality is a process, concrete but never finished, by which we identify ourselves with God's plan for creation. Because this plan is essentially the Kingdom of God and its justice, spirituality is identification with the will of God for bringing this Kingdom to us and others.

A spirituality of aging calls for courage in facing our own changes and the changes in the world around us. As we age we experience progressive losses through the death of our parents, friends, and the loss of our work and health. These losses force us to reflect and grow and offer us one of the richest periods of our lives. As Richard Rohr

says, basically the first half of life is writing the text of our lives and the second half is writing the commentary on that text. Such introspection is necessary to unpack all that life has given us and taken from us. Aging is a spiritual journey that humanizes us and leads us to cooperate with the God who loves us and wants to forgive us and use us every day.

Aging is hard work, not for the faint of heart as is often said but Ralph Waldo Emerson says the measure of our success is to have laughed often and much, to have won the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children, to have earned the appreciation of honest critics and endured the betrayal of false friends, to have appreciated beauty and found the best in others and to have left the world a bit better.

We need our elders to show us the way in the aging/retirement process. Some of us are not far behind. Our elders are our prophets and guides. This is important to remember as we seek to call up the next generation of leaders on our church committees and council. We need the next generation with their vision and energy but we desperately need the history, tried and true experience of our elders to ground us and give us a foundation for all the changes the church will face in the future. A strong church board has a balance of women and men, experienced and new members.

We need our elders to guide us in our marriages, careers and at church. We need our elders to help guide our children also at church, to ask them how's school and life and to pray for us as families. We need our elders to remind us of the causes for justice that they worked for and how that work continues today. We need our elders.

I'll close with the Prayer of An Aging Elder.

### Prayer of An Aging Elder

Lord, though knowest better than myself that I am growing older and will soon be old. Keep me from becoming too talkative and especially from the unfortunate habit of thinking that I must say something on every subject and at every opportunity.

Release me from the idea that I must straighten out other people's affairs. With my immense treasure of experience and wisdom, it seems a pity not to let everybody partake of it. But thou knowest, Lord, that in the end I will need a few friends.

Keep me from the recital of endless details; give me wings to get to the point.

Grant me the patience to listen to the complaints of others; help me to endure them with charity. But seal my lips on my own aches and pains - they increase with the increasing years and my inclination to recount them is also increasing.

I will not ask thee for improved memory, only for a little more humility and less self-assurance when my own memory doesn't agree with that of others. Teach me the glorious lesson that occasionally I may be wrong.

Keep me reasonably gentle. I do not have the ambition to become a saint - it is so hard to live with some of them - but a harsh old person is one of the devil's masterpieces.

Make me sympathetic without being sentimental, helpful but not bossy. Let me discover merits where I had not expected them, and talents in people whom I had not thought to possess any. And Lord, give me the grace to tell them so. Amen.