

Grow Old Along With Me

First Congregational Church Branford

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Rev. Suzanne Personette

In the Children's Message, a mention of Proverbs 16:30 which says that gray hair is a crown of glory.

King David wrote 73 of the 149 psalms in the bible. He may have written Psalm 71. If not, commentators believe it was written by a poet or songwriter who worked in the Temple Guild. It was written 1000 years before Christ, in the timeframe when David was alive. The psalm depicts someone who may have grown old, but clearly expected new things...

In you, O Lord, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame. In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me. Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress. Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel. For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth. Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is continually of you. I have been like a portent to many, but you are my strong refuge. My mouth is filled with your praise, and with your glory all day long. Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength is spent. O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds. So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to all the generations to come.

I invite you to turn to your neighbor, or find a neighbor, and take turns saying: *grow old along with me, the best is yet to be....* Okay... now, let that sink in... I hope it's a good feeling.

Those probably aren't easy words for those who have recently lost a spouse. Maybe you got to grow old together, maybe you didn't; maybe it's too difficult to think that the best is yet to be. I'm just glad you're here. I'm just glad you're here. And, if you're under 40, this could be a real snoozefest, so I apologize for that, too!

I'm talking about growing older today. I know that some of you could be up here today giving this sermon! What could I possibly have right at the young age of almost 60? (hahahahaha) I do appeal to your greater wisdom, and to your greater forgiveness!

I so much enjoy hearing from older people about their experience of God. They are so faithful. This church was built on the faithfulness of our older

generation. We are grateful to you. God has been your rock and your fortress. Your mouth is filled with God's praise, and with his glory all day long. Thank you.

On Thursday around 1pm, I was coming in from a walk and a man in his early 80's was going up the stairs to Walker Chapel. I assumed he was going to ask Missy something. But, he turned to me and said he was going into the chapel to say a little prayer, if that was all right... George had moved nearby in May, and on his daily walk he likes to go in there. Isn't it great that John leaves the door propped open?! Aren't you grateful to be able to provide a place for George, and others who meander in? (We should keep it propped open through the fall and winter and get our reception desk volunteers parkas to wear!) Just the best.

What does our psalmist say about age?... Have you noticed that the psalmists don't hold back what they feel?! This one prays: "Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength is spent." Do not forget about me! I'm not invisible. I still have gifts! Many of my gifts are at their most acute. You can still use me! Remember that old guy, Abraham, what all you did with him.

But, it's also this, isn't it?: I still need to know that you're with me... holding me... inviting me ever closer into your heart... My Lord, My God... who I need maybe now more than ever... with my aching back, arthritic knees... I love you... and I just need to know that you still love me...

There's a booklet called, "So we're getting older". It says, next to dying, the recognition that we are aging is the most profound shock of our lifetime. For one, we're called upon to adjust to some degree of decline in physical vigor, as well as a change in our physical characteristics. Sometimes people lament about all the sagging! We can laugh about it - *what else can we do* - unless we opt for plastic surgery! It's certainly a shock to our eyes, a shock to how we think of ourselves, and it can effect our self-esteem. And, it's a shock that our body no longer does what it once did... You probably can't shoot hoops like you did at 25... You may have trouble walking up a hill that you used to run up...

For me, the last several years have been *the hide and go seek* game! I can't find my glasses, keys, or phone. God forbid you ever put something down because you will go on a wild goose chase to find it! On Wednesday, maybe because of this sermon, when I had an episode with my glasses, instead of feeling alarmed by what I did, I just started singing, *grow old with me, the best is yet to be!* - and I smiled. It made me feel better to nurture some acceptance, instead of being worried about my mind. God bless us, church, when we laugh! Yesterday morning at home I went downstairs 3 times to get something because each time I went down I did something else first and then I'd go back up and remember what I'd gone down to get! Three times this happened. The fourth time I was bound and determined

not to get stopped by something I saw that needed attending to! Just get the thing!!! I guess I'm earning my crown!

We have to accept the fact that if we live, we are going to grow old... If gratitude is the beginning of wisdom, I think there's something to be said for being able to accept aging and to feel grateful for what we do have, instead of mourning over what we no longer have. It takes a lot of maturity. It takes faith in God. It takes church. It takes friends. It takes community. It takes a healthy dose of humor.

Interesting note, in an effort to try to explain why FCC dwells upon the past, a beloved member in their 70's shared with me, *I'm afraid nostalgia goes with being elderly, try as we may to keep focused ahead.* That has helped me feel more compassion for those who aren't quite ready to let go of yesteryear, when it felt like the church had reached the Promised Land.

But... things don't *ever* go back to how they were. But, maybe... things can turn out better than they were! Amen?! Church, we need to recognize that the Promised Land is here and now! Yes, it's just wonderful you had beloved ministers in your past that encouraged certain programs and ministries. It's really, really great you have a 375 year old history. But, I promise you the Promised Land is here and now, right here today, this moment, with one another; and, that the next 375 years are going to be better than the last! Your gorgeous, beloved church croons, *grow old along with me, the best is yet to be.* So many wonderful and hopeful things are happening around here, one of them being the governance recommendations for how FCCB can more easily operate.

That booklet on aging says, "be flexible - rigidity is about becoming set in our ways, falling into ruts, saying we can't change. We can foster mental flexibility to be open to new ideas, new relationships and activities." It made me think how there are things we can't change in life, but we *can* let them change us...

I really appreciate how the Talmud, the sacred writings of orthodox Judaism, affirms that it's critical to recognize that each chapter of our life has its place and something to offer. At 40, a person has understanding, at 50, one gives counsel, and at 80, one has special strength. Pulitzer Prize poet Carl Sandburg wrote Remembrance Rock at 70, Benjamin Franklin invented bifocals when he was 78, Sophocles wrote Oedipus Rex at 75. At 100, Grandma Moses was still painting. At 94 Bertrand Russell led international peace drives. At 90, Picasso was producing drawings and engravings. At 89, Mary Baker Eddy was directing the Christian Science Church. At 89, Arthur Rubinstein gave one of his greatest recitals in New York City's Carnegie Hall, and on and on. Lord, do not cast me off in the time of old age!

They say people in nursing homes fare better when they continue to think about others; when they send notes - even to the person down the hall, and to the staff, doing small acts of kindness, rather than focusing upon their own illness and grief. I once told a woman of 96 who was no longer feeling useful, but who liked to pray for others and the world, that that is more than enough! There are religious communities where that's all they do. Prayer is useful! Prayer changes things!

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, author of the popular book, Kitchen Table Wisdom, said about aging: "Because my mom had a heart condition, I was afraid she'd have a heart attack at the news of her brother's death. That's when she told me the most interesting thing: 'Rachel, I couldn't have dealt with this when I was 40. But now that I'm 80, I'm strong enough. The only way that I am weak is in my body. It takes a lifetime of experience to learn to deal with trauma.' Remen says, at 67 I can deal with things that would have completely devastated me at 33.

And, journalist Linda Ellerbee writes that while she can feel invisible sometimes around those who aren't ready yet to look beyond the face and body, she says, "My lips are thinner, but my smile is still wide, and nothing is as beautiful as joy in an old face. Look at my eyes. They've seen birth, death, failure, loss, success, dreams denied and dreams that came true, and sunrises. So many sunrises. I am more myself and more at home in myself today than I was at 20 or even 50. You can see this in my eyes - the knowledge that vitality, wisdom, and humor survives when superficial beauty fades. And, besides, so what if you don't see me. I see you."...

This makes me realize the truth of the poet's words that yes, it's the *last* of life for which the first is made... And, you get your crown!

Lastly, most importantly - God affirms for you to grow old with *him*, the best is yet to be:

Grow old with me
And oh the best it could be
And our hands they might age
And our bodies will change
But we'll still be the same
As we are
Make me hurt, make me laugh
Make me feel like I'm real
Grow old *with me*.
Amen.

