

“The Autumn of Life”

Psalm 71

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Of all the seasons, there is none I love MORE than the fall. With the advent of autumn comes football and the World Series; there’s Halloween and Thanksgiving along with all the preparations that lead up to Christmas. Of course, THIS autumn is going to be considerably different in light of the on-going pandemic which has turned ALL our lives upside down. We now live with the reality of restrictions and quotas, but they’re necessary if we’re ever going to defeat this world-wide killer.

Some years ago, Chuck Swindoll--the popular Christian speaker and writer--wrote a book of devotions he entitled *Growing Strong in the Seasons of Life*. In it, he points out that as each of the four seasons offers its own distinctive sights and sounds, its smells and feelings, they no less offer us insights into the SEASONS OF LIFE and especially our relationship to God. For instance, he sees winter as a season of quiet reverence which is then followed by spring, a season of refreshing renewal. Then comes summer, a season of enjoyable and much-needed rest and that must eventually give way to autumn. Autumn is Swindoll’s favorite season too. It is in the fall that the foliage changes along with the weather, and birds make their annual journey southward. Squirrels finish storing their nuts, salmon start their swim back to their spawning grounds, and bears prepare for a long hibernation. For human beings, he views it as a season of preparing for our OWN kind of hibernation. In what is often referred to as the “autumn of our lives,” it becomes a time for serious self-reflection. We pause to assess what it is we’ve accomplished with our lives, whether our time on earth has been meaningful and productive, or not. In light of declining physical powers and diminishing financial resources, we find ourselves forced to re-evaluate former goals and devise new ones. However, to be in the “autumn” of one’s life is not necessarily the same as being a senior citizen. I know people in their 50’s and 40’s and even 30’s who are tired, who are chronically depressed, who labor from one day to the next lonely and afraid. They exhibit all the symptoms of being in “the autumn of their years.”

What makes this sermon so personal for ME is that I now find MYSELF entering that very stage- the autumn of life. And I’ve learned that that day arrives much faster than any of us realize. I am now semi-retired from the ministry which doesn’t mean I’m no longer employed as a minister, only that my part-time work with the Deer Creek and Pleasant Unity churches now gives me more time to accomplish some of those things I couldn’t do when I was employed full-time. My wife and I are also both enrolled in Medicare and collecting our pensions with the Presbyterian Church, and though Rose is now collecting Social Security, I’m choosing to wait another couple of years before I collect mine at the age of 70 and a half. The point is that when I was a young man, those three words--“retirement,” “Social Security,” and “Medicare”—seemed a life-time away; those were programs reserved for “old” people. But now I suddenly find myself having to deal with such “OLD” matters, MYSELF.

I used to pride myself on my good health and brag how I went for more than thirty years without having to consult a doctor. However, in the four years since I moved back to Pennsylvania, I’ve suddenly developed a host of sinus and pulmonary problems. As a result, I’ve lost my sense of smell and always have to keep handy one of those small inhalers you see

advertised on TV for COPD in order to help myself breathe. The truth is that while my HEAD insists I can still do things I once did in my 20's and 30's, my BODY tells me OTHERWISE. It now never stops reminding me that NOBODY escapes the aging process and all the limitations that come with it.

But I'm not ALONE in having to face the inevitable- we ALL have to confront the autumn of our lives one day. Having grown up in New Jersey, you can then understand my love and appreciation for "Old Blue-Eyes," Frank Sinatra- ANOTHER New Jersey native. Well one of my favorite Sinatra songs is called "The September of My Years," a song which might NOT have been one of my favorites twenty or thirty YEARS ago but has suddenly found new meaning for me AS I'VE GROWN OLDER. It's a song of wistful remembrance that begins, "One day you turn around and it's summer. The next day you turn around and it's fall. And the winters and the springs of a lifetime- whatever happened to them all?" Well, every one of us will at one time or another find ourselves waking up to that SAME bitter question, "Whatever happened to the seasons of my life? Where did all the years go?" With our most productive days now behind us and no way to make them up, we now realize how much of our lives we've squandered and that had we been wiser, we could have achieved so much more with our time. Such thoughts come NATURALLY to us in the autumn of our lives.

Now don't get me wrong, I have no fear of having entered the ranks of now being a "senior citizen"- I'm only too happy to take advantage of those specials offered to persons "65 and up" whether it's the discount one receives at family restaurants or the reduced price one pays at the local movie theatre. I must say that growing older certainly has its privileges and I plan to take full advantage of them! However, FOR MANY, the autumn of life is NOT a happy time. Over the years, I've heard the same complaints from both church members and non-church members ALIKE that old age has been a real struggle and they know it's only going to get worse with each advancing year. Watching long-time friends and family members pass away before themselves, they realize how there's now fewer persons to share their ancient memories with. They're tired of the constant trips to the doctor's office, often having to see two or three different specialists on a regular basis. They've watched their retirement income shrink with interest rates being practically invisible. They been told that older people are at greater risk of catching the coronavirus and also have a higher probability of dying from it once they DO. If they've been fortunate enough to eventually reach their mid-eighties, they then face a fifty-fifty chance of developing Alzheimer's disease or are ALREADY trapped in the latter stages of it. Add to that the increasing sense of powerlessness and loss of freedom many of them feel when they're no longer able to make the simplest decisions for themselves, as well as the humiliation at having lost much of the dignity and respect they once commanded. These are just SOME of the fears people contend with as they age throughout their lives.

Before she passed away at the ripe old age of 94, Nancy Reagan was interviewed on "60 Minutes" where she was asked to reflect about her husband's battle with Alzheimer's, the same disease that claimed my mother fifteen years ago. With great honesty, she opined, "The golden years are when you can sit back, hopefully, and exchange memories, and that's the worst part about this disease: there's nobody to exchange memories with...and we had a lot of memories." She admitted that the joy of living was gone and that she now found herself terribly lonely. "Yes, it's lonely," she said, "because really, you know, when you come right down to it, you're in it alone and there's nothing that anybody can do for you."

Well the question we have to address this morning is where does one GO to find the resources to give thanks when one finds him or herself in the autumn of one's years? Where does the capacity to experience joy and praise come from when one is on the DOWNSIDE of life rather than on its UPSIDE? Well one resource can be found here in Psalm 71, this morning's scripture lesson. It is the prayer of an old man who has been taken from his homeland in Israel to die in exile in Babylon. We don't know how long he has been there but we DO know that his faith has been severely tested by remaining captive in a strange land and having to endure the incessant taunts of his enemies. At times, he laments his situation and asks God for help, while at others, he expresses his dependence upon God and thanks him for all his faithfulness. He confesses in the opening verse, "In thee, O Lord, do I take refuge" and two verses later, "Be thou to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for thou art my rock and my fortress." He says, "For thou, O Lord, art my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth. Upon thee I have leaned from my birth; thou art he who took me from my mother's womb." Thus, his trust has been an integral part of his life from his earliest years on and he credits God for being there for him again and again- sustaining and guiding and protecting him.

However, despite his confidence, he still has moments where his faith wavers, especially when confronted by those who mock him and try to convince him that his God is powerless to deliver him. With v.9, he cries, "Do not cast me off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength is spent. For my enemies speak concerning me, those who watch for my life consult together, and say, 'God has forsaken him; pursue and seize him, for there is none to deliver him.'" But faith ultimately triumphs because he knows that God remains faithful even when WE are "faithLESS." Though old age may rob us of our looks and deprive us of our strength, it will NEVER rob us of the love and favor that our God has for us.

Throughout the rest of the psalm, he praises God for his continued faithfulness. With v.14, he resolves, "But I will hope continually, and will praise thee yet more and more. My mouth will tell of thy righteous acts, of thy deeds of salvation all the day, for their number is past my knowledge. With the mighty deeds of the Lord God I will come, I will praise thy righteousness, thine alone." As he draws near to God in prayer, he discovers his trust rewarded and his strength renewed, vowing he will praise him as long as there is breath in his body.

With this psalm, we have a great resource which will sustain us even when we find OURSELVES in the autumn of life. Like him, we TOO can affirm, "In thee, O Lord, do WE take refuge...for thou art OUR rock and fortress. Thou, O Lord, art OUR hope, OUR trust since the days of OUR youth...Therefore, OUR praise will continually be of thee." And even when it becomes a struggle for us to say this and our faith wavers just like the old psalmist, if we CONTINUE TO DECLARE IT ALL THE SAME, we will SEE how our God will faithfully pull us through. There is much we don't understand about God but this much we are assured- that our God loves us with an everlasting love and he promise he will never leave or forsake us REGARDLESS of what stage of life we happen to be in!

But notice that Psalm 71 ends on a triumphant note of faith and praise despite the fact nothing has yet changed in the psalmist's life. He's STILL in exile in a strange land; STILL tormented by his enemies; STILL an old man growing grayer and more toothless and more bent over with each passing day- and yet because God has faithfully accompanied him throughout his life EVEN when he was hauled out of the land of Judah, he KNOWS that God will not abandon him now. It is IMPOSSIBLE for him to give up on God or his promises!

One who probably did more to make Americans conscious of the great concerns of many senior citizens was Maggie Kuhn. During the 1950s and 1960s, Kuhn worked for the Presbyterian Church, where she hoped to give emphasis to the social dimension of the Gospel. Her interest in elder rights began, not as a PERSONAL issue, but as one of HUMAN RIGHTS and BASIC JUSTICE after attending a “White House Conference on Aging” as a church member in 1961 where she realized the need to reverse the cultural tendency to treat old people like children. In 1970, although she worked for the Presbyterian Church in a job she loved, she was forced to retire the day she turned 65 because of the mandatory retirement law then in effect. That year, she banded together with other retirees and started the “Gray Panthers movement.”

The Gray Panthers were at the forefront of combating the then-popular "disengagement theory," which argues that old age involves a necessary separation from society as a prelude to death. It is the heartless suggestion that because older people are in decline and their resources and contributions to our country's future are increasingly narrowed, you try to make them as comfortable as possible and then relegate them out of sight and out of mind. It is their duty to die with the least amount of disruption or inconvenience while for everyone else, life goes on. Kuhn implicated THE AMERICAN LIFESTYLE for treating the old as problems OF society and not as persons experiencing the problems CREATED BY society. She accused gerontologists of perpetuating the illusion of old people as incapacitated, noting that grant money seemed to favor such research, even calling into question the representation of old people in popular media.

Kuhn took a stance on Social Security, arguing that politicians had created an intergenerational war over federal funds in order to divert public attention from the REAL budgetary issues: overspending on the military and extravagant tax breaks for the rich. She criticized housing schemes for the elderly, calling them "glorified playpens." While acknowledging that they helped to keep seniors safe, she contended that they also isolated the elderly by separating them from mainstream society. During her years as a Gray Panther activist, she lived in her own home in Philadelphia where she shared her home with younger adults who received a break on rent in exchange for their help with chores and their companionship. All the while, she combined her activism with caring for her mother—who had a disability which required her to receive assistance in her care—and a brother who suffered from mental illness. Seeing all issues of injustice as inevitably linked, Kuhn refused to restrict the Gray Panthers to just elder rights activism, but focused also on peace, presidential elections, poverty, and civil liberties. In 1995, the same year she passed away at the age of 90, Kuhn was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame. Her deep Christian faith had taught her that as a child of God, NO person is ever worthless, that we ALL have contributions to make while there's still breath in our bodies.

Another person who embodied the heart and spirit of this psalm was Beulah Travis. Beulah, who passed away several years ago at nearly a hundred years of age, was an incredible woman of faith and love. She was a long-time member of the First Presbyterian Church of Syracuse, NY where I served as her minister, and she will always be for me the model of what living with faith and hope in the autumn of life is all about. In the early 1950's, she moved from being a Sunday School teacher to becoming the Christian Ed Director at Old First, at a time when there were over 500 persons in the C.E. program. However, what began as a TEMPORARY assignment ended up lasting almost TWO DECADES. In 1970, at the age of 63,

at a time of life when people are discussing retirement options, she was already thinking about her NEXT project. During that time, she became concerned about the church neighborhood which was already beginning to decay. The majority of homes were owned by absentee landlords and occupied by families with only one parent. She knew we needed to find a way to reach out to the kids living there, many of whom had little supervision and often lived in an atmosphere of neglect, drugs, and sometimes abuse.

One of our buildings--the McConaghy Youth Center--was occupied on Sunday mornings but she wondered whether it couldn't be used the REST of the week AS WELL. So, in 1970 she launched "Exploring Your World." It began initially as a summer program but it proved SO successful that within two years it expanded to include a YEAR-ROUND PRE-SCHOOL AND AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAM. Neighborhood children received instruction in various educational and social skills and were given the opportunity to explore the world around them through field trips to the library and the zoo. For almost forty years, "Exploring Your World" continued to serve the downtown Syracuse area, attracting an enrollment of about three hundred students a year. Before she died, the Presbyterian Women Association honored her as one of their "Women of the Year" for her decades of outstanding service at our denomination's General Assembly. Reflecting on her years running it, Beulah said:

I was a young sixty-three when "Exploring Your World" began, and I continued working as its full-time director into my nineties. People are always asking me where I get my energy, and I just tell them it's not my nature to keep still. I have to be busy. I also love kids. I think they're nuts, but so am I. I know it's an uphill battle to reach a kid whose home life is full of negative experiences. But every so often, we do get through to someone, and the joy of watching that one life bloom helps make up for the ones we can't help. I have always been a positive person, and I never say something can't be done. Instead I figure out how to make it work. This I attribute to my faith. It keeps me going and never lets me down.

Several years ago, Beulah was moved from Summerfield Village where she enjoyed a large group of friends to a different retirement complex some thirty miles south of Syracuse to be closer to where her son lived. Although not happy about moving, when she arrived at her new home, she immediately resolved "to make lemonade out of her lemons," as she told me. At the age of 93, SHE VOLUNTEERED TO SERVE AS THE MAIL LADY FOR THE WHOLE COMPLEX, a chore that allowed her to spend time visiting with all the residents there. She said, "David, can you believe there are people here who don't receive any cards or letters, people who rarely have a visitor. I have an opportunity to bring a little cheer and comfort to them every day."

Friends, when I am looking for resources that will help people navigate the "September of THEIR years" with faith and with hope, I first turn to the PROMISES that come to us in the scriptures- a word from God that can be trusted such as Psalm 71. After God's Word, I think of those INDIVIDUALS who have come to incarnate that word and promise in their OWN lives, people like Maggie Kuhn and Beulah Travis. But I don't stop there. I think of the older members of the various congregations I have been fortunate enough to serve who week-in and week-out continued to donate so much of their time and energy and resources. I think of the Elders and Deacons who have overseen the various ministries and programs of the church; who never stopped praying for those on the church's prayer list, or assisting with the various meals and receptions for funerals and special occasions. I think of those members who have remained

in contact with the church's home-bound members- phoning or visiting them, regularly sending cards and letters or worship bulletins to let them know we care, or it might be something as mundane as helping out in the church office when the regular secretary wasn't in. For me, it is people like them as well as people like YOURSELVES who remain for so many of US a living, breathing testament of how to faithfully and gracefully approach our later years!

And finally, with JESUS CHRIST as our friend to guide us and walk beside us, the advancing years don't have to be NEARLY so fearful or threatening as we would imagine them to be. Day after day, he enables us to live confidently and courageously in the sure knowledge that we are loved with an everlasting love and that NOTHING will ever be able to separate us from either his presence or his love. If we know that he is for us, then WHO or even WHAT could possibly be against us REGARDLESS of what may await us just down the road. As we close, I'd like for you to now bow your head as I lead us in a special prayer about "growing old gracefully." It's called "The Commodore's Prayer" and it first appeared in the *The Baltimore Sun* on December 16, 1962. Let us pray:

Lord, you know better than we do that we are growing older and will someday be old. Keep us from the fatal habit of thinking we must say something on every subject and on every occasion. Release us from craving to straighten out everybody's affairs. Make us thoughtful but not moody; helpful but not bossy. With our vast store of wisdom, it seems a pity not to use it all; but you know, Lord, that we want a few friends at the end. Keep our minds free from the recital of endless details; give us wings to get to the point. Seal our lips on our aches and pains; they are increasing, and love of rehearsing them is becoming sweeter as the years go by. We dare not ask for improved memory, but for a growing humility and a lessening cock-sureness when our memory seems to clash with the memories of others. Teach us the glorious lesson that occasionally we may be mistaken. Keep us reasonably sweet, for a sour old person is one of the crowning works of the devil. Give us the ability to see good things in unexpected places and talents in unexpected people; and give, O Lord, the grace to tell them so. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.