

A Completed Life

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Dec. 11, 2016

Based on Luke 2:22-38

As you all know, this week we lost John Glenn. One of my earliest memories was his orbiting of the earth and his very engaging smile on re-entry. A lot was made of his second flight eighteen years ago, at the age of 77.

In October of 1998, he received the somewhat dubious honor of being the oldest person to go into space. His main mission as a payload specialist was to be the payload himself, to be, in fact, a subject of geriatric research. Scientists wanted to see how his body would endure weightlessness in space.

Glenn recalled that he was strapped with all sorts of leads to measure his brainwaves, respiration and heart rate. For four days, tests were done to find out how his balance, immune system, bone and muscle activity, perception, metabolism, blood flow and sleep were affected by zero gravity.

He was a good sport, and he made a lot of septuagenarians very happy campers. Septuagenarians often feel they are forgotten, due to their age, unless, of course, they are running for president.

Vincent Van Gogh loved the aged. He had a special affection for how lines etch a face over time. He could depict old men warming themselves by a fire in such a loving way. He said, "I like to say something comforting in a picture."

The sermons in this advent series have been linked by the fact that the main characters in the gospel stories we have focused on have been of the easily forgotten variety. They have all been outsiders -- oddballs: We began two weeks ago with the magi, who were outsiders because of their religion and culture -- they were Persians.

Then I spoke last week about the shepherds who were outsiders because of their lower class standing and disreputable habits. This week we are looking at Simeon and Anna who are outsiders due to their age.

Simeon and Anna should be retired, but they are still working every day in the temple in Jerusalem. It's even said that Anna, age 84, hadn't left the temple grounds for years. I guess the temple was equipped with a dormitory, bathrooms, and a cafeteria, too.

I love the image in the text this morning of old man, Simeon, cradling a child in his arms, looking into the infant's face and saying, "I can go now. I've seen the hope of the world. I've held the future in my arms."

I believe you can read the health of an older person by the thoughts they think holding a baby. If they are the kind of thoughts I just mentioned, then the mental health of the older person must be pretty good.

Something like that happens at every infant baptism. Not only the minister but the entire gathered congregation holds the child, blesses the child, and in the baptized child, we see something of God's providence and love; God's hope for the world despite all the evidence that the world is spiraling downward.

When Jesus was six weeks old, his parents brought him to the temple in Jerusalem. The Law of Moses stipulated that the firstborn son was to be presented to God in the temple. Not the first born daughter, though. Sigh. That will take another two thousand years to happen. Sadly.

While they were there, they met these two beautiful old people I've mentioned, Simeon and Anna. We can imagine that they spending their days attending prayers and sacrifices, participating in all the temple rituals; helping out here and there where they are allowed, due to their gender and age.

Every church has a few Simeons and Annas. WE certainly do. In fact, that's very much what church is about, especially in this day when so many young families raise their children at a distance from grandparents.

When old Simeon sees Mary and Joseph and their baby, he takes the child in his arms and spontaneously breaks into a prayer. He says, "Master, I can now die in peace . . . ,for my eyes have seen your salvation which you have made possible for all people."

It's called, in church tradition, the *Nunc Dimittis*, and for over a thousand years it has been the core of evening prayer offered in monasteries throughout the world.

But if you look at Simeon with the child in his arms with the eyes we have been trying to bring to focus during this advent season you will see a man who has found himself at what we sometimes call, a "thin place." He sees something he has been prepared to see for a good long time.

Well, you look any baby in the eyes and you know what you are looking at? You are looking at the future staring back at you. But Simeon sees something more. He sees the purposes of God. He sees something that gives his heart a peace it has never known.

I have loved this text from the day, years ago, when I handed my daughter into the arms of a mentor of mine who baptized her and then put her into the arms of dozens of the people in the church I was then pastoring, a number of them very old with a beauty in their eyes you only see in the aged.

I realized that this was something very important, something timeless, something basic to the relationship of one generation following another.

Yes, and today I love Simeon for obvious existential reasons. I'm a lot more like him than I used to be. I remember that when George Burns hit 95 he said, "At my age, flowers scare me."

Poet and Kentucky farmer. Wendell Berry, who is 82, thinks and writes about the mystery of life and growing old. In an essay, "Quantity vs. Form," he reflects on the idea of a "Completed Life"—a whole life—and refers, oddly it may seem, to a classic biography of Lord Nelson and the account of his role in the Battle of Trafalgar (1805) written by British historian Robert Southey.

Berry is a pacifist but nevertheless was impressed that Nelson went into his final battle fully prepared to die. His lieutenants advised him to disguise himself on the deck of his flagship in order to cut down the odds of being shot by a sniper. Nelson refused.

He chose to wear his admiral's traditional frock coat, with its bright medals and red sash, thus making himself a prime target, instead of slinking around, pretending he was an underling.

He was forty-seven. And he was killed in the battle. Southey writes, "He cannot be said to have fallen prematurely, whose work was done" (*The Way of Ignorance*, p.83).

Wendell Berry suggests that there was a "formal completeness" about Nelson's life that "had nothing to do with its length and much to do with its accomplishments and Nelson's own sense of its completeness."

Berry thinks we have lost that sense of completeness in our obsession with more of everything—including life expectancy. We have come to believe that there should be an infinite, inexhaustible supply of everything, including life, and we are entitled to it.

Speaking about his own age and the prospects for the years ahead, Wendell Berry said, "To me, at my age, the main question is, 'Can I be a grateful man when I die? Can I remember up to, and on the last, that I had a very good life?' A completed life.

We spend a great deal of money in this culture to disguise and deny the process of aging. "Do not go gentle into the night," the poet, Dylan Thomas said. We shouldn't, and I don't intend to. But I might have added, "For heaven's sake, let's be careful of making ourselves ridiculous trying to pretend we are something we are not."

The late Joseph Sittler, who taught theology at the University of Chicago, thought and wrote a lot about aging, which he called an “awkward problem.” We’re part of a culture that thinks it can fix everything, make everything right. And in that culture, he said, aging and death are regarded as failures, “awkward problems” that we need to fix or at least deny.

I’m very much in favor of the Joe Biden bill, passed this week by the Senate, launching a war against cancer. Still, we need to think about aging, not as a time to fear, but as the goal of life, a time, Sittler said, “for remembering, of gathering up and sorting out, discriminating between the abiding and the evanescent, a passage from knowledge to wisdom, from simple awareness to insight.” (*Gravity and Grace*, p. 120). Think again of old Simeon – of what he saw in Jesus,

The topic is so very relevant. We are on the cusp, in this culture, of a huge increase in the number of people achieving senior status. There are more than 46 million of them now accounting for nearly 15 percent of the population.

Part of the way we think about aging is the traditional retirement age of sixty-five.

Not long ago, I mentioned that it was Otto von Bismarck who made that happen well over a century ago. He’s the one who set the retirement age in Germany at sixty-five, not on the basis of demographics, but rather because the German Social Security system was going broke, and sixty-five was the age when most people died. And so if everyone worked on average until that age, paid into the system and died, the system would remain solvent. Problem solved.

Well, things have changed since then. And thank God we have social security. I sure hope we can keep it. I know plenty of people who retired at sixty-five and are busier and happier than ever: gardening, painting, walking, traveling, skiing three times a week, needlepointing, climbing mountains, okay, raising their grand kids in some cases, but also doing things they always meant to do, like going to the symphony, and they’re loving it—and because they are not hurried, they are loving the things they do more now than at any time in their lives.

And we all know people who retired at sixty-five and who shouldn’t have, and don’t know what to do with themselves.

In a conversation with a financial planner, a sixty-five year old man I know of, was asked when he planned to retire. He was a little indignant. He said, “I’ve spent forty years learning how to do this job of mine. I finally know how, and I intend to continue doing it.” That is NOT an unusual story. It takes time to get up to speed in life.

The Center For Retirement Research (there's a center for everything, I guess), has established that older workers are not necessarily less productive or less valuable than younger workers. Younger workers DO have better "fluid intelligence." That is to say, they are better able to process new information.

No surprise there. For example, younger air traffic controllers, when faced with data showing two airplanes on a collision course, will send information to avert a crash more quickly than older air controllers. Which is why the retirement age for air traffic controllers is 56. But older workers exhibit better overall judgment than younger workers, making them valuable when it comes to decision-making.

Recent research shows that staying positive as one ages also slows the process of decline when it comes to cognitive function.

Listen to this from an anonymous senior-aged gentleman who was part of a study done on Adult Development.

"Contrary to all expectations, I seem to grow happier as I grow older. I think America has been sold a bill of goods on the theory that youth is marvelous but old age is a terror. On the contrary, it's taken me sixty years to learn how to live reasonably well, to do my work and cope with my inadequacies. For me youth was a woeful time – sick parents, war, relative poverty, the miseries of learning a profession, a mistake of a marriage, self-doubts, booze and blundering around.

Old age is knowing what I am doing, the respect of others, a relatively sane financial base, a loving wife, and the realization that what I can't beat, I can endure."

Well then, is aging our enemy? There is an alternate way of thinking. It is deep in our religious tradition — aging not as loss, but as a precious gift. Aging not as declining but moving into the future toward completion.

Think of old Simeon, holding the child in his arms. He may have grown a bit myopic, at that time. Maybe even had some cataracts, but where it counted, he was clear-eyed, and happy to his depths. Think of him as I repeat these words from 82 year old Wendell Berry. Can you make them your own?

"To me, at my age, the main question is, "Can I be a grateful man when I die? Can I remember, up to and on the last day, that I had a very good life?"

Amen