

Cycle of Life- by Jason Byassee
2 Timothy 4:6-8

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Sermons are supposed to *end* with poems. Let me confuse you by starting with one. TS Eliot wrote this

Old men ought to be explorers
Here or there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity . . .
In the end is my beginning.

Old women and men ought to be explorers. This contrasts sharply with what our culture assumes about old age. “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks,” they say. *Not so*, says the poet. In old age there is more to discover. Because then we’re closer to the greatest discovery—the full love of God in the face of Jesus. *That’s* what heaven is.

I start this sermon backwards like we start this sermon series backwards. We’re going to spend the next six weeks exploring the life cycle, starting with the winter years of our life. Each stage of life teaches us about God. And get this--in a mere month and a half, we’ll speak of infancy right before the start of Advent. That’s right, in six weeks, Advent is here. Can you believe how fast the year has gone? It’s like our lives. Gone in a flash. Better explore in a hurry. Hear this word from St. Paul toward the end of his life.

2 Timothy 4:6-8

6 As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

This is the word of God, it belongs to you, the people of God, **thanks be to God.**

We’ll start where our culture starts. Our culture is absolutely terrified of growing old. Think of the magazines we see at grocery store counters. Do you ever see anyone old there? All you get is a youthful notion of beauty aided by makeup and medicine and anorexia and photoshop. Not a shred of wisdom. Our tv and movies tend to depict the aged as objects of humor or of dread. There are some exceptions. We see a hint of a desire for wisdom in the popularity of the *Lord of the Rings*. Gandalf’s age is part of the reason for his wisdom. Of course Gandalf can also fight in a battle or lead an army. Which most of the aged tend to have retired from. Physically speaking.

Some years ago Ted Williams died, the great slugger for the Boston Red Sox, last guy to hit .400, if the Sox had him now they’d have been in the playoffs. You can see why they called him “The Kid.” Williams took time off from the game *twice*—for World War II *and* Korea. Our sports stars have changed a bit haven’t they? Here’s the kid in the winter of his life. When he died in 2002 his family preserved his body in some sort of freezer in hopes that his DNA could be cloned and another great hitter made in a petri dish. Never mind that his own son *had* his DNA and couldn’t hit a lick. What a sad imitation of the Christian hope of the resurrection of the body. And what a wrong way to treat the dead.

What about Jesus and age? I preach up here a lot that no one can suffer anything that God has not also suffered in Christ. But here’s a problem. *Jesus never got old.* He died in his 30s. What about those who are

older, then, is their suffering not one that he shares? But look here, in Jesus' day, mid-30s was not young. Life expectancy in the first century best anyone can tell was about 25. If you made it out of infancy the numbers were better—the average age at death then would be 35-38. More importantly this—the body of Christ that *is* the church, *we* experience age all the time. Christ's body in Judea may not have grown old, but his body that we're all apart of does grow old as we do. And Jesus knew what it was like for his body not to work. He was nailed to a cross, immobilized. One of the fears I hear from our elderly is fear of loss of bodily control. In his passion Jesus had no control over his body. Those who suffer, whatever they suffer, are not far from God. He is close, suffering too, to save.

The bible suggests an enormously important role for the aged. The bible never patronizes the old, never criticizes them for being behind the curve or not with it. The very word "Old Testament" doesn't mean worn out, unimportant. Old means reliable, trustworthy. And the bible's depiction of older people honors them. Think of Sarah and Abraham 100 years old and told they would have children. She laughs. Hard to blame her. Countless Old Testament women are called to new adventures in faith. So too in the New Testament, Elizabeth and Zechariah are past childbearing years but are given John the Baptist. Simeon and Anna receive the Christ child in the temple and rejoice. Age in the bible is a sign of wisdom. It's a badge of honor. But more than that, the aged are radically open to the redeeming power of God (repeat). They show the rest of us what to do when God turns up.

I met a man like that once. He's a Catholic priest named Father Christian at a monastery. Jaylynn and I met him when he was in his late 80s. Jaylynn wandered over into the monks' part of the dining hall for a pad of butter, a definite party foul at the monastery, boys only. And Father Christian was delighted. "Oh, you'll be joining us today?" he gushed. She blushed. We named him Father Butter. Last year when I took some of y'all to the same monastery I assumed he'd be gone. But there he was, in church, praying for us guests and our families and friends. He was 99. In one service of healing all the monks and us guests got to lay our hands on the sick and pray for them. He said "When you're 99 I'll come pray for you." His bald head reminded me of a newborn babe.

And that's the thing of our greatest age. It can be childlike. St. Augustine said this, "Your old age must have a childlike quality about it, and your childlikeness the wisdom of age." We've all known people old in years who *haven't* grown in wisdom or gentleness. It's hard work to age well. Kathleen Norris said this, my favorite quote ever, "Start practicing now to be a sweet little old man or woman, because however old you are, you'll need all the time you have left to get there." As we age our bodies and minds sometimes don't work as well as we'd like. As we lose our memories we can grow angry, confused, difficult. In our culture one of our biggest fears is to be a burden on others. A bigger fear is to be alone. Our nursing homes are often places of crushing loneliness where we warehouse our elderly. A friend from Uganda asked me about this once. Why are your old people by themselves? Don't you need them to teach your young? To remember who you are?

The church honors those closest to the edges of life. That is, the newborn, the sick, the elderly. The bible commands us to care for the widow. 1st Timothy puts it this way, "Whoever does not care for their relatives . . . has *denied* the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." The church has to be a place *not* just where young and old coexist. But where we cherish one another. In fact I can't think of another institution in our culture where young and old make our lives together. On the day of Pentecost God promises "In the last days . . . I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh . . . your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams." In today's scripture Paul tells Timothy, gently as he can, that he's facing his end. He's not bragging as he says "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." He's an old man telling a young man that the end is beautiful. Not that it's easy. Paul describes himself as poured out like an offering.

It's the kind of fate faced by the martyrs. It imitates Jesus. Still! The edges of our life are nothing to fear. They bring us closer to Jesus. And give us a chance to tell the younger among us, hey, this is nothing to fear. I can see Jesus from here. And I'll see you again soon.

We should tell our neighbors this about death. It is nothing to fear. Wendell Berry puts it this way,

Any definition of health that is not silly must include death. The world of love includes death, suffers it, and triumphs over it. The world of efficiency is defeated by death; at death, all its instruments and its procedures stop. The world of love continues, and of this grief is the proof.

Grief is a part of *not* fearing death. We don't forget those who have died. We remember them. At the eucharist, especially, where all the saints are gathered. On All Saints Day next week we'll remember those we've lost. Rick did last week with Fred Robinette. I tell stories all the time of those I miss in here. Bill Dixon with his impish grin. He knew every child's name in our church. John Hovis who had a tooth pulled in a Tunisian bazaar during World War II. What'd the Arab dentist fill it with? The gold coin in John's airman's kit, melted down. They don't make em like that anymore y'all. Tom Cottingham who went on our Guatemala mission team in his mid-80s. When he was 95 he lamented that there were still so many books he had yet to read. *He* was TS Eliot's old man who was an explorer. Buck Robbins who said this church raised him. When he had no father this church taught him to hunt, to fish, to be a man. That's why Buck advocated for children's and youth ministries. And Cheryl Marshbanks, so recently lost. John gave me a whole page of prayers she prayed for this church. One of them was this:

Lord, cause many of the worshipers to arrive early so that there is little rushing and confusion as they come to worship. God, please give them peace as they look for a parking space, enter to worship and that they may feel the Holy Spirit's presence all around them. Quiet the chatter of their minds and fill their hearts with new life; open their ears to hear your Word and to carry the Word to our community.

Did you realize you were being prayed for like that? Do you realize that you still are?!

There *are* gifts to aging. We all know the difficulties. With two back surgeries I know the difficulties too young. But there are gifts. Charlotte Stanley our oldest member will openly read the paper when she comes to church. She can't hear me anyway, and there's no need for pretence when you're north of a 100. You don't have to be anything other than what you are. I wish we knew that younger. When my step-grandmother was dying her minister asked if she wanted him to read a psalm. "No," she said. No need to pretend. We tend to think of memory as a gift. But memory can hurt. Tracy Kidder's book *Old Friends* is about a nursing home. He tells of a man who remembers yelling at his wife when she dropped a frying pan years before. I'm not sure why this moves me so much. Now that she's gone he says, "If she could come back to life now, she could drop a hundred of them and I wouldn't care at all." Our memory needs to be healed. Like the rest of us. And one day we'll view even our worst sins as a chance for Christ to give more grace. That woman will reassure her husband, honey, everything is forgiven. *Loss* of memory can be grace too, surprisingly. My grandma was sort of a sour person. Until she aged. After she hit 85 she forgot she had ever frowned so often (maybe she ran out of frowns). When she met Jaylynn she said "I saw you two kiss in the parking lot." Bless her. I pray for her and the others I've lost. Especially at the Lord's Supper. We're all still one body, praying for one another.

Now here's the thing. Memory loss is *usually* terrible. Many of you are facing this in aging loved ones or in yourselves (others of you north of 90 have better memories than I have). And precisely here the church can help. Folks who can't remember their own name *can* remember the words to "Amazing Grace." Folks otherwise angry or confused can remember what to do in church. This is the kind of space they were baptized in. Where they sang hymns. Where they are sent into the world in mission. The church often has to be

memory *for* people who have none. It's too crushing a burden just for family or friends, alone. This is one of our most important callings, church. One hope some of us have for our church is to launch an elder care facility. A place that family can drop an aging loved one for a day. It would be like our preschool—it would just need to pay for itself, and it would get us in new relationships that would bear fruit. Pray for this God-sized hope. It could help us all remember, oh, right, the church has to *be* memory for those without. Just as the aged *are* wisdom for us without. Our young people have visions and our old people dream dreams.

Two of my favorite stories involve the deaths of saints. One, Martin Luther. In that day, folks would gather bedside for a last word as death approached. How different from the mechanized deaths of our age, God bless hospice. As they gathered at Luther's bedside his last words were these, "We are poor beggars." That's it, from the greatest intellect in his century in Europe. We are poor beggars (say that with me). The other death is a martyrdom, a man with the impossibly wonderful name of St. Polycarp. His mentor was St. John. His mentor was one Jesus of Nazareth. When the Romans demanded that Polycarp renounce his faith they pleaded his age. You're old, just curse Christ and be done. His words, "I have served him 86 years and he has done me no wrong, how can I curse my king who saved me?" When they lit the flame to burn him the onlookers said it looked like a sailboat, not an execution; it smelled like bread baking, not death.

May our lives also be a banquet for others to feast on. May our lives make tales for others to tell. And however many years we have left, let's not *just* practice being a sweet little old man or woman. Let's practice praising the Lord. *That's* what makes life life. Amen.