

The Lily Pad

“I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys.” Solomon 2:1



The past is kind enough to give you lessons. The present is kind enough to give you opportunities. The future is kind enough to give you both.

The question on everyone's lips is, “how does it feel to be 60?” It is interesting what my answer is... I do not feel the weight of the age. I am grateful for good health (minus the irritating gall bladder that was recently removed), energy, a spiritual anointing, and a sound mind. I feel more alive, more creative, and certainly more judiciously pastoral.

It's been a long time coming... one day drops at a time and it has gathered into a concrete consolidation, shaken together to become 60! It crept up on me when I was not looking at it. But I am awesomely grateful, thankful, and blessed. As I turn 60...I feel that “60” gives you fearlessness!

I am so jubilant for my God-fearing Family who shower me with inexhaustible love and support. They have held my hand through this 60-year journey. A journey that began in 1963 with my angelic, devout servant-leaders' parents: Rev. Wille and Sister Emma Griffin. I give humble thanks for the great cloud of witnesses surrounding me; this cloud is, on one hand, those who went before me and lived by faith and, on the other hand, it is the awesome compassionate presence of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

My spouse and best friend, Martin, our children, Marissa, Biancha, Sophia and Nicolas, our siblings, Cindy & Mike; Kim & Kirk; Eric & Mary; Anthony & Maggie; Janice & Mario; Crystal & Sterling; Uncle Mike; Uncle Jimmie & Aunt Mary; Aunt Vera; Aunt-cousin Luree, Uncle James & Aunt Jean; Aunt Zealine & Rev. Davenport; Aunt Shirley & Uncle Eugene; Aunt Brenda & Uncle Amos; Aunt Virginia, three great-great Aunts ... cousins, nephews, nieces, Christian brothers & sisters, colleagues and an overabundance of military shipmates... God has smiled on me; God has set me

free; God's sure been so good to me!

As I get ready to tackle my next decade, I can't help but think of all I've accomplished during the past 10 years. I never dreamed that my 52nd year (2015) would be one of the most extraordinary years of my life. I became an 'adult orphan'. Losing both Mother and Daddy within three months of each other, was excruciatingly painful and scary. My family structure suddenly changed and the people I'd depended on for my entire life weren't there any more to pray, support, affirm, and comfort me. It was exposing, vulnerable, and lonely.

In between the three months of my parents' passing, the death of our first born, Marissa, one of life's ultimate tragedies, brought on gut-wrenching, heart-hurting, curl up in a ball unable to move kind of grief. Such excruciating pain and faith challenge was unbearably overwhelming, and I never expected to understand it or stand up again.

Losing these three saints, turned my world upside down. The grief and loneliness I felt during that period was devastating. But praise and thanks to God's grace in grief. In grief, we can't forget, and so we learn to move forward and find joy and live productively as best we can again. However, I began to recognize God's glorious grace in my life while grieving. God extended God's abundant healing and comforting grace to me. For that, I am forever grateful.

Clinging to God's purpose for my life was affirmed by Daddy, (Rev. Griffin), "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. (2 Timothy 4:1-2) Preaching, as the apostle Paul records, is the vehicle by which the life-giving truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ is conveyed. The words of the preacher are to be faithful to the Word of God, which is "the power unto salvation for everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). "Mama, go, you were called to preach the Word of God, who has called you according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28)."

I found joy again in the midst of my forever grief, that could only come when you willingly allowed Christ to fill you up. I'm still on the Potter wheel, finding my highest purpose as I remain pliable in the hands of the Potter; my life fulfills its highest purpose when you let the Potter have His way with you. I'm profusely grateful for Jesus Christ and what He means to me.

Pondering my 60s, I wonder what life has in store for me during the next 10 years. Sometimes I wish I could look into a crystal ball and ask. Other times I want to be surprised. One thing I know for sure is that I am so grateful for all that I have and all that I am able to do at this point in my life.

Daily grief, trials, and sadness pierce my spirit. Martin's continuing medical challenges, pastoring and leading God's people at a time when the world beckons them to turn from God and God's plan for their life, adult children, grandparenting, social justice, inclusion, politics... it can be scary navigating so much change. People ask me, how do you do it? How did you stay positive and hopeful?

It's not easy. Sometimes its day by day. Other times, its hour by hour or even minute by minute. I recall when God tells Jeremiah that God's people are like clay in God's hands. God works with a purpose to bring God's dream for God's people into reality. Then something goes wrong. For some reason our lives aren't taking shape. Despite the work of God, the Master Potter, the dream isn't coming true. Many things can mar a vessel, leaving it a flawed, unfinished divine project.

People of God, have the courage and hope to see what Jeremiah saw long ago and apply it to your life today. The Potter's wheel is still turning. God's hands are still upon you, shaping your life despite your flaws and your struggles, with the goal of revealing God's glory through you. You need not give up on your life, because God hasn't given up. God does some of God's best work with vessels that need an extra touch, another try, a new beginning. With time, my loneliness turned to connectedness and grief to gratitude.

60 is not middle-aged! Not even close. 60 is a reckoning with the truth of mortality, with change, with a new sense of myself as finite. 60 is an expanded awareness of time passing. It's wondering where the years went and, as one marvel at the breadth and depth of the journey — past, present, future. 60 is standing on a threshold, contemplating the beginning of the end. To reach this place, alive and relatively unscathed, feels like both destiny and blessing. 60 is a more respectful understanding of fate. It's the small but real comfort of being the youngest of the old. 60 is a chapter between mid-life and old age; a chapter that has no name.

60 is 20 times three. 20 more than 40, which sounds like a lot. And 20 less than 80, which sounds like too little. It's just a number. Still, I can't quite believe it's now my number- 60! 60 on the inside doesn't feel very different from 50, but 60 as the age I am now will takes some getting used to. Still, 60 is quite different today than it was a generation ago.

60 is facing the fact that my youth really is over. It's coming to fully appreciate that those of us who grow old are the lucky ones. And it's realizing how little I know about getting old. It's pausing to think of the many beloved and special friends who didn't make it, who will never be 60, who are missing these incredibly hot dry summer days and unbelievable development in medicine and technology. 60 is about doing my best to live for them, too. (Moment of Silence)

60 is about trying, somehow, to hold on to all the years and ages that came before. It's about accepting that they're already gone, sifted through my fingers like sand. 60 is a constantly shifting landscape of depletions and benefits, losses, and gains. The losses are dramatic and obvious, while the gains are often invisible but no less dramatic. 60 is an appreciation for the moment at hand, because I know it won't last because I know it will certainly change. 60 delights in simple pleasures and other people's joys and successes. 60 is less drama and more contentment.

60 is about creating fluid relationships with aging persons and with grown children. And 60 is about making room for new connections to flourish. 60 is offering an arm and receiving a helping hand from my youthful granddaughter. It is marveling at the strength of all the personal bonds even as I begin to absorb the necessity of one day letting each of them go. It's about stepping in to steady the older generation and stepping aside to allow members of the younger one to stumble and fall and get up on their feet again.

It's about waiting to see how Martin and I will grow older together, side by side. 60 is a dance of intimacy and independence, closeness, and distance, reaching out and holding back, longing and surrendering. 60 requires more thoughtfulness, faith, and compassion.

60 is an ongoing private conversation with God; praying that my son and daughters will be blessed with lives that are rich and full and not too painful. 60 is about feeling my heart lift, always, at the sound of a familiar but fully adult voice on the other end of the phone. It's knowing from the tone of just one "Hi, mom," whether it's been a good day or a tough one, as I remember the excitement as the four of them would recall their school day or watch as one or two would slowly walk to the car, indicating it had been a rough day. 60 is being so very, very grateful and blessed every single day that I am still Mom.



60 is funerals and weddings. It's losing loved ones and bearing witness to tender beginnings. It's showing up to be a steady presence at bedsides and showing up to help launch the young people I've known since birth who are suddenly taking marriage vows and starting careers and having babies of their own. It is watching children who once spent every day together, turn into grown-ups and scatter like leaves in the wind. It is writing an obituary for a friend who should still be here and a happily-ever-after wish for a young adult who, in my mind's eye, is still a kid. 60 is gathering to mourn and gathering to celebrate. 60 is grief and gratitude, sorrow, and joy, all tangled up together.

60 is finding out that dressing "my age" means wearing whatever feels good. It's

the freedom to have my own style and to change it by the day. It's shopping at thrift stores and antique malls. Oh, the wonderful treasures one can find at 60.

60 has its moments of gloom. So much is over. There's no going back. 60 is the realization that joy doesn't just happen, I have to choose it again and again. It's a choice that requires effort sometimes. 60 is an opportunity to rethink some old ideas. It's a farewell to a certain kind of ambition and it's an uncomplicated pleasure in the vocation (Shepherding God's people) at hand. 60 is time to let go of perfection. Time, also, to give up comparing, worrying, arguing over petty things, and taking slights or insults personally. 60 means there's no more time to waste. (Not that there ever was.)

60 comes with permission to love my family and friends much more deeply. It's making the phone call, writing the note, coming up with the plan, making it happen. It's texting a photo of winter in Wisconsin or the cheese grits I made for dinner and getting pecans or sugar cane syrup in return. It's not hesitating to say whatever words I need to say: I'm sorry. That was hurtful. Thank you. I forgive you. I love you. It's finding the perfect gift and it's the joy of giving something extravagant to someone who doesn't expect it.

60 is about accepting my limitations. It's realizing I can't be all things to all people. It's speaking the truth and living with the consequences. 60 is choosing integrity over popularity, which means watching some people walk away and being ok with that. And it's befriending my own imperfect, less driven, less busy self. A self not so adept at retaining facts but somewhat better at taking the long view. A self who is done with multi-tasking but who turns out to be happier doing one thing at a time slowly and carefully and well. A self who is slower to hurt and anger and quicker to apologize. Less of a grind, but more at ease in my own skin. Less polished and more vulnerable. Less impressive but more honest. Kinder. Gentler. Loving. Or so I hope.

60 is an impulse to simplify. It's looking around and noticing how much of what I have, I've ceased to really see. It's packing stuff away, giving stuff away, throwing stuff away and exhaling into the empty spaces left behind. It's more trips to Goodwill and St. Vincent's than to the mall or Kohls. It's wondering why I ever thought it was a good idea to collect anything.

It's a box in the basement slowly filling with things that once seemed like reflections of me but are now just things. It's realizing they were always just things. 60 is less time spent taking care of things and more time attending to what is overwhelming, invisible, intangible. It's forgiving everyone for everything and traveling a bit more lightly through my own emotional landscape. 60 is about clearing some space – in a kitchen drawer, in my mind, in my relationships, in my heart.

60 is doing things because I want to rather than because someone else thinks I should. It's saying no to what doesn't feel right and yes to the small voice inside that says, "This way." 60 is an afternoon with Amme at Chuckey Cheese or a respite get-a-way to Illinois.

60 is a deepening concern for our shared future. It's a desire to give something back, to make the world a little better while I still can. 60 is flexible. It's understanding that information isn't wisdom, and that wisdom arrives quietly and in its own time, nourished by listening and silence and reflection. 60 is a greater willingness to compromise, to collaborate, to consider another point of view. 60 is less about being right and more about being present.

60 is daily gratitude for modern medicine and replacement parts. It's taking nothing for granted: driving, mobility, walking up and down upstairs, shoveling snow. 60 is still a two-way street, up and down, breaking apart and coming back together again. 60 is self-care and maintenance. 60 is strong and able. 60 is fully alive, awake, and vital. 60 is also knowing, in the words of the late poet Jane Kenyon, "Someday it will be otherwise."



60 inspires a certain kind of urgency. It is a desire for a life that is both less and more. It's the end of carrying on as if time were an unlimited resource to be spent and spent and spent. There is no world but this one. No meaning but the meaning I'm willing to create. I have one life and one life only. Though brief, it will have to do. 60 feels like a nudge in the direction I've always wanted to go, a summons to pay closer attention to the way I spend my days, to the things I say and do, to the qualities I still aspire to embody.

60 is an invitation to make a deeper kind of peace with impermanence. It's about rising to the challenges of aging and embracing the mysteries, wonders, and gifts of growing older. It's a desire to ripen into wisdom, into goodness, into a woman who may one day be an elder but who is, for now, just another year older. 60 is knowing today is an occasion, tomorrow isn't guaranteed, and every plan is temporary. 60 is the beginning of the if-not-now-when decade.

When Oprah turned 60 she said, "We go through life discovering the truth about who we are and determining who has earned the right to share the personal space within our heart."

My birthday wish is for each and every one of you to know that you are a tapestry of love; lovingly woven into my soul and wrapped around my heart.

On my special day, may God grant you everything you have ever wished for. Amen!

**PASTOR CLARISSA, BRO. MARTIN,
The Kids, Amme, The Girls & Rocco**