

November 24th: Aging/Dementia

Welcome, my friends, to “Soulcare: Help For Heavy Times”. This is our new series, and over the next year we’ll be shifting into a different style of sermons and a different kind of topic. We’ll still be looking at passages from all parts of our Bible, but we’ll be doing it with a new intention, and that intention revolves around our desire to see this congregation continue to grow as a healthy, life-giving, safe, and compassionate community.

To that end, we will be discussing a wide range of topics related to mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing. In the month of November, we’ve been focusing on a mini series called “Family Matters,” so we’ve been getting up close and personal with some dynamics that might be playing out with your loved ones, or experiences that you’ve navigated. We hope that despite these heavy topics, we have found ways to support each other and hold onto hope. Before we dive in, let’s take a moment to pray.

Eternal God, you are beyond time and our human lives are like the blink of an eye in your sight. And yet, you know every detail about us, from the hairs on our heads, to the depths of our souls. We are all too aware that our existence is oftentimes too short and fragile, but we come to you now because we trust that you are with us in this journey of life and faith. Walk alongside us as we take another step towards wholeness this week, offer the tender care and gentle wisdom that we long to hear. Gather us all into your loving embrace, so that we might have the courage to face a new week. Amen.

I want to start with a thought that I can’t promise won’t give you an existential crisis. So take a deep breath and mentally prepare yourself, because here it is: today is the oldest you’ve ever been, and it’s also the youngest you will ever be again. Isn’t that wild to think about?

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Does that make you feel a little weird inside? I know it makes me feel more than a little weird. The first time I heard it, I needed a few days to really understand the implications of this concept. I thought to myself—how can I be both young and old at the same time? Inside this one moment in time, how can I grapple with the fact that I will never be my younger self again, but also grapple with the idea that my older self will look back on this day and see myself totally differently.

You might be having some of the same thoughts as you begin your own reflections—and some questions as well. For example, what does it feel like to know that today is the perfect intersection of your past and your future? How are you preparing for your older self while still holding onto who you have been? Or are you in some kind of spiritual denial about the passing of time that is happening to you?

If you are in denial this morning, there's no judgment here, and you can safely know that you're not alone. Modern society and our American culture in particular has a strange relationship with time and specifically with the concept of getting older. There are plenty of messages in our media and cultural discourse that tell us that getting older is not a good thing—it's not something to celebrate or be happy about. Being young or feeling young is idolized in your language, advertisements, and cult of celebrity, that's why we see so much societal pressure to use anti-aging skincare, hide our wrinkles with Botox injections, or color our gray hair.

And even in some medical settings, aging is seen as a problem to be solved, which is why we're seeing the rise of biohacking practices, new health and wellness technology, a multi-billion dollar market of supplements, and even innovations in genetic testing and DNA alteration. While some of this could be good and helpful in our quest to lead healthier lives, I have a bit of a hot take about some of this anti-aging discourse: I think that a lot of this scientific advancement isn't geared towards actually living longer, it's really all about being younger for longer. And this means that even if we do succeed in

extending human life, it's as if the reality of being older and aging is still undesirable and somehow less than.

And if that's the case, I can't help but wonder what the impact of all this implicit and explicit messaging is doing to our souls. I wonder what it feels like for us to live inside of a system that intentionally diminishes certain decades of our lives in favor of others. I wonder what it feels like to engage in spirituality and faith while being part of a culture that is so rooted in a denial of basic and inevitable aspects of our humanity.

I don't think any of us can deny that aging can be hard on our bodies and minds. It's natural that as our hormones, muscles, and cognitive abilities change, we would feel some negative or conflicting emotions about these experiences. And when I speak to the people in my life, whether that's my family or all of you, I hear all kinds of valid concerns or fears for the future. There's a lot of anxiety about things that feel beyond our control or our skillset—things like physical decline, diagnoses like dementia, and finding appropriate professional care options. And I want to affirm that those worries can be real—it is difficult to navigate new health conditions, it is challenging to have to move into a retirement community, and it is worth grieving when we lose certain aspects of our independence—I won't try to claim otherwise.

But I do want to push back on some of the subtle cultural messaging that accompanies these changes, because I think our society fundamentally doesn't support these transitions or allow us to process them in a healthy way. And even worse, I think some of us experience these milestones and we absorb the negative messages of our culture. We may not realize that we've internalized them, but many of us end up believing in some way that once we reach a certain age, our lives become empty and meaningless. Once we reach a stage when the time in front of us is shorter than the time behind us, we might be tempted to believe that there's no purpose left, there's nothing to look forward to, and there's nothing worth living for.

I understand that perspective, but I think God would definitely disagree. I think that God would say that this could not be further from the truth. And this certainly isn't how God wants us to feel about our souls and the gift of time that we've been given.

So let's take a closer look at a passage that came to mind for me about this topic—written by a person of faith who might have found themselves in the very same moment that I described just a few moments ago: the oldest we've ever been, and the youngest we'll ever be again, and yet struggling to grapple with the complexity of aging.

Psalms 71 is probably not a passage that you've heard in church before, it's a great psalm, but it doesn't often make it into our lectionary or into more traditional services. However, it's one that I've meditated on in my own life, and it's carried me through a number of difficult seasons. What I love most about it is its unique relationship to time—the psalmist uses all kinds of time based language that is meant for us as the audience to notice and reflect on in our own lives. As we go through these verses, you'll see all kinds of references to different life stages and parts of the day, and as you listen, I invite you to consider how God might be offering you an opportunity to see your own story the same way.

Verses five and six begin with this: "For you have been my hope, Sovereign LORD, my confidence since my youth. From birth I have relied on you; you brought me forth from my mother's womb. I will ever praise you." And then in verses 7 and 8, our psalmist writes, "I have become a sign to many; you are my strong refuge. My mouth is filled with your praise, declaring your splendor all day long."

So in these early verses, our biblical author is looking backwards at the past, and marveling at how God has been present from the very first moments of life. Our author calls God a strong refuge in these early years, and a source of confidence. If this type of reflection is speaking to you this morning, here are some questions you can ask yourself to continue this spiritual practice at

home: If you were to look back at your own early life, can you see how God has been beside you? Is there a situation where you can name how God has been at work in your life? Was there a moment that you can point to as evidence that God has taken care of you or protected you?

You can continue to think about those questions, but let's take a look at the second half of this passage–

Verse 9 continues with this prayer: “Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone,” and then verses 14 and 15 say this, “As for me, I will always have hope; I will praise you more and more. My mouth will tell of your righteous deeds, of your saving acts all day long though I know not how to relate them all.” Our passage closes with these thoughts, “Since my youth, God, you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds. Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, my God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your mighty acts to all who are to come.”

If this theme of looking to the future is what you feel drawn to today, you might use these questions to guide your thoughts: As you think about the days, weeks, and maybe years to come, how do you plan to look for God's care and protection in your life? What upcoming events, circumstances or changes in your life are you asking God to be with you in? What would it feel like for your soul to be held in God's care?

No matter where you are in your life, or what stage you find yourself in—if you're looking to the past or contemplating the future—here's what our psalmist wants you to know: our entire lives are spiritual. From the moment we are born to our final breaths, our lives are infused with God's presence, our souls are alive with God's love. There isn't a single moment in our life that is disposable or not worthwhile, because God is with us in every situation and at every age—and that definitely includes our final decades.

So here's a new perspective for you to contemplate–

In the Hasidic tradition of Judaism, the elders like to say, “for the unlearned, old age is winter; for the learned, it is the season of the harvest.” Said another way, the author and feminist icon Betty Friedan argues, “aging is not lost youth but a new stage of opportunity and strength.”

If you’d like to live into a season of harvest, or your soul is longing for new opportunities and strength, then today could be the day when you start a new journey. Whether you are nine or ninety nine, the invitation to deeper faith and a more vital soul is open to you.

No matter where you currently are on the path of life and the path of spirituality, I want you to know there is always something new to be learned about God, and there is always something new to discover about ourselves. There is always wisdom that is waiting for us if we are committed to seeking it out. There is always love to be received if we are ready to receive it.

I know that it might not always feel like it, especially if we fear losing our memory, losing our identity, or losing our purpose, but the truth is that we are never lost to God. We will never lose our deepest humanity, our divinely created souls. Even if we cannot remember our own name, or recognize our own face in the mirror, God knows us and calls us by name. God loves us, because God knows us more deeply and completely than ever we know ourselves. God loves you, yesterday, today, and for all tomorrows.

My friends, I’ll close with this. If this topic has resonated with you or you would like to engage with this theme, we have two book recommendations for you on our Soulcare Library Board, located in the back of the sanctuary. Father Richard Rohr’s seminal work *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, and spiritual director Alice Fryling’s book *Aging Faithfully: The Holy Invitation of Growing Older* are both wonderful ways to explore your past, present, and future, so we hope that if you pick up one of those texts that you will find what you are looking for.

May your souls be well this week. Amen.