As I sat on my deck in the morning quiet and contemplated what to say in this sermon about the middle stages of life, a bird flew by and landed on a nearby bush and started to sing a beautiful song and I thought of one of the scriptures I had picked for today, Jesus talking about worry and possessions. Jesus said, “Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns and yet God feeds them.” As I watched the bird sing his lovely song I thought about how animals understand their lives. Birds don’t have mid-life crises. They don’t abandon their nests and go out to buy a cool sports car. They don’t panic because their life is half over or wonder if any of it really matters anyway. Why? Is it maybe their concept of time? They don’t know how long they are supposed to live and they don’t think about their regrets? They simply live in the now. Singing their song. Doing their work. Living their life.

It is both a curse and a gift that humanity *does* know the average span of a human life and that we can count our years so that we know when we have reached the approximate middle point of our lives. It is a curse because that makes it so very difficult to live in the now, so hard not to worry and wonder and count the minutes left which means we end up living more in the past and in the future than in the present. But it is also a gift because that means we get a choice about how we understand and treat the years we have lived so far and we get to choose how to live out the years that we hope are still to come.

Mid-life, often characterized as that stage of life from approximately age 40-60, is a time of reflection. After 40 society tells us that we are “over the hill”. We’ve gotten to the top of our personal mountain and we’re told that it’s all downhill from there. And so the questions begin.

What do you see when you stand atop that hill at 40? Do you look back and see a life well lived? Or do you have regrets? Are there choices you made that you now realize were mistakes? Are there things you didn’t choose that you now realize you should have? Have you achieved what you had hoped to by this point in your life? Or are you still struggling in ways you never thought you would be? Do you have the career you always hoped for? Or are you stuck in a dead end job or maybe without any job at all? There is a realization that the power and control you once maybe had as a young person with your life all ahead of you, is now very different. And too maybe the beliefs you had as a young person, what you were taught growing up, are increasingly feeling as if they no longer quite fit who you are now. It’s not that we’re on death’s door, of course, but maybe for the first time we understand that death truly gets just a little closer every day. And time just moves so very fast. It feels like we were 25 just a little while ago. We blinked and now we’re 50 and our kids are teenagers or older and we know that if we just blink again we’ll be 70.

Psychologist Erik Erickson says that the main question of this stage of life is generitivity vs. stagnation. At this stage of life we can either process our feelings of regret and decide to live in the present and move forward giving of our time to better the world around us, or we can find ourselves so stuck in our past and so worried about the future that we become self-centered and stagnant, unable and unwilling to see beyond our own lives and our own problems.

Author Brene Brown writes, “People may call what happens at mid-life ‘a crisis’ but it’s not. It’s an unraveling – a time when you feel a desperate pull to live the life you want to live, not the one you’re supposed to live. The unraveling is a time when you are challenged by the universe to let go of who you think you are supposed to be and to embrace who you are.” She goes on to say, “Time is growing short. There are unexplored adventures ahead of you. You can’t live the rest of your life worried about what other people think. You were born worthy of love and belonging. Courage and daring are coursing through you. It’s time to show up and be seen.” For some, that’s a wonderful challenge but for others, that’s a terrifying. prospect.

In the stereotypical midlife crisis people try to recapture their youth in various ways. But that’s trying to solve the wrong problem. Robbie Coltrane said, “See, what you’re meant to do when you have a mid-life crisis is buy a fast car. Aren’t you? Well, I’ve always had fast cars. It’s not that. It’s the fear that you’re past your best. It’s the fear that the stuff you’ve done in the past is your best work.” Buying a fast car won’t fix that fear. Going backwards won’t fix that fear. The only thing that will fix that fear is grappling with it, looking at it honestly, deciding what your best work actually is and choosing to see that you can still do more, no matter your age or how many years you have left.

Permit me a small tangent here but sometimes I feel like our entire country is presently struggling with a mid-life crisis. We struggle with Erickson’s question of generativity vs. stagnation. Do we process our past, admit who we have been as a nation and what we have done, good and bad? Can we accept that who we are now is not who we were in our youth and that’s okay, all the while trying to integrate who we are now into a future that helps our country and the world around us? Or instead do we become isolated and self-focused trying to regain an impossible dream of who we were (which is a lie because we were never really that anyway) folding more and more in on ourselves becoming ever more stagnant and close fisted hoping to hold on to what we think we have lost? Are tax cuts for the rich our cherry red mustang or Ferrari? But I digress.

So many times midlife, whether you look at it as an unraveling or a crisis, is seen as a negative thing. But it doesn’t have to be. A mid-life crisis is simply an attempt to reignite one’s life at a transitional period. Nothing more and nothing less. And it can be done, regardless of circumstance, and even regardless of age. We don’t have to experience or carry out the negative thoughts, emotions and actions that seem to often derail this process.

And for those of us who come at this transition from a faith perspective, the good news is that God isn’t just waiting for us to screw it all up, ready at a moment’s notice to judge us for our past actions or to throw us away because we have questions or doubts. Instead when we are honest with ourselves and with God about our struggles, about our unraveling, God is ready to lift us up. God can remind us that we are worthy of love and belonging no matter our age. And that we *were* created with courage and daring coursing through us.

Isaiah tells us, “Even youths will faint and be weary,

and the young will fall exhausted;

but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,

they shall mount up with wings like eagles,

they shall run and not be weary,

they shall walk and not faint.”

God says, “even to your old age I am God,

even when you turn gray I will carry you.

I have made, and I will bear;

I will carry and I will save.”

If we are struggling with mid-life questions, we don’t have to do this work alone, and if this work exhausts us, God can carry us. This unraveling, this life transition, can be life-giving if we let it, with God’s help. We can let go of our regrets. We can forgive ourselves for the wrong paths we took or the right paths we avoided. We can embrace all who we have become, and recognize the negative and destructive actions and thoughts we have had in the past and choose to let them go. We can forge a bolder, braver, smarter, kinder, more fully integrated self that is open to new possibilities, embraces humility, uses the gifts we have been given and seeks to focus on love, not just for ourselves, but love for all that God loves.

Because in the end when we stand before God, we will face our biggest fear: That our life never really mattered in the big scheme of things and that God will judge us and find us wanting. We’ll try to justify ourselves before God, but ultimately it will not be what we own or what we drive that will matter. It is not the success of our career that God is interested in. God will not count the number of our wrinkles, or judge our BMI, or look with despair on the gray in our hair. God will not appreciate the riches we hoarded or the power structures we worked to uphold. God will only be interested in how much we loved, how well we loved, how deeply we loved, how much we fought for love, and how often we chose love when it would have been so much easier not to. That’s what will matter to God. That’s all that really matters when it comes to how we live our lives.

There’s valid criticism of these mid life questions that says only the privileged get to have such struggles. Only those who can be fairly sure of long lives and those who have real choices about their jobs and homes and lives have the opportunity to struggle with such questions. Those who are hungry or homeless or mired in poverty would find such mid-life struggles ridiculous. I think there’s a truth to that it is important to admit. But I do not think that disparages the questions we ask ourselves at midlife. I think that simply means we have to work harder in order for others to have the privilege to ask and answer such questions for themselves if they choose to do so. Which is why I think it’s doubly important that those of us who do get this privilege do it right, to struggle with our midlives in a healthy and generative way, and to do all we can to ensure that we work towards a world where everyone gets a chance to get to the middle of their lives, look back, look forward, and make the choice to live their best life in the years to come.

At some point in your life you may have thought or you will come to ask the classic midlife crisis question, “Is this all there is?” So know that there are two answers to this question. The first is “Yes, this really is all there is.” Life when it comes down to it is really very simple. Good things happen, hard things happen. Life goes on, no matter what. We all live. We all die. We are dust and to dust we shall return. And you really can’t take it with you. Like Jesus said, you can’t add an hour to your life by stressing out over it. It is what it is. Which is maybe why he also said that the birds and other animals seem to understand life better than we do.

The second answer to that question, “Is this all there really is?”, is “Yes, and isn’t life pretty amazing?” You exist. You get a chance to live and grow and create. You live on this fabulous planet where birds fly by and perch on trees and sing gorgeous songs that have nothing to do with you but you get to enjoy it anyway. No matter how long or short our time here is, that’s a gift. But also, “No, this isn’t all there is.” Because God has promised us a new Realm that we can’t even fully imagine. A place where justice and love reign forever. A kin-dom that is drawing near even now. As good or bad as life might be right now, God promises us that it will get better. God promises us and even occasionally gives us glimpses of an amazing world to come. But for this moment, living here in the amazing world we have in front of us, with the beautiful and hard live we have been given, let’s live the best we can. That’s how we not only *survive* midlife, but *thrive* because of it. May all our struggles and questions, no matter our age of stage of life, help us to remember that. Amen.