

"Vee Get Too Soon Oldt, und Too Late Schmaradt!"

Text: My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle,
and they all come to an end with a sigh..."
Job 7:6

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To one who comes of Scottish parentage wears the Macbeth Tartan kilt, even if these later days it takes a huge stretch to get it all the way around me; and to one who is a pastor in a Church which took root in Scotland, it might seem a little strange that I would venture over across the English Channel and use a German idiom from the lore of the Pennsylvania Dutch. But I did have a Stuttgart born German Grandfather Conrad who would like this sermon.

Those Pennsylvania Dutch are not the proper wooden-shoe from Holland. They belong to the simple but stalwart Christians who escaped Europe during the persecutions of The War of the Palatinate. (The Thirty Years War if you prefer.) The Pa Dutch are ones that are truly Amish and of the Mennonite tradition. Using horse-drawn buggies for transportation, they are devoted to the simpler times of long ago and refuse to accommodate themselves to the fast moving technological madness which has consumed the rest of us. They also have an elemental wisdom about how life is to be lived, which is conveyed in the gathered sayings of the Pennsylvania Dutch.

I grew up in Western Pennsylvania, home of "Sixburgh" Steelers football. The Presbyterian Church in that area is far less important than Super Bowl fame. But like North Carolina, tons of traditional Scots settled there and brought their Reformed faith with them. In fact they used to say that "Presbyterians were 'denser' in Western Pennsylvania than anywhere else on earth." In polite company I should not add that the same could be said of Charlotte –denser- i.e. There are some Mennonite and Amish outposts all around the nation, but their real homeland is in Eastern Pennsylvania: near Lancaster and Reading, York and Collegeville and even Intercourse, Pa.

I used to have a friend up there named Paul Reinhold. He always had a list of

his favorite sayings and would bring them out any time you asked, and even when you didn't. Like laughingly he would ask, "Have you heard this one?" "Ach, it wonders me!" or "Throw the cow over the fence some hay." Originating of course from the transfer to English of a different sentence order, like "Throw Amos down the stairs his hat. Or, "Kissing wears out, but cooking don't." Or my wife's favorite, "The hurrider I go the behinder I get!" Or the one which most grandmothers adore: "A big barn and a big wife never did any man harm!" Or a sad one of the old spinster: "She went to the city to be went with, but there was no one there to take her!"

My favorite you can see from the topic of our sermon: "Vee get too soon oldt, und too late schmart!" That is, life is gone before we know it, and we stay just as dumb as we were. The Bible says the days of our years are three score and ten . . . yet they are soon cut off and we fly away. (Psalm 90) Willie Nelson used to sing "Ain't it Funny How Time Slips Away?" No Willie, it ain't!

One time the song George Burns used to sing: "I wish I were eighteen again," was widely popular. "I wish I was 18 again, going places that I've never been." A local radio disk jockey conducted a survey on the air one evening, asking people to call in and say whether they wished they were 18 again. Oh most of them were middle and older aged folk who lamented that life moved too fast - "The older you get the faster it goes."- Some said they would not want to go back. It got a little boring. Then a call came and a woman's voice said "Yeah, I wish I was 18 again. I have made such a mess of my life. I got all tangled up and messed it up and I lost my boy friend and my job and I have been unhappy ever since. I wish I could go back and be 18." Noticing the sound of her voice, the host asked, "Well Natalie, how old are you?" She said, "I'm 22!"

One day when I was about 50, I lamented with my father how quickly time seemed passing. All he said was, "Just wait and see." I have, and I have

seen. Carl Jung warned that if you do not live the stage of life you are in to the fullest, then you will spend the rest of your life pining to go back. It is true in things philosophical, it is true with family, it is true with friends, and it surely is true with marriage.

There are two ways of looking at life: You can look down . . . or, you can look up. You can take the passing years as a burden, to be carried like a big old sack of potatoes; or you can look up to the Lord and turn the burden over to him.

I read our Bible lesson from the Book of Job. It is a touching passage. After a string of natural and personal calamities, including the loss of his farms, the death of his children and his own miserable illnesses, Job assumed that all of his days of pleasure were over. It's hard not to feel that when life mashes you down. He was astounded at how quickly the years had passed. He wrote: "My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle." The shuttle on the loom is what he was referring to. It snaps back and forth Click, click, click -- that's how fast a shuttle goes. "My days run away and flee," he added, "like an eagle swooping down from the sky." T.S. Eliot asked:

Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
Bring us farther from God and nearer to the Dust.

I say to younger people: You are at a great time of your life. You can look at the future and ask: "What can I do to forward the movement of God's world?" What can I do to help? How can I find a worthwhile path? . . . But, I warn you, the question soon changes; same question but in a different tense. It no longer is "What can I do?" It becomes (click, click, click): "What have I done?" The way you answer it then will depend on the way you start out now. The way you finish is related to the way you begin.

I had an Old Testament Professor in Seminary, the famed James L. Kelso. He was a formidable piece of work: eccentric, excitable and exhausting. He was a tough grader. There was no nonsense in Dr. Kelso's class. I survived and I got to know him as a friend later when I was got to preach in the Church he attended on Sundays. He told me an interesting story. He did not believe in the system of giving grades for papers and exams. So did I – for a different reason. He said his students were predictable, he could tell from the first exam what they would ultimately do in his class. He said "Now and again somebody fools me, but most of them finish the way they begin." Most of them finish the way they begin.

I am a little past retirement age now. I have lost track of most of the people I knew when I was young. That's sad. But thankfully I have managed to hold on to a few of them. And Dr. Kelso was right, not only in a class in Old Testament, but in many other ways. Most of us finish the way we begin. The ones I could trust then are the ones I can trust now. The ones who were braggarts then are still bragging about how great they are. The ones who cut corners in high school and college are still trying to cut corners in their retirement. It's not that no one ever changes; it's just that the way you start out now, when you are young, is the way you will probably end.

Sometimes I think nothing ever really changes in the world. I started preaching fifty years ago. I have changed and grown old and out, but I still think the second best sermon I ever preached was the second one I preached back in 1961. 47 years ago. I don't know how or why, but when I collected my favorite sermons for publication, that one was always there, called "When God Wears Us Out!"

I have been planning ever since to do certain things about my life, my style, my publications, my record keeping. I am not too organized and I am a past

master at procrastination. I was always going to analyze a full year's tapes of my sermons to see what trends I had developed. I had planned to lose weight. That was 60 pounds ago. Another goal was making what Santayana called "Scribbles in the dark." I was always going to put a pad beside my bed so that I could make notes in the middle of the night. Or I was going to get myself a Stand-up Teachers' Desk because I love to write standing up. Fifty years later and I still have not done that either. Does it sound familiar?

"Why didn't somebody tell me?" They probably did and I was not listening. So I am telling you now: (Are you listening?) The anchors of your life must be set to hold against the wind. The moral bulwark you build around your life to defend you from the passing fancies and perils of the world begin the first day you think of it. It is a never ending task. Let me give you an example:

I grew up in a Presbyterian home and I gave my life to Christ and asked him to come into my heart when I was a young man. I have never wavered from that decision. But, people often ask me how I came to believe the things I do about my theology and how I manage to incorporate into my mind and soul the changing knowledge of the world with the presence of the unchanging Christ and the One Eternal God. "Don't you ever have doubts?" they ask. Well sure I do, and sure does everyone else who is honest with you. And further, I have a pet theory that Jesus Christ had far more doubts about the earth and the heavens than the Gospels have time to tell us. So, what do you do?

In my case I call it building a fortress of faith, a Castle, like the impregnable one in Franz Kafka's philosophical novel of that name, only my Castle is not so much to keep other people out as to keep me protected within. I have known some, who like in the Parable of the Sower in Luke 8, got off to a good start and then withered and fell away. Some of the seeds fell among the rocks, some fell among the thorns and the thorns grew up and choked it. But some

of it fell on good ground and it grew and yielded a hundred fold. Like seeds, your faith has to be in good ground; you have to nurture it and water it and pray for it. If you care about your faith and want it to live and grow with you, you need to keep working on it all the days of your life. Never give up on stretching yourself to learn and know more of Jesus Christ and his ways with you and God's way with the world.

A friend Hank McCall wrote me last week and included his estimation of what it takes to keep vibrant in your older years.

“Regardless of age or wealth, keep going. To retire from active effort is to dig one's own grave. The way to keep going is to keep going. Keep riding your bicycle until you fall off.”

Samuel M. Lindsay,
Pastor, Royal Poinciana Chapel

I love that: “Keep riding your bicycle until you fall off!”

Anyway, I was speaking about the need to keep on building your spiritual depth and power also. I did it this way, starting 50 years ago. I felt that the first foundation stone I had to lay was the broadened conviction of the Creator God. Either Genesis was right that God created the world or it isn't. I opened up all the possible doors to explore this foundational truth. At the time I had become convicted that the Theory of the evolutionary origin of human beings, as seen in Darwin's natural selection and others was correct. Not that I chose to but I came to believe it, an unpopular belief at the time which caused me some difficulty in the Parish.

In that conflict I spent three years on a fellowship grant in Scotland and earned my Ph.D. degree, with cross discipline theses on the implications of the evolutionary origin of man for the moral question of the creation stories in Genesis. It was hard work, an uphill battle all the way. But God lead me to

believe that those two theories are entirely compatible: it was possible to weave my religious belief in the Creation story with the scientific hypothesis that we belong to a long and complicated developing process. Otherwise I would have remained lost out there in the hinterlands. That was the first pillar of my faith for the modern world. It sounds so elementary now: God made the world and he created us to do his will and purpose on the earth. Boom, laid down and cemented in place!

Then God moved me on to the Bible. I grew up being taught that every single word in the Scriptures was dictated by God, and I believed it. In college though we were introduced to other possibilities in Biblical interpretation. Later, it was the rage in Seminary for young professors to teach that "The Things That You're Liable to read in the Bible Ain't Necessarily So." (That's actually from Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess.") We were taunted with all kinds of theological and Biblical Criticism: Form Criticism, higher criticism, historical critical methods led by Germans like Harnack, Gerhard Von Rad Rudolph Bultmann. I was in a spin. Where could you find the Word of God in all the changing interpretations? So it was time to place another foundation stone to hold up my personal theology.

So, I became in part, a Bartian, i.e., believing with Karl Barth that God chose to finalize the 66 Books we have in the Old and New Testaments as his Word to men and women. Barth taught that you could do all the Criticisms of the Bible, but what you had to do was sit down and read it. And like the trapeze artist in the circus tent, to use one of his images, God will speak to you and guide you as you tip toe along the dangerous tight rope across the chasm of modernity. And I still say to this day that I am never a better Christian or have fewer questions than when I am reading the Bible not trying to analyze it. Billy Graham said early in his ministry, that his success for the Lord "began the day he started to preach the Word of God and quit trying to defend it." The Bible can take care of itself. But you see I had another foundation block

in my faith.

We don't have time, but then I struggled to get some other blocks in place and built my fortress. I worked on what I believed about the miracles and whether healings were still possible in our time. Then I immersed myself in the matters of the Virgin Birth, the conflicting Christmas stories, the Physical Resurrection, the Ascension, the Resurrection of the Dead and the Parousia – The Second Coming – of the Lord. Each time I looked it over as completely as I could, then I made a decision and put that stone into its place. Once my stones are cemented in, I never tamper with them. I have never tried to remove a single one. I move on. You would be surprised to learn what some of those stones say to me. They are not all orthodox, but they all are mine.

And I am still working on my fortress. Right now, in this rapidly changing age, I am trying to figure out how Jesus might handle those of other faiths, how Jews and Muslims and Buddhists and the rest can come under his wings and enter his kingdom. It is hard for me to believe that God would send one of his children to hell because they grew up in a different culture and religion.

But I take heart at my unfinished business. Professor Donald Baillie of St. Andrews University once said that his whole life was a matter of climbing mountains of the faith. He added that just when he reached the top of one, there was another one waiting for him to climb. His brother John once asked him what he would do when there were not more theological mountains to climb. He replied that when that day came his life would be over.

I mentioned Kafka's philosophical novel about the impregnable Castle in Prague and the exhausting attempts to enter it; well you may already that he never finished the Novel. In fact it ends in mid-sentence, with two clear but different endings already outlined on his desk. Keep on riding your intellectual bike until you fall off of it!

I adore the little book by John Cowper Powyss, with a disarming title: The Art of Growing Older. It sounds so simple. But, I have never read anything so deep on how to affirm the passing years. Dr. Powyss wrote that he thought of his middle years as being the "afternoon" of his day. Sure enough the morning was gone. Each new morning is a gift. You get ready for work, take a little time for lunch, go back to work. Tiredness creeps over you more as the day wears on. But, while mornings and afternoons have their individual character, honestly, there is not much you can do in the morning which you cannot do in the afternoon.

Then comes the evening. They were his favorite time of day. Hard labor is usually over. Energy lags, the night is drawing nigh; it is a quieter time inside. "Pray God," Powyss wrote, "that there will be someone you love waiting for you at the end of the day, a spouse or child or friend, or even a little puppy.

From the Midlands of England, he said his favorite evenings were the ones in which he could take his dog out on a long walk along the sea. "You are foolish if you allow the waning hours or years to tear away your happiness by pondering unkept promises or unfulfilled desires," he wrote. St. Paul added that when he became a man he gave up his childish ways. Most people don't. Powyss said, "It is all so simple. There is no fear, no regrets, no looking back. The closer you get to home, the more relieved you feel. And when you see the light in the house that is waiting at the top of the hill, you know inside that everything is going to be O.K.

If things are beginning to settle in for you; or if you must set your life's goals around the needs of one you love; or if you are nearing retirement and it puzzles you; or if you already passed retirement and you are wondering where things are going next. Emerson wrote, "It is only as time with relentless fingers tears most of the pages from the book of life that we realize how precious and important are the remaining ones." Right? Right.

Now a little summary in four parts: (1) First, relax. Take some time to smell the roses. Early one April Santayana was invited to teach at Harvard University. He walked into the lecture hall, looked out the window, saw the forsythia was in bloom, the daffodils danced in the breeze, the crocuses were everywhere, the tulips bright and colorful, He smiled and said: "Excuse me ladies and gentlemen but I have a date with spring. I invite you to join me on the lawn." And to their everlasting delight, he walked out the door to behold the loveliness that God had given to His world and they all followed him.

Have a date with yourself, to find and fulfill the purpose for which your life was made. Don't waste it or hurry it or squander it away. Say: "I intend to use my time to find Christ's inner peace, to share His love, and to live forever with His unbounded grace." There is not much you can do in the morning which you cannot do in the afternoon or the evening. Thank God you made it.

(2) Second, keep it steady as you go. Like in Golf, sometimes the front nine doesn't go well. A friend one day had a disastrous front nine, like a 57, high for him. He wanted to quit and have a drink at the clubhouse at 9. I said, "Nah, there is still time to recover." And he did. He came back in 41. There is time to recover, to correct past mistakes, to start out again, and to make a success of your life.

But be careful: The opposite can also be true. You can turn it all bad on the back nine. Lots of people get off to a great start: fine home, good health, great job, great spouse, perfect children, tons of money. But then something happens. Call it a midlife crisis. Call it bad luck. Call it an old man trying to be young. Call it stupidity . . . whatever . . . but, people can turn against themselves. A great first half is no guarantee that the second half will follow. If there is time to recover, there is also time, I warn you, when it can turn upside down. Keep it steady, keep looking.

(3) Third, relax a little. Norman Vincent Peale once said that the patron saint of the United States must be St. Vitus Dance. We are so fidgety and determined to get our own way; we jump around all over the place. Come on now, you are not as important as you think you are. One of Cromie's Laws says: "If you have to tell them how great you are, you ain't!" It all belongs to the Lord. In one congregation I served years ago, I was anxious, even impatient, to get the church moving and improve. They seemed to be content to stay as they were. But the church was on the edge of a burgeoning suburb, with tons of young families moving within walking distance, and some wanted the church to move ahead. I was in the middle. I pressed on and I was getting frustrated. Then an old elder came to me one day and said, "Relax, Richard, this church was here long before you came; it will still be here long after you are gone." It was and it is. In fact it is thriving now. We each have a little part to play, but it is a emphasize the Little, a little part to play.

(4) Fourth and final: when you get too soon old and too late schmardt, you have to find a deeper level to anchor in and you need a time for spiritual things, to firm up your faithfulness to Christ. Cicero lived a long time ago and wrote de Senectute, a book on growing older. I quote: "Each part of life has its own pleasures. Each has its own abundant harvest. We may grow old in body, but we need never grow old in mind and spirit. We must make a stand against old age. We must atone for its faults by activity. We must exercise the mind as we exercise the body. Life may be short, but it is long enough to live honorably and well. Old age is the consummation of life, rich in blessings. . . ."

And to that the Bible says "Amen." Jesus Christ never had the privilege of growing older. But, in Him, all things are new, any time, all the time. The privilege of being born again is not assigned to any age. Nicodemus was old when Jesus told him to be born again. He said, "How can a man be born when he is old?" Jesus said, "How? First by surrendering you life to me, to give it

up into my care and keeping. And then by unfolding your self-centered life for the joy of others, and turning it all over to the Lord."

And why? Because otherwise you will fold in on yourself and smother your spirit. Let God be in charge. He promised that He will carry you to your grey hair. I called my ministerial cousin Howard yesterday in Ireland. I asked him how he was. He told me he had just been reading Psalm 37 and began quoting to me from verse 25. He was surprised when I quoted it along with him: "I have been young and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread. Depart from evil and do good, so you shall abide forever..." (Psalm 37: 25)

If God is in charge, you don't have to be. If he is awake all night, you and I can go to sleep. If he holds you in the hollow of His hand, you will be forever safe. Christ will see you through. And if you haven't learned that, ye have grown too late schmart. This is the only day of life we know we have. Yesterday is a memory. Tomorrow might be a good possibility. But for now, this one, this day is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it, for now and evermore. Amen.