

THE JOURNEY OF LIFE: THE MIDDLE YEARS
Psalm 90; Ecclesiastes 3:1-8;
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Maybe it's true that life begins at fifty. But everything else starts to wear out, fall out, or spread out. Middle age is when work is a lot less fun – and fun is a lot more work. Middle age is when it takes longer to rest than to get tired.

My intent this morning is to help us identify a faith for the middle years. When you are growing up as a child, you know, you have this impression that most of the turmoil in life takes place before you are 21. If you can just make it through adolescence to 21, it will be smooth sailing for the next 40 years or so, and then you'll be too old to care. Youth assume that people in the middle years have life under control: their parents, teachers, coaches....most all of their authority figures are people in their middle years. A corollary assumption is that people in their middle years are people of strong faith: in the prime of life, so why not in the prime of faith? From a childhood perspective adults have it all together; but when you become an adult, you discover that it isn't necessarily so. The middle adult years are anything but a settled time. They are years of change and challenge, years which call for faith, and shape our faith, and test our faith.

I once heard it said that middle age begins when the dog dies. The puppy Barb and I got while I was still in seminary grew up with us and it was a sad day when, in its 13th year, we had the dog put to sleep.

One day a woman I knew, a mother of several teen-aged children came into a meeting with glum look on her face. We said, "Elinore, is something the matter?" She said, "The dog died." But she didn't have a dog; what she meant was that her marriage had just died, her husband was moving out, and the strain of the middle years was showing on her face. The middle years are a time of great responsibility, advancing careers and raising families and paying bills and serving the community. They are a time of correction: when people give up the fantasies and deal with the realities. A time of aging: when you realize that if you had become a professional athlete, you would now be the old man of the game, 20 years older than today's stars, and your favorite heroes are on the senior's circuit. The middle years are busy years: we do not have time to read the books we should, to accept the invitations we'd like to, to make the wise investments we dream of. In an era of two-career couples, single-parenting, continuing education and so on ... the middle years are a time of life on the run!

And what of our faith? By our middle years we discover that the faith we learned in Sunday School, the one we put in a jar on the shelf when we abandoned the church at the age of 18 and are now opening again as we find our way back to the church, is not adequate. A few years ago I was leading a Bible Study, and something I said about the Creation stories greatly upset a thirty-something couple. After the class the wife said, "Tom, what you said about these Genesis stories was just so new. We never heard that before, it was so different from what we always have believed." I asked when the last time they had studied the scriptures? She said, "About 20 years ago, in Sunday School." I responded, "And since then you have grown up, matured married, divorced, re-married, had children, learned to operate computers ... do you

really think the faith you learned in 8th grade is enough to sustain you now?" I think of Carl Jung's observation: "You cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of life's morning; what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie."

So, before this introduction gets any longer, let's talk about a faith for the middle years. First, by reminding ourselves of the wisdom of the preacher in Ecclesiastes, who saw that for everything in life there is a season: a time to be born and a time to die, and in between a time for childhood and youth and the middle years and senior years, for laughter and tears and all the emotions of life. As life develops and changes, should not our faith keep pace?

A faith for the middle years is a **pilgrimage faith**. It is a faith that is on the move. The entire story of God's relationship with God's people begins with a call to pilgrimage. In a text we will look at next Sunday God calls Abraham and says, "Leave the land of your fathers and mothers, leave everything you ever knew, head out on this journey into the unknown and I will show you where to go." Nowadays we hardly go anywhere without first having a travel agent secure everything from our tickets to our ground transfers. Nothing left to chance when we book our reservations on-line. Abraham went out not knowing where he was to go," traveling by faith. Then later God called the Israelites out of the security of Egypt and led them into the wilderness - it was a long pilgrimage of faith before they reached the promised land.

Sometimes the journey through the middle years feels a little bit like the wilderness. We've left the land of our fathers and mothers; the securities of our childhood faith, and we are not sure where God is taking us. It is not nailed down anymore, we are on a journey. A woman in her middle years said to me, "It is a surprise, you know, to be living a life I never thought I'd lead. I wanted to be a mother with lots of children; instead I'm a single, career woman." Our faith is that there is a time for every purpose, and a purpose for every time, under heaven.

Our middle years can take us from security to a wilderness pilgrimage; our security is that Jesus was not fooling when he said, "Lo, I am with you always, even in the wilderness."

A faith for the middle years is a **faith of finitude**. That finitude is captured in the 90th Psalm: "The years of our life are threescore and ten; they are soon gone; so teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom." I appreciate the way this truth is expressed by Richard Masten in his poem, "The Second Half":

I turned 40 a while ago & came dribbling out of the locker room
ready to start the second half.
Glancing up at the scoreboard I saw that
we were behind 7 to 64.
And considering the score I'm beginning to be darn glad
this particular game ain't gonna go on forever.

But don't take this to mean I'm ready for the showers.
Take it to mean I'm probably gonna play
One heck of a second half.

I told this to some kids in the court next to mine
and they laughed;
But I don't think they understood.
How could they, playing in the first quarter
only one point behind?

A faith for the middle years is one which numbers its days, sometimes by way of regrets of things not begun, sometimes by way of celebrations of things accomplished. As one of the prisoners said in the camp at the *River Kwai*, "There are so many things I'd meant to try, so many contests I had hoped to win. And lo, the end approaches just as I was thinking of preparing to begin..."

A faith for the middle years is a **forgiveness faith**. By now we've learned that life is not perfect, and people are not perfect, and we ourselves are not perfect. In our childhood days we learned how Jesus forgives us, and how we ought to forgive others 70 times 7 times; but then we didn't feel the need for forgiveness, and we hadn't had to face the imperfections of others and ourselves.

But by the middle years we've made some mistakes we wish we could undo, but we cannot. "If you, O Lord, should keep track of our sins, who among us could stand? But with you there is forgiveness." We learn to live with ourselves not because of our goodness but by grace. By now we've shed the childhood illusions that our parents were flawless; or that the irritating habits of our spouses will go away; or that our children are always going to be the little darlings they were when we first rocked them to sleep. By now we've learned that our athletic heroes sometimes use drugs or gamble on games and that all our childhood heroes and even we, ourselves, have to be included in Paul's words, "For all have sinned." So in the middle years we either become bitter and disillusioned or we learn to live by receiving the grace of forgiveness and offering it.

And finally, a faith for the middle years is a **community faith**. It is a faith that must be nurtured by other people and shared with other people. That is the way God designed it when God chose a nation, when God formed a Church; it is what Jesus had in mind when he taught the Lord's Prayer with the inclusive, "Our" rather than exclusive, "My." It's a community faith, not to be practiced alone.

Often it takes the changes of the middle years to make us aware of this need we have for community. So many young adults drift from the Christian community in their late teens, then find their ways back as they move into their middle years. Maybe we have to get past the years of competitiveness, our struggles for achievement ... as one person put it, "our macho intensity." Maybe we even need to be knocked down, surrounded by prayers, lifted by a community's love. Maybe then we are ready to discover a community faith.

A father of several small children not long ago said, "I guess we are a typical family. My wife and I were brought up in the church, but stopped going when we went to college. Then we

got married and now we have children, and now we feel the church needs to be part of our lives again." I said, "Welcome back to a community faith!"

A pilgrimage faith, a finitude faith, a forgiveness faith, a community faith - it's a faith for the middle years. Thanks be to God. Amen.