

Feb 2 *Unafraid – Living with Courage and Hope* “Sickness, Growing Old, Death”

John 11:17-27

I Corinthians 15:50-54

Let's begin by recognizing that we're talking, not about sickness, growing old and dying, but the fear of these things. We're all going to get sick, grow old and die. We fear a lot of what happens in the aging process and even how we will die. We can't completely eliminate these concerns, and concern often morphs into fear, but we can confront them, come up with a plan and, even more, live in hope in spite of the difficulties.

There are a lot of reasons we fear becoming old. We fear becoming obsolete or irrelevant. We fear looking old. We live in a culture that idolizes youth, spends vast sums to hide signs of advancing age and uses phrases like “out to pasture” to describe the elderly. We desperately want to postpone growing old and looking old. I have grandchildren who tell me it is already too late for me.

We need to realize that we are valuable no matter what our age! Psalm 71:18 showed that long before today's hair coloring or anti-wrinkle creams, people feared that they would cease to matter to God as they grew older. It says, “So, even in my old age with gray hair, don't abandon me, God!” Throughout the Bible we hear that this fear is unfounded. God doesn't despise age. God calls us to serve at all ages, and always welcomes our willing hearts.

The psalmist goes on to say “You've taught me since my youth, God, and I'm still proclaiming your wondrous deeds!” Think about all the people that you have a chance to influence by your example and verbal sharing. These include your children, neighbors, grandchildren (or even great-grandchildren). In another place, God promises in Joel 2:28, repeated in Acts 2, “I will pour out my spirit upon everyone; your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams.” In our old age, God will continue to fill us with God's Spirit and give us dreams of God's will for our lives and for the world. We can celebrate that our dreams are important and maybe we will be upset when younger people do not want to listen to them. But we are also told those younger

people have a word to say to us and the world. We are called to listen to the visions of those who are younger. Sometimes their visions are of a world we don't really understand! Only as all are valued and what they say given importance, can God's spirit be unleashed on the world in fullness.

No matter our age, we matter, we have work to do! We need to celebrate this and realize how important we really are. The world might say we are out to pasture but God says I want you to continue, by your words, your works and your love to tell others about how great is God. Since we are the mature group I say to you, continue to have dreams, not of the good old days but of what new things God may be doing. Listen with hope to the visions of younger people. No matter our age, celebrate that life is good and blessed by God right now.

We need to address the fears that we have about this aging process. They are real. As we age we begin to have more health issues and this worries us. We all face declining abilities both mental and physical and we are afraid. We fear becoming incapacitated by a stroke or other serious ailment. There isn't probably a one of us who doesn't have a moment of anxiety when we can't recall something important and wonder if this is the start of something more serious. We worry if we will have enough financially to pay for a last illness. There is probably even more that causes us to worry. And all of these fears are legitimate because they have happened to people we know and love. None of us want to end our days in a nursing home, penniless or incapacitated, but it happens.

I would like to say, do these three things and you will have nothing to worry about! Unfortunately, there is no magic solution. Aging can be tough. The road to our death can be challenging. We need to do what we can now that is preventative, like eating right, being in community with others, exercising and all the rest. We need to have as good of a plan as our finances allow for end time health issues and then we need to let it go. Worrying about what might happened won't keep it from happening. When those fears creep into your thinking take a deep breath, remember God is with you and release them.

Ultimately, the way to release most of the fear is to acknowledge that we will die to eternal life. At first this does not seem very comforting, but here is why this is ultimately good news. From ancient Rome to today, the “ultimate” human threat is, “I will kill you.” Roman officials puzzled over how little that threat seemed to affect Jesus’ followers. Jesus, who died and rose again, set his followers free from even the fear of death.

Think about the power of the scriptures that we shared today to free us from the fear of death. When Christ saw his friend Mary grieving the death of her brother Lazarus, “Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” He tells us that death has been defeated. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul writes: “When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’”

When someone we love dies, we often use “combat” language, sadly saying things like “she lost the battle.” But Paul reminds us that death never “wins.” For a Christian, death is not a defeat, but a transition into a new phase of our victorious walk with Christ.

Easter is God’s answer to our deepest fear. God came and walked among us in Jesus. He died and was buried, but on the third day rose from the grave! When Christ stepped out of the tomb humanity’s greatest enemy was defeated, the deepest source of our fear.

When we actually trust this, it will be okay when we die. We grieve saying goodbye. But we have the hope that our goodbye is only “for now”. We remember the words of Jesus to his disciples the night before he died: “Don’t let your hearts be troubled, trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?” Like David in the 23rd Psalm, we can say, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for you are with me.” This hope changes how we face our own death, and helps us to grieve as those who have hope when we lose someone we love.

Indeed, "Death has been swallowed up in victory!" Trusting this gives us the ability to live life unafraid, with courage and hope.

I am not saying that the dying process will not be scary. You probably can identify with my mother's sentiments as she was facing the last years of her life. She often said, "I don't fear death, I fear how I will die." Yet no matter how challenging our last days might be God is with us.

Jesus faced evil and death at their very worst and defeated them. We always need to focus not on our dying but on what happens afterwards. How we die might be challenging and messy. I had a professor in seminary say that the great hope of every person is to live to be 99, in good health and a clear mind. On the last day of their being 99 they get up, run a race, spend time with their family and then drop over dead. Unfortunately, he would smile and say, "I doubt that hope will be realized." Knowing God is with us makes it easier to trust in the walk of life and ultimately we do not fear death. Easter is our story of hope and promise. Early Christians staked their lives on the truth of Jesus' victory over death. We do as well.