

Unafraid: 6. Aging, Sickness, and Death
Proverbs 19:23, 1 Corinthians 15:54, John 14:
May 20, 2018
Pastor Steve Richards

Forty years ago this weekend, I graduated from college. As I say that, some of you are already doing the math to figure out how old I must be. And some are thinking, “he’s old” (I didn’t tell you that I started college when I was 8!) and others are thinking, “he’s younger than I thought.” Which am I? We all age from the moment we are born. We all are given a lifetime though nowhere are we told how long that will be. Forty years ago, I was eager to get started with the rest of my life, though I really had no idea what that might be. I just wanted things to happen. Wanted to get older and accomplish something. And now? As Bill Clinton said a few years ago, “I have more yesterdays than tomorrows.” My Dad lived to be almost 91. That’s another thirty years for me. I did a funeral for someone in our church who was nearly 102. If I lived that long, it would give me another 40 years, but even that is not very long. And statistically, that’s not likely, but I’m hoping.

AARP put together a video ago in which they asked millennials, “How old is old?” Take a look. [video] I am not the same person I was forty years ago, and mostly that’s a good thing. I’ve gained experiences that I cherish, and picked up wisdom that has improved my life and the lives of people around. I’ve learned not to repeat certain things. I’ve witnessed the ups and downs of relationships. There has been sickness and grieving. And I must admit that each new decade has arrived with a certain sadness that the pace of this aging process is not slowing down. The woman at the end of the video says: “As long as I’m growing and learning, then age doesn’t matter.” And yet it does. Most of us fear growing old.

One survey that I saw identified the top fears of aging: losing independence, poor health, financial security, and becoming irrelevant. That’s the one that gave me reason to pause. In this year’s winter Olympics, one of the questions was whether Shaun White [slide], the snowboarder who captured the Olympic gold when he was 19 years old would be able to do it again 8 years later. [camera] He had suffered a horrible fall months earlier that had left him severely injured. Many were surprised when he qualified for this year’s Olympics. If you were watching the competition, the announcers kept referring to him as old – could this old man win the gold – and it looked doubtful, until his final run which was flawless. He won the gold, and I cheered! Mostly, I was cheering for all of us old guys over the age of 27. It all seems downhill after 30 or 40 or 50, so you go out and get a red Mustang convertible. There comes a point where you want to hold off the aging process or fool yourself into thinking you are younger than you are. Sometimes it’s in harmless ways like coloring your hair or cosmetic surgery. But then others respond by messing up their marriage with an affair or addicted to something in an effort to feel young or hold off aging – and they simply mess up life.

The Nielsen Company surveyed 30,000 people from age 18-85 asking them about their well-being, and here’s what they found. [graph] We enter our young adult years feeling good about our lives and then we get married and have children and our sense of well-being decreases, but then our children start getting older and we are feeling better about life, but then our children enter their teenaged years and our well-being declines until it hits bottom when are suddenly empty nesters and are left to figure out who am I. But then our satisfaction with life increases through our 50s, 60s, 70s and by the time we reach our 80s our overall sense of well-being is higher than it was in our twenties. There is an upside to aging. The Bible does not tell us we get older and then we retire. Retirement is never mentioned in the Bible, but there comes a point later in life when we are set free to do what God has created us to do. It’s not “retire from” but

“retire to.” We have time to invest in family and friends, to care about people, to serve in the community, to mentor people. To go to places and participate in adventures. Our last years are meant to be our best years.

Abraham and Sarah were well beyond the age of retirement when God called Abraham to go and made a covenant that continues until this day. Moses was 80 years old when God sent him back to Egypt to lead the Israelites to freedom. Luke tells us that Simeon was old and Anna had been widowed for 84 years when she identified the infant Jesus as the redeemer of world. Their greatest work for God was in their senior years. And if that’s where you are, God is ready to lead you into a new and glorious season of life. Are you ready to let God lead you? The prophet Joel said, **Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men (and women) will dream dreams.** It is important for those of us who are not yet “old” to listen to the dreams of our elders. And for those of us who have entered the second half of life, let us never stop imagining the ways God might work through us and adventures we might have along the way. God will stand with us every step of life’s journey.

One of our struggles is the fear of getting sick. In our bodies we have this early warning system that is meant to protect us. Our five senses are constantly sending information to the brain, looking for danger, and when there is a threat, hormones are released to prepare us – fight, flight or freeze. And this also happens internally when your heart skips a beat or there’s a pain or fever. Something is not right and your initial response is danger. But the rest of the brain is meant to help you process what’s happening so maybe your wake up in pain because you did yard work yesterday or you are reacting to something you ate or maybe it is time to call 911. The challenge today is that we are bombarded with so many messages. Nielson rating estimates there 80 commercials for medicine on television every hour. And then there is the Internet. So we feel something or a bump appears and so we google our symptoms and come up with a diagnosis and then equipped with all those television ads, we make an appointment with the doctor so we can get the prescription that will save our lives. Only to discover what I thought was going to kill was a simple infection or nothing at all. Or we get a diagnosis and maybe that diagnosis is cancer and immediately you’re thinking, I’m going to die. When most people don’t. Or you are waiting a few days for the results of medical tests and you’re thinking the worst – I’m going to die.

Worry is a form of fear that grabs a possibility in the future and brings it into the present. It is imaging a negative future that may never happen. Jesus said, **Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself.** (Matthew 7:27, 34) What do we do? I think we need a spiritual practice. It’s what many today refer to as mindfulness. Stop and breathe. In fact, this Fitbit that I wear actually buzzes a few times a day to remind me to stop and breathe. For two minutes, breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out. Or use a breath prayer. In those moments when you are becoming anxious – “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” “Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” It is amazing how calming it is when I stop and breathe, and let the breath of God fill my life.

The real fear that we face is death. For every one of us, this life will come to an end – that moment when the heart stops and you take your final breath. What’s next? This early warning system that is meant to protect us from danger keeps pushing death back. It’s a battle. Don’t die. But is death really to be feared? The Bible tells us this life is just the beginning to the great adventure. In this life we try to learn all we can and we surrender our lives to God, but when this life ends, Jesus tells us **Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. My Father’s house has plenty of room; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am**

going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. (John 14:1-3)

Death is not the end. How do we know? God says, let me show you. At 3:00 on a Friday afternoon, Jesus said, "It is finished." And he breathed his final breath. He was dead and was buried and on the third day, he was restored to life. Death is not to be feared. It is the great beginning. The apostle Paul said, **When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death is swallowed up in victory."** Death is the victory! When we break through the tape at the finish line, we have entered something new and absolutely glorious. Revelations tells us: no more suffering, pain, death – all things are made new again. If we believe this, there is no fear. We grieve those who died, but with hope and joy that they have entered the greatest part of life.

This has been a series about facing life with courage and hope. Over 100 times the Bible says, "Don't be afraid. God is with you." But there is one thing the Bible tells us to be afraid of – fear the Lord. Some have looked at those words and understand God to be a God of wrath. In the words of Jonathan Edwards, the 18th century preacher, "we are sinners in the hands of an angry God." Be afraid. And if we are doing wrong, God will send us to hell. There is fire and brimstone waiting for us. But that's not how I understand what the Bible means when we read as we do in Proverbs: **The fear of the LORD leads to life.** This fear is a reverence for, a holy respect for. When Moses asked to look at God, God said, you can't survive the experience of looking at me, because God is so powerful that we would be unable to bear the fullness of what we see. We are told that if we stare at the sun, we could damage our eyes. God is the one who powers not just the sun, but the entire universe. We are to have an element of fear in the presence of God. When Abraham met God, he fell to his knees and hid his face. Moses did the same. God is all-powerful but his defining character is love. So we don't fear God in the way we fear other things in life. It is a holy respect and awe because God is greater than anything we can imagine.

The fear of the LORD leads to life. That fear is meant to drive out all other fears in life. Of what shall I be afraid if I know and am known and am in constant relationship with God? If God is even greater than death, why should I fear death? It was a year ago that my Dad died. So on Monday, I stopped at Fort Snelling where we placed my Dad's cremated remains and as I got out of my car to walk toward his grave, I suddenly remembered moments from my childhood when he would be driving home late at night and my sisters and I would be in the back seat. I would fall asleep. I felt safe and secure in his presence. When we arrived home, he would pick me up and carry me to my room, but I didn't know that at the time. All I knew was that the next morning when I woke up I was no longer where I had been. I was at home – his home.

In this life, there is much to fear, but we can rest safe and secure, knowing that there is one greater than all fears who will never – not today, not tomorrow, not for all eternity – will never let us go.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of May 20, 2018

Weekly Prayer: Come, Spirit of God, come! Set our hearts on fire with your truth and grace and power. Burn away all that distracts us from hearing, receiving and obeying your living Word. Grant us faith and courage to follow wherever you lead. Lead us in the way of life today, tomorrow, and forever. Amen.

Monday, May 21

Scripture: Isaiah 40:27-31, 46:3-4

Why do you say, Jacob, and declare, Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD my God ignores my predicament"? Don't you know? Haven't you heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. He doesn't grow tired or weary. His understanding is beyond human reach, giving power to the tired and reviving the exhausted. Youths will become tired and weary, young men will certainly stumble; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength; they will fly up on wings like eagles; they will run and not be tired; they will walk and not be weary.

Listen to me, house of Jacob, all that remains from the house of Israel who have been borne by me since pregnancy, whom I carried from the womb until you grow old. I am the one, and until you turn gray I will support you. I have done it, and I will continue to bear it; I will support and I will rescue.

Observation: Today's readings likely came from a time when the Israelites were returning to their ruined land after decades in exile. There were no "Babylon to Jerusalem" flights! The references in Isaiah 40 to "stumbling" and "walking" reflected the only way most exiles got home. So the Israelites were weary, and feared maybe God was too. But these prophetic texts said God never forgets his own. Israel (and we) could always hope and trust in God, because God has pledged to support us all our lives—and our God never grows tired like we do.

Application: Isaiah wrote, "His understanding is beyond human reach" (40:28). Our need to control, our challenge with "letting go," runs into our inability to control time. Even the best health and fitness programs cannot (honestly) promise to fully halt the aging process. How can really trusting in a God who's vastly wiser than you are renew your strength by setting you free from the need to try to control life's uncontrollable realities?

Prayer: Lord God, when I'm worn out, you are still full of eternal energy. As I age, you remain the same creative, caring God you've always been. Help me learn more and more to trust your timeless love. Amen.

Tuesday, May 22

Scripture: Psalm 71:17-19; 92:12-14

You've taught me since my youth, God, and I'm still proclaiming your wondrous deeds! So, even in my old age with gray hair, don't abandon me, God! Not until I tell generations about your mighty arm, tell all who are yet to come about your strength, and about your ultimate righteousness, God, because you've done awesome things! Who can compare to you, God?

The righteous will spring up like a palm tree. They will grow strong like a cedar of Lebanon. Those who have been replanted in the LORD's house will spring up in the courtyards of our God. They will bear fruit even when old and gray; they will remain lush and fresh

Observation: We live in a culture that idolizes youth, that spends vast sums to hide signs of advancing age and that uses phrases like "out to pasture" to describe the elderly. Psalm 71:18 showed that long before today's hair coloring or anti-wrinkle creams, people could fear that God would abandon us as we grow older. But, the psalmists said, God doesn't despise age. God calls us to serve at all ages, and always welcomes our willing hearts. (Look for the next LAUNCH seminar at Messiah to learn how to serve in life's second half.)

Application: In what ways have our culture's constant messages about the awfulness of growing older influenced your spending and behavior? In what ways, even subtly, do signs of age lead you to think less of yourself or other people? Do today's readings challenge any of your attitudes or actions? What is one way you want to revise your thinking about older people in the light of these Bible texts?

Prayer: O God, I'm so used to hearing (and saying) things like "too old" or "too green" that it's a joy to see that the Scriptures, and you, show no age bias. Free me from those biases, too. Amen.

Wednesday, May 23

Scripture: Luke 2:25-38

A man named Simeon was in Jerusalem. He was righteous and devout. He eagerly anticipated the restoration of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. The Holy Spirit revealed to him that he wouldn't die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Led by the Spirit, he went into the temple area. Meanwhile, Jesus' parents brought the child to the temple so that they could do what was customary under the Law. Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God. He said, "Now, master, let your servant go in peace according to your word, because my eyes have seen your salvation. You prepared this salvation in the presence of all peoples. It's a light for revelation to the Gentiles and a glory for your people Israel." His father and mother were amazed by what was said about him. Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "This boy is assigned to be the cause of the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that generates opposition so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your innermost being too."

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, who belonged to the tribe of Asher. She was very old. After she married, she lived with her husband for seven years. She was now an 84-year-old widow. She never left the temple area but worshipped God with fasting and prayer night and day. She approached at that very moment and began to praise God and to speak about Jesus to everyone who was looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Observation: We usually read this story at Christmas. But it also carried a generational message. Here were Mary (probably in her early teens) and Joseph, bringing an infant to the Temple to dedicate to God. Who greeted them? Simeon, so old that as soon as he'd seen Jesus he said to God, "Now let your servant go in peace." Anna, an 84-year-old widow. The young couple didn't brush the elderly off as out-of-date annoyances, nor did Simeon and Anna scorn the young parents as clearly too young to parent the Messiah.

Application: We don't know exactly, but Anna had probably been constantly in the temple for sixty or more years. It might seem a stretch to "worship night and day" (verse 37). How can your time spent worshipping God, praying and studying the Bible shape what you do with the rest of your time? How can you let your worship fill you with the same confidence and eager anticipation that it gave Simeon and Anna?

Prayer: O God, one of your names in the Bible was "Ancient of Days." I'm thankful you are the Lord of all my days, from birth through old age. Keep me aware of your presence with me. Amen.

Thursday, May 24

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:6-10, 16-18

God said that light should shine out of the darkness. He is the same one who shone in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay pots so that the awesome power belongs to God and doesn't come from us. We are experiencing all kinds of trouble, but we aren't crushed. We are confused, but we aren't depressed. We are harassed, but we aren't abandoned. We are knocked down, but we aren't knocked out. We always carry Jesus' death around in our bodies so that Jesus' life can also be seen in our bodies.

So we aren't depressed. But even if our bodies are breaking down on the outside, the person that we are on the inside is being renewed every day. Our temporary minor problems are producing an eternal stockpile of glory for us that is beyond all comparison. We don't focus on the things that can be seen but on the things that can't be seen. The things that can be seen don't last, but the things that can't be seen are eternal.

Observation: The apostle Paul wrote 2 Corinthians after a painful time, when many Christians in Corinth, biased by a set of false teachers, had turned against him. Later in the letter, he cataloged the many challenges he had faced in carrying out God's mission (2 Corinthians 11:23-28). Yet Paul did not let any of that destroy him. In verse 10, he tied his struggles to Jesus' death, which seemed the worst defeat of all and yet became a victory when he rose from the dead three days later.

Application: We sometimes feel shame about the realities of illness or aging. We see them as a sign of weakness or failure. Paul faced those realities, but saw them differently. Are there disciplines (Bible memorization, meditation, prayer) that help you access God's strength to keep your inner self moving toward victory even when your outer self is breaking down? How has the Bible's teaching that our eternal life starts now shaped your view of your limitations?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, on the days when life feels dark, when nothing seems to go right, help me not to be crushed or destroyed. Remind me always that "the worst thing is never the last thing." Amen.

Friday, May 25

Scripture: Hebrews 2:14-15; 1 Corinthians 15:51-57; Revelation 21:3-5

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, he also shared the same things in the same way. He did this to destroy the one who holds the power over death—the devil—by dying. He set free those who were held in slavery their entire lives by their fear of death.

Listen, I'm telling you a secret: All of us won't die, but we will all be changed—in an instant, in the blink of an eye, at the final trumpet. The trumpet will blast, and the dead will be raised with bodies that won't decay, and we will be changed. It's necessary for this rotting body to be clothed with what can't decay, and for the body that is dying to be clothed in what can't die. And when the rotting body has been clothed in what can't decay, and the dying body has been clothed in what can't die, then this statement in scripture will happen: Death has been swallowed up by a victory. Where is your victory, Death? Where is your sting, Death? (Death's sting is sin, and the power of sin is the Law.) Thanks be to God, who gives us this victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

I heard a loud voice from the throne say, "Look! God's dwelling is here with humankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." Then the one seated on the throne said, "Look! I'm making all things new." He also said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

Observation: 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. In 1 Corinthians 15, the apostle Paul boldly proclaimed a divine victory so sweeping that death would be "swallowed up." In John Wesley's sermon "On the Resurrection of the Dead," he quoted Paul and said, "Let this especially fortify us against the fear of death: It is now disarmed, and can do us no hurt." The Bible ended with Revelation's glorious vision of a world in which "death will be no more."

Application: When someone we love faces death, we often use "combat" language, sadly saying things like "she lost the battle." But Paul quoted the prophet Hosea to deny that death "wins": "Where is your victory, Death?" (Hosea 13:14) For a Christian, death is not a defeat, but a transition into a new phase of our victorious walk with Christ. Does the idea of death cause you fear and anxiety? How can internalizing the full meaning of Jesus' resurrection lead you toward greater peace as you await God's eternity, where death will be no more?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you went where most of us most dread going—the realm of death—and you emerged victorious! You offer me the choice to join you in that victory. I accept your offer of a life that lies beyond the power of death. Amen.

Saturday, May 26

Scripture: Psalm 111:7-10; Proverbs 2:2-6; 2 Corinthians 7:1

God's handiwork is honesty and justice; all God's rules are trustworthy—they are established always and forever: they are fulfilled with truth and right doing. God sent redemption for his people; God commanded that his covenant last forever. Holy and awesome is God's name! Fear of the LORD is where wisdom begins; sure knowledge is for all who keep God's laws. God's praise lasts forever!

Turn your ear toward wisdom, and stretch your mind toward understanding. Call out for insight, and cry aloud for understanding. Seek it like silver; search for it like hidden treasure. Then you will understand the fear of the LORD, and discover the knowledge of God. The LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

My dear friends, since we have these promises, let's cleanse ourselves from anything that contaminates our body or spirit so that we make our holiness complete in the fear of God.

Observation: This series of messages has called us to live above and beyond many of our most common fears. We've learned that trust in God can point us toward an unafraid life. There is one kind of "fear," however, that the Bible fully endorsed: "the fear of the Lord." Proverbs 3:6-7 gave a concise definition of the life-giving kind of "fear" today's readings called us to: "Know him in all your paths and he will keep your ways straight. Don't consider yourself wise. Fear the LORD and turn away from evil."

Application: “While we tend to associate the word ‘fear’ with a ‘hair standing on end’ or ‘fight or flight’ feeling, ‘the fear of the LORD’ is better understood as reverent awe. Indeed, the Lord is ‘fearsome,’ but not in the sense that some want to run away from or escape from God’s presence. Rather, we are called to approach the Lord with a sense of awe while in the presence of the holy.” (CEB Study Bible, Proverbs 1:7) Can you recall a time when you experienced this healthy, life-giving kind of fear in a particularly vivid way? Why would this type of fear cause you to want to draw closer to God, rather than to shrink away?

Prayer: O God, let me never lose a sense of awe at the privilege you offer me to accept your love and to walk through my life in your presence, with you as my Lord and guide. Amen.