

SERMON

12/9/18

Peril and Promise: An Open Door

In our culture, the older we get, the trickier it can be to talk about our stage of life! Somehow, it's easier and clearer earlier – we have a common understanding of what “baby”, “toddler”, “preschooler”, and “teenager” mean. But what about “young adult”, “middle-aged adult”, and “older adult”? Which years do these stages typically span?

When I headed to Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in 2010, I was interested to find that the student body fell roughly into three demographic groups. About a third of us had come straight from undergrad studies – these were the 20-somethings. Another third of us were mostly 30-somethings – some with young families. And the last third of us were mostly in our 40s, 50s, and 60s.

As you might imagine, this range of ages made for lively conversation and an enriching mix of perspectives for us all! It reminds me of what this *Wise Ones* series (planned by Susan and Worship Committee) offers us as people of different ages traveling together this Advent.

In my first semester at seminary, I took a class called *Human Development and Christian Formation*. Our primary text was Spiritual Growth Through the Life Cycle by Peter Feldmeier, a Catholic priest who got his PhD in Christian spirituality from Berkeley's Graduate School of Theology.

Feldmeier writes in general terms; and, of course, we are all individuals who move through life at our own pace and in our own ways. Yet there's something about his basic thesis that was very intriguing to me and continues to ring true: *we humans develop in ways that make us uniquely open to spirituality in different ways at different stages of life – from infancy through old age.*

Middle-age? Ugh.

When I showed up for that first seminary class, I was 50 years old - right smack in the middle of Feldmeier's definition of middle age: 40 to 65. So, when we were asked to present one of the life stages to the class – guess which one I was asked to present?!

At that moment, I wasn't feeling particularly excited about being middle-aged. Dave and I had really enjoyed our years of raising a family, but now our youngest two had graduated from college and moved out. There we were – empty-nesters - married 30 years and trying to figure out how to relate to each other in this new stage of life. I remember telling our marriage counselor: “I hate being such a cliché!”

I had also just finished serving as lead lay person at church. In many ways, I experienced that role as life-giving. At the same time, there had been so much that had happened during that time - including:

- the resignation of our much-loved pastor of 17 years, the search for an interim, and then for a new long-term pastor
- a major construction project required to make the building accessible, and
- initial conversations about becoming a welcoming congregation.

At the end of those six years, I was weary, a bit disillusioned with some people, and somewhat disappointed in myself, too.

A time of peril and promise

So, when faced with one of my first seminary assignments - to report on mid-life - I wasn't thrilled. But I wanted my younger classmates to get a little taste of the second third of life for themselves. So I decided to try to have some fun.

Luckily, two of my 20-something seminary friends were willing to help. Each got suitcases filled with symbols of all that people in our culture often accumulate by middle age – not just things, but also roles and responsibilities.

I started by giving them pillows to stuff under their sweaters to represent those pesky 25 pounds we Americans tend to put on between 25 and 50!

They also unpacked and were asked to try to simultaneously juggle:

- laptops and stacks of committee chair files
- a frying pan, hammer, and jug of laundry detergent
- a kid's soccer ball and musical instrument
- mortgage payment notices
- bills for after school activities, college tuition, and weddings

- yarn and knitting needles
- a couple of low fat cookbooks
- and workout clothes – plus a heating pad and bottle of Ibuprofen!

Our assigned class readings also named significant themes that often arise at this stage of life:

- The question of mortality can start bubbling up more as we begin to intentionally grapple with the reality that we will die one day. (I remember when my mother turned 60 and told me she'd started taking special note of people's ages when she read obituaries.)
- Thinking about our mortality can prompt us to look back on our lives - reflecting on those forks in the road, the big decisions that brought us to this point.
- Spiritual questions often begin to surface, too – “Does my understanding of faith still make sense? Are adjustments needed?”

Reflecting on these questions in the mid-life journey, Feldmeier quotes from Dante's *The Divine Comedy*:

*Midway in our life's journey, I went astray
From the straight road and woke to find myself
Alone in a dark wood. How shall I say*

*What wood that was! I never saw so drear,
So rank, so arduous a wilderness!
Its very memory gives a shape to fear.*

*Death could scarce be more bitter in that place!
But since it came to good, I will recount
All that I found revealed there by God's grace.*

Here in the last two lines, Dante hints at the rich spiritual potential of mid-life – one of those “thin places” in the human life cycle where we may be uniquely open to encountering the Divine.

This is good news for us at CMCL! According to the congregational profile the search committee gave me, as much as one-half of us are in our 40s, 50s, and 60s!

The second third of life can be a time of peril and promise - and the gifts that we middle-aged adults carry with us on our Advent journey this year likely reflect some of both.

In one hand – we may come bearing riches from full lives in this new season:

- The pure gold of meaningful friendships that have spanned many years
- The treasure of hard-won long-term marriages or partnerships
- Gifts of knowledge and expertise accumulated over decades
- And not always – but sometimes – at least a bit more money and/or time than we may have had at earlier stages of life

In the other hand – we may come bearing other kinds of gifts:

- Doubts and questions
- Newly surfacing fears about the future
- Shifting sense of what's most important - from the hard work to build a life for ourselves and our families (so necessary at earlier life stages) - to a growing yearning to impact future generations in good and lasting ways

Three spiritual practices from mid-life Advent “Wise Ones”

How might Zechariah and Elizabeth shed some helpful light for us this morning? They are mid-life *Wise Ones* in the Advent story – and like us, they carried their own human disappointments, weariness, and longings.

When reading and reflecting on this morning's text, I noticed Zechariah and Elizabeth modeling three spiritual practices. Might these point the way this Advent – not just for those of us who are middle-aged, but for us all?

1. They keep showing up
2. They adopt a servant stance
3. They humbly attend to the Holy

Luke describes Zechariah and Elizabeth as “righteous before God” - living according to God's ways, active participants in their community of faith. I'm struck with the matter-of-fact way the story begins with what seems like a very ordinary day. Zechariah's “section was on duty” and “he was chosen by lot” for that day's tasks. If he attended CMCL, we might say: “Check the

calendar. Yep, it's Zechariah's turn to lead worship. That's the person who usually lights the Peace Lamp, so he'll do it."

Zechariah simply did what it sounds like he had done many times over many years: rolled out of bed, got dressed, and showed up.

In my first weeks at CMCL, I remember meeting someone here who is an empty-nester. This person told me that she had been intentional about saying "yes" when asked to serve as a leader this year. She recognized how easy it could be to drift away from church for a while after young adult kids leave home. Instead, she is choosing to keep showing up. That's a Zechariah-like spiritual practice.

Zechariah showed up – and adopted a servant stance. The text says that he "was serving as priest before God...to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense...[A]t the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside." It was on behalf of the whole community of faith that Zechariah was serving.

Over these first three months at Community, it's been great to get to know a number of you – including many midlife people - who so faithfully serve God and others here. Just a few examples from the last week or two include: cleaning up after a potluck, helping with the youth wreath fundraiser, fixing broken toilets, playing beautiful music, trouble-shooting the sanctuary's audio system, taking care of little ones in the Fishbowl, planning Advent worship, serving on Council/Pastoral Team/committees/ad hoc groups, and volunteering with MOOS (the before school program for families with low income).

When Zechariah showed up that day with the intention to serve, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to him. Of course, "he was terrified" and overwhelmed. But the angel had good news: "Do not be afraid...for your prayer has been heard."

On the other side of fear and disappointment, Zechariah and Elizabeth were to experience unexpected "joy and gladness"! Others would also "rejoice" because the angel promised that their child would grow up to "make ready a people prepared for the Lord." God had big eternal purposes in mind and middle-aged Zechariah and Elizabeth had a part to play!

Showing up, serving, and humbly attending to the Holy were spiritual practices that proved breath-taking! Struggling to understand and believe, Zechariah was rendered mute and unable to speak after his encounter with this one who came standing in the presence of God. After conceiving soon afterwards, Elizabeth went into a time of seclusion. These two had much to ponder.

Might the Spirit be inviting us to intentionally show up this Advent – offering our admittedly mixed bag of midlife gifts?

How might we adopt the stance of a servant – the better to glimpse God’s good work in us and in the world?

And are there a few small ways to simplify our lives in the next two weeks in order to more humbly wait and watch for Christ’s coming?

While these questions may be especially helpful in midlife, opening ourselves up to see where they might lead seems a promising path for Wise Ones of all ages.

Show up. Serve in some small way. Humbly watch and wait.

Sometimes in midlife – and in other seasons of life - that’s all we can do. The good news is that’s enough.

With this in mind, I’d like to close with a middle-years prayer from the Northumbria Community. Let’s pray:

*Lord, help me now to unclutter my life,
to organize myself in the direction of simplicity.*

*Lord, teach me to listen to my heart;
teach me to welcome change, instead of fearing it.*

*Lord, I give You these stirrings inside me,
I give You my discontent,
I give You my restlessness,
I give You my doubt,
I give You my despair,
I give You all the longings I hold inside.*

*Help me to listen to these signs of change, of growth;
to listen carefully and follow where they lead
through the breathtaking empty space of an open door.*

Amen.

*Celtic Daily Prayer: Prayers and Readings from the Northumbria
Community*