

Discovering the Power of the Incarnation

Sermon 3—“The Power to Persevere”

Passages: 1 John 2:12-17
Luke 2:22-40

Does anyone here like growing old?

- What are some of the more difficult things about growing old?
- Are there any good things about growing old?

Two weeks ago, we started studying the First Epistle of John, written when John lived in the city of Ephesus, between 95 and 110 A.D. Most scholars believe that John wrote this letter when he himself was fairly advanced in age! In fact, in his second and third epistles, he refers to himself as “the elder” (“the old man”)! This was *a title of great respect* given to him by the community. Indeed, even though John was advanced in years, no one disregarded his words as those of a babbling old fool. Everyone listened to him as their “elder”! They saw him as a man who, over his long life, had gained much wisdom, particularly through his personal contact with the Lord Jesus Christ! His wisdom was sought out by young and old alike!

One of the sad developments in our Western society is the way our focus has shifted! Today, it is the young ones (particularly the rich and beautiful among them) who gain our respect. They are the ones we seem to applaud and idolize. We honour our young sportsmen and women as superstars, and flock to see our young music and movie stars as if they are gods. Young people dominate the hi-tech industries and the fashion industries; they’re on the cutting edge of design, engineering, and innovation. They have the new ideas! They also have with energy and drive to turn their new ideas into reality. Understandably, they are the ones that big business wants to recruit.

Clearly, in our society, youth is highly respected, while *growing old* can be seen as a curse. Indeed, those who are old are often ignored or shunted off to nursing homes! We have so little tolerance for our elders.

Now maybe I’m becoming more sensitive to this issue because I, myself, am getting older. But, my sensitivity to this issue is also because of the way the

Scriptures speak about “elders”. You see, in contrast to our Western fixation on youth, the society of John’s day treasured the elderly! Not only were they honoured as valuable members of society, but their contributions were solicited *by all age groups*, as today’s passage makes clear! I mean, it looks like John wrote a lot of letters, not just this one. In verses 12 and 13, he tells us: **“I write to you, children...; I write to you, Fathers...; I write to you, young men...”**. He’s speaking of this current letter. But in verse 14, he speaks of others letters that he has written. (Sadly, the NIV ignores this change in tense!) **“I have written to you, children...; I have written to you, Fathers...; I have written to you, young men... ”**)

Can you see? It is clear that these three groups had been regularly coming to John seeking his wisdom! They could see that he was a man whose faith had matured over his many years as a Christian, and so they looked to him as an important source of Christian wisdom. In what ways was John wise?

His letter shows us at least **three particular areas of life** in which John was very wise:

1. John was wise in his understanding of himself. We saw this last week! Over the course of his many years, John grew more and more humble. He was increasingly willing to admit his sins and failures and to seek healing in relationships. As a result, people turned to him for advice in their own broken relationships. As we saw last week, John encouraged his readers to grow in self-awareness, to confess their sins and pursue reconciliation in all relationships! That’s godly wisdom!
2. As we turn to today’s passage, we discover that John was wise in his understanding of the world. He could see the shallowness of its values and the emptiness of its boasts. It prompts him to offer these pearls of wisdom, found in today’s passage:
 - v15 “Do not love **the world** or anything in **the world...**”
 - v 16 “For everything in **the world**—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from **the world.**”

- v 17 "**The world** and its desires pass away..."

Of course, don't take John's words here to mean that he hated the world! John was well aware that God loves the world that He created. In the beginning, God declared His creation to be "good". And so, "**the world**" that John is talking about here is not the original creation. What John is talking about here is the current, corrupted state of the world; the world that is now sick with the effects of human sin. Of course, there are many good things in this world (like family, friends, nature, wine and cheese with my wife)! John knows this! But his reference to "***the world***" in these verses is a reference to the way even these good things have been contaminated with the destructive influences of sin. We live in a world where nothing is perfectly free from conflict, dissension, jealousy, or miscommunication. This is the world that John is talking about.

Of course, you might try to dismiss him as a man who, in his old age, has become cynical! But what I see in John is a man who, over his many years of experience, has come to see the world **as it really is!** He is wise.

3. John was wise in his understanding of human life. It's evident that, as John got older, he began to take more notice of the brevity of life-- how quickly it all passes by! (As I grow older, this is the refrain I often catch myself saying!) It is this realisation that makes an older person instinctively begin to shift in his/her priorities. An older person tends to place a greater value on the *things of eternity* than on the *fleeting pleasures of this life*. You hear this shift in John's language! Listen to verse 17.

¹⁷ The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.

John is clearly putting a higher priority on *faithfulness, obedience and perseverance* than on his own desires. In other words, as he gets older, his eyes are focusing on things that are *beyond* the temporary thrills of

this life. That's what getting old does! You look beyond this life... to a place beyond the grave. That's wisdom!

And it's the reason why **we need our elders!** We need to rub shoulders with them in worship and fellowship. We need to hear them tell their stories of faith and perseverance. And we need to ask them for their insights and advice, respecting the long road of obedience and perseverance on which they've travelled. **So, who is your "elder"?**

You may not know it, but I often turn to Len Abbott for wisdom and advice- he is my **"elder"**. And you may not know that the Anglican Church has a system of elders, called bishops. These are meant to be "elders" to the clergy; to give them wise advice and counsel. This is also the reason behind the tradition of *godparents* (which we've adopted here). A godmother or godfather is an older person who is further along, and who can share the wisdom of their experiences with a recently converted Christian. **Do you have an elder?**

You all know that I did my Doctoral Thesis on the Multi-Ethnic Church. My point was that we need them in order to grow and develop our unity! No group should stand alone! Each ethnic groups of the church needs the others! Well, in the same way that we need *multi-ethnic* churches, we also need *multi-age* churches! Sadly, however, the opposite seems to be the case! In most churches today, every age group has their own service, their own music and their own style of worship. This should not be! We are here to be the family of God, and to learn from one another.

Obviously, this was how it was in the church to which John was writing! It was a multi-aged church! **Look again at vv 12-14.** What does he say? He tells us that he's writing to three distinct age groups: **children** (those who are very young in the faith), **young men** (those who are getting stronger in their own faith and putting it to the test) and **fathers** (those who are now mature enough to lead others into the faith of Christ). Notice: John doesn't write three separate letters, but speaks to each age group, encouraging them to persevere through every season of life.

Now, let's stop here for a moment. I need to ask you a very important question! You see, the sermon series we are currently engaged in is a series

about the Incarnation. So, **what does “growing old” have to do with the Incarnation?**

John has already given us the answer back in verse 6! Indeed, his words in verse 6 operate as the foundational thought of today’s passage! **“Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did.”** So, how did Jesus walk? I just finished reading a book called *“The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry”*. It’s the story of a man who hears that a dear old friend is dying and so he writes her a very short letter and goes out to post it. But in the course of going to the Post Box, Harold decides he will hand deliver the letter...even though Queenie lives 600 miles away! And so, through the course of weeks...in rain and sunshine, amidst many ups and downs, Harold walks. And as he walks, he grows and matures and better understands himself... and life generally. When asked how he keeps going, all Harold can say is, *“I just keep putting one foot in front of the other!”* He simply persevered!

How did Jesus walk? *“He kept putting one foot in front of the other!”* From birth until death, he just kept putting one foot in front of the other! He simply persevered! This, my friends, is the connection between the Incarnation and growing old. The early chapters of Luke’s Gospel make this connection very clearly! From the day of his birth as a human being, Jesus persevered in life! Furthermore, even Jesus had “elders” in His life, like Simeon and Anna, who were there to confirm His calling and to speak words of encouragement to His parents.

It’s funny, but I think that for many of us, Jesus could have come down from heaven as a fully grown man, suddenly appearing in Israel as a 30-year-old Rabbi! That’s because we think the Gospel is only about Jesus’ death, and the rest of the story is only incidental to that! But if that’s the case, then we haven’t come to appreciate the Incarnation and its essential role in salvation! You see, **if** Jesus did suddenly appear as a fully grown man so He could die for us...**if** He didn’t have to grow up and go through every stage...every season... of human life, **then He couldn’t be our Saviour!** I think it was Ireneaus who once said, *“Unless the whole of human nature is assumed, the whole is not redeemed!”*

And that's why Luke makes it clear to us that Jesus began his journey of life *as a tiny, helpless baby*. That is, He assumed the totality of our humanity from its very beginning in the womb. Then, through each stage of life, Jesus grew and matured in his humanity. Like us, he simply kept putting one foot in front of the other! Luke makes this clear when, in speaking about Jesus' infancy, he writes (v40), ***“And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.”*** Luke says it again in verse 52, but this time he's writing about Jesus as a teenager! ***“And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.”***

Jesus grew! Each stage of life was important to his education in perseverance. *And that's how the Incarnation is related to getting old!* By assuming the full nature of our humanity and experiencing it *one season at a time*, Jesus was not only endorsing this process of growth and aging, but He was assuming it and thus **redeeming** it! In Him, growing old is a noble and wonderful thing! In Him, growing old has been **purified** and **perfected**, and given back to us **that we might appreciate it as a central component to the life of faith!** That's why we must now ***“walk as Jesus did.”***

For it is God's intention that we all ***“...grow in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men.”*** And as we grow, we must look to those who are further along the track than we are, to gain from their wisdom on the issues of faith. At the same time, we must invest in those who are less mature, sharing with them the wisdom that we are learning.

The end result is the church as **one family...one body**...at various stages in life... with the Incarnate Christ as our Head and Guide! Thus, we move forward in faith, taking each season of life as it comes and not getting sidetracked by the corruption of our world. We focus our eyes on that which is eternal! This is the same advice that John gave to his readers 2000 years ago, which I repeat for us here today: ***“The world and its desires are passing away, but the one who does the will of God lives forever.”***

Amen!

As we come to the end of this sermon, there's a song that I'd like to play for you that expresses the beauty of growing old.

(Garage Hymnal- ***“Bird in a Winter Storm”***.)