

Isaiah 42:1-9

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

Matthew 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.' Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

“Young Is A Stage: Get Over It”**Rev. Charles Schuster****January 9, 2011**

We're invited to the Fellowship Hall after the service. They have cake for us. Again, it's a statement of gratitude for the support we have given the church in many, many ways, and the support we have given financially for the coming year.

Bertrand Russell has said, "I was born at the wrong time. When I was young, no one had respect for youth. Now that I'm old, no one has respect for age." Carol Fox is doing a class here at the church, and the subject of her class is aging. The last two Sundays of this month, two sessions, 10:45. The information is in your bulletin. Two one-hour sessions on how to grow old without annoying your friends and family. I visited with her and we talked about what she was planning to do with that class, because it did line up with what I'm trying to do with the sermons. She has nine points that she wants to make, but basically, it's an approach to life that takes a look at life and says that things happen to us, and then we have a choice about what we're going to do to the things that happen. She has nine points, I have three. Reverend Fox's class will be excellent. I invite you to think about attending it.

The words of the French philosopher Rousseau: "The person who has lived the most is not the one with the most years, but the one with the richest experience." Some people want to grow old because they think it means wisdom and respect. Most of us realize that older is considered lesser. Unless we can find a way to be young while we age. The turn of the calendar from one year to the next, it's not about another year gone, it's about rich experiences pending. Finding a way to be young while we age, which is not denying our aging. Running off in some kind of unrealistic fantasy. But finding a way to be young at heart, while we may have become slow of foot, or even mind.

In our time together, let me suggest some perspectives on youth and aging. First of all, if we want to stay young while we age, we've got to find a way to be ultimately connected. you see, it begins with theology. It begins with our sense of God, and how we are related to that. One of the most remarkable speeches ever given, and it comes up again every year at this time at least, but many other times during the year because it is an incredible speech, and those words etched in our minds. Martin Luther King Jr. and his words, "I have a dream. I have a dream that some day, we will be judged by the content of our character, not by the color of our skin." What we have in that speech is often overlooked is how he began it, because it is a perspective that gave him, I think, the balance to say what he said, because he began that speech by saying, "I have been to the mountaintop." He looked over the landscape of life, not from the place in time by from the ultimate view. He was ultimately connected. "I have been to the mountaintop." It was Jesus who said, if you want to save your life, you need to be willing to lose it, and his suggesting the best way to discover who we are is to get out of the way of ourselves, and to find something about life to which we can be connected if we want to save our lives, we must figure a way to give our lives, so that we are prepared to lose our lives.

Henri Nouwen had some thoughts along these lines. He wrote, "Birthdays need to be celebrated. They are more important than successful exams or promotions or victories. Birthdays need to be celebrated, because a birthday means to say to someone, "Thank you for being you." Celebrating a birthday is exalting life and being glad in it. It's saying, "It's good that you are alive. It's good that you are walking with me on this earth. Let us be glad. Let us rejoice. This is the day that God has made for us to be together."

When Marv Levy was coach of the Buffalo Bill football team, he said, "You know, in life you've got to take some chances. If Michelangelo wanted to play it safe, he would have painted the floor of the Sistine Chapel." He was ultimately connected, I submit to you. Michelangelo looked over the landscape. He had been to the mountain. He knew that he had something important to do and he did it, and he put it on the ceiling of the chapel. If you've ever seen it, it is spectacular. But if you're going to see it, you've got to look up. You've got to look up. If we are ultimately connected we've got to look up.

Ernest D tells the story of two brothers, David and Mike. Mike was a successful business person in New York, and David took a job wherever he could get a job, at dude ranches and parks and resorts, seasonal jobs. Mike would send David pictures to entice him to settle down, like his mama wanted him to. Pictures of the good life, pictures of his HDTV set, pictures of his new car, his BMW car. And then one day, David sent Mike a

picture. Actually, a poster. It was a breathtaking view of Wyoming's Grand Teton National Park, and on the back of the poster, David had written to his brother, "I love seeing what you have, but this is my back yard." Being ultimately connected, we know what is important and what is not. We know what we have. Being ultimately connected is to be alive in our place and time. I had a funeral this week for Carla, for Carla's grandmother Ina. You don't know Carla. I will never forget Carla. She was 20 years old when it happened. It was 15 years ago, something went terribly wrong with her liver. They put her on a list. There was a day that they called her in for the transplant. They prepared her for surgery. She was ready physically and mentally, and then the surgeon came in and said, "I'm sorry, but the liver we have is too big. We're going to give it to someone else." Then there was the day she was up in the mountains, and on the edge of the range where the signal would reach, she had to keep a beeper, but the beeper went off and she got back to the hospital. Within an hour she was in surgery, where she received her new liver and her new life.

And there was a day when we did this, somewhat like what we had done at this church, when we went over to the children's garden at Spring Creek. We went to Dinosaur Ridge, which is in the Golden area, the Red Rocks area. If you've ever been there, if you haven't been there, they actually have dinosaur tracks. You can see the footprints in the rock of a dinosaur. We were up on Dinosaur Ridge, and we had arranged to have a theologian there. I was the theologian. We had three geologists. We had an entomologist. That's somebody who knows bugs. We had a meteorologist. We had all these ologists. And we were talking about everything that we could see from the perspective we had, and there were probably 50 of us, and some of us were not experts, some of us were just there. Carla was just there. It was her third day out of the hospital. And when we got through with this, somebody said, "What do you all see? Those of you who aren't educated, in some particular area, what do you all see?" And Carla raised her hand. I will never forget this, and she said, "I see it's a beautiful day."

She saw the larger picture. "A beautiful day. I look up at the blue sky and the white puffy clouds, I see it's a beautiful day." When I got to see her this week, we talked about that time in her life, and she said, "You know, when I came out of surgery, I realized that someone had to die, for me to be able to live, and I know that when I came out of that surgery, I was allowed to go home. I know that I participated in everything at the church and everything I could get into, and I have tried to do that. For the rest of my life I have tried to do that because I want to, I just owe it to the person who gave their liver, I just owe it, to live fully and completely." To be ultimately connected, to see the bigger picture.

Wayne Dyer writes, "To be mindful of the perfection of the universe and the creative source behind it, I've always felt that my presence here at this time is a component of the intelligent system, and my job on earth is to teach self-reliance and compassion." To be ultimately connected is to know there's a job for us to do, and it's not about making money, it's about living fully, and helping completely, and we don't grow old if we know we're connected to that.

God doesn't call the qualified. God qualifies the called. Secondly, I submit to you that we will stay younger as we age, if we are eternally grateful. This is not to say that life is perfect or we think it is, or that we are exactly what we would want to be. Bob Newhart remembers that day after he had retired and his wife said, "Bob, take out the garbage," and the comedian said to her, "I want to ask you a question. Do you think Joanne Woodward would have asked Paul Newman to take out the garbage?" And she said to Bob, "Bob, if you were Paul Newman, I wouldn't ask you take out the garbage." Someone walked up to Abraham Lincoln and said, "You are the ugliest man I ever saw," and he said to her, "I can't help it." And she said to him, "I guess not, but the least you could do is stay home."

We may not be Paul Newman or Joanne Woodward. We may not be pretty, but we don't stay home, and we don't linger over who we're not, nor do we live in envy over other people and who they are. Maybe life hasn't turned out for us the way we thought, but Will Rogers was right when he said, "We can't all be heroes. Some of us have to sit on the curb and clap while they walk by." But we can be eternally grateful for what we have and what we are. As you can imagine, the past weeks toward the end of December, right before Christmas, around the church, they were kind of hard. They were difficult. They were just tough. I mean, you've got sermons you've got to write, you've got letters you've got to write, you've got articles for the newsletter, you've got all these things, and meetings, and then you've got classes, and it's getting deep into Advent and Christmas Eve is coming, and you've got, what, five services on Christmas Eve, and then people die, and you've got a funeral, and then somebody wants to get married and you try to talk them out of it, but they're going to get married, and the pressure begins to build, and if you think it's tough on us, you ought to look at those poor folk who type those things that we write. Oh my goodness.

You know, one of the great things about the staff is, we support each other. We gnash our teeth together. We are supportive of each other, and we've got to the point where I've just got to thinking about all the stuff, then we looked outside the building, at those folks who worked for the roofing company, putting the new roof up on the church, and you say to yourself, "What are we complaining about? Another service, another sermon to write? Look at those poor devils up there, climbing straight up like mountain goats with ropes, pulling shingles off, putting them in a bag because they're contaminated, they've got hazardous material in them, and we're saying... what are we complaining about? And do you know what they're saying to each other? "Here we are, we've got to climb this building, we've got to put these shingles in these bags, and we've got to wear these respirators, because it's dangerous. But you know what? We've got a job. Some people don't.

Our church is an incredible place. We have done so much. We have great leaders. We have wonderful church members. There's a generous spirit, exciting classes, it is a great place to be. And I think part of the reason for that is a visit we had from Kent Millard. Some of you were here when he came. It was the night when he gave this presentation in the sanctuary. We had a new custodian who bumped one of the, remember that, one of those fire boxes and the alarm went off, and we had to evacuate? You may remember that

evening. Kent came, and you know what he told us? He said, "What you need to do at this church is to create a permission-giving environment. What you need to do is to set up a church structure where people have their dreams and their ministry, and what you do is, you build the structure around supporting those dreams and that ministry. That's what you do. And the only question you've got to ask yourself is, what does God need us to do, as this church? And what does God need us to become? So that it's all driven by mission, not money. Because the money will come if you're headed into mission."

And it did. And we stopped worrying about what we lacked, and started looking at what we had. And rather than be stymied by what we think we could not do, we began to think about the potential achievements, and we stopped the grumbling and began to be grateful. And a number of things came out of that. From that, one of the retired ministers said, "You know, I'm going to see if I can start a church in Wellington." Eternally grateful. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, those words you know came out of what's called Second Isaiah, those words from Isaiah come at a time when Israel was in captivity. It was the worst time in their history, and the prophet is speaking for God, saying, the old things have passed away, and I'm going to do some new things now. The blind are going to be able to see, the people in prison are going to be free. Eternal gratitude. Kent Millard, who came and who inspired us, has decided to retire. Wasn't planned. His wife has cancer. He wrote a beautiful letter to his congregation. I've got a copy. He and I have been in correspondence. He wrote, "My wife's recent bout with pancreatic cancer has been a wake-up call for me and made me realize how much I love her and I want to be with her, and spend as much time with her as I can."

And then, he went on to say, "On the first Sunday I came to this church, my sermon title was, "For all that has been, thanks, for that all that will be, yes." In quoting Dag Hammarskjöld, "I want you to know," he wrote, "I feel the same way today as I did then. For all that has been over the past 18 years," Kent Millard said, "in our ministry together, I say an emphatic thanks to you, and thanks to God, and for all that will be, with my family, with my wife, and with the future of this church, let it come. I say yes, with gratitude." Here is a man who is giving up work that he absolutely loves, whose wife is gravely ill, whose future is in doubt. But he is not bitter." Nothing will age us faster than an attitude that is resentful, and nothing will keep us young longer than an attitude that is the sense of gratitude. If we want to stay young as we age, we will want to count our blessings and avoid keeping score of our burdens or the cause for them. Resentment will pull us down. Gratitude will lift us up."

Halle Berry, the actress, said it. "I no longer scramble blindly through hardships. I no longer emerge from a bad time in my life just relieved to have survived," she said. "Instead of despairing, I try to find the lessons within the experiences." Eternally grateful. Ultimately connected. Finally.

If we want to stay young while we age, I think we will need to be absolutely present. If we want to stay young while we are growing older, we've got to be in the moment and we've got to enjoy it. I'm not sure John Elway was in the moment when he spoke of Mike Malarkey as a potential Bronco coach when Malarkey's name is Mark, or maybe it's the

other way around. I don't think George was in the moment when he wrote in his diary, "Nothing important happened today." George was the king of England, and the day he thought nothing happened was July the 4th, 1776, when the Declaration of Independence was signed. One of the most interesting and problematic parts of the Gospel narrative is the baptism of Jesus. It's a problem. Biblical scholars argue over what this means. Why would Jesus want to be baptized, because baptism is for sinners to repent, right? And it seems to me that Jesus wouldn't need to have done that. John the Baptist didn't think he needed to. What sin did he commit? Is there something we don't know?

See, I don't think Jesus was concerned about sin, his or ours. I think his baptism was a symbol of what it means to live life fully and with purpose. And I think he wanted to be baptized because he wanted to experience what all of us can experience when we begin to take our journey of faith seriously. And that's what that can symbolize. Absolutely present.

What Jesus was about was not sin that pulls us down, but salvation that lifts us up. He cared to think about God's spirit in the present. He cared about opportunities in the moment, and how we shouldn't miss them. Absolutely present in the water, in the living water, in the spirit of God, in the moment. To grow younger while we age, we want to be in the moment. I have noticed this year, as I have other years, but it seemed a little stronger this year, I... It was Target. We were trying to find something for our grandson. It was the Tuesday before Christmas, and almost everybody was walking around with cell phones, talking to somebody. Nobody was in the moment. They were there, but they weren't. I saw some of you'all. And if you were in the moment, there, you were alone in it, and you heard people talking to other people. It wasn't face-to-face, it was phone-to-phone. Pardon the pun - it was phoney. It's not present.

James Baldwin was right when he said you cannot fix what you will not face. I heard this woman talking on her cell phone. I listen to someone. "You know, it's when you do these kinds of things that I don't want to be around you. I thought you were perfect, once. I called you Mr. Right. I just didn't know that your first name was "Always."" The worst thing about growing old is that old people sometimes glamorize the past and want to live in it, but it never was as good as they remembered it. And the worst thing about young people is, they want to forget the past, because they think it's irrelevant. And if you do not understand the past, you're going to relive it. Moments are to be savored, not forgotten, but the past is to be learned from, not worshipped. It's the present, it's here. It's now. We have just celebrated the gifts of the magi, Epiphany, to the Christ child at Christmas. We don't know much about the magi. We don't know really where they came from. We don't know where they went. What we know is we're told in that legend that they had gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh, and we also know that they were present to Mary and Joseph and to the son. They were present. So we call them wise.

John Ortberg wrote a book, *When the Game is Over*. "When my son was very small, he loved to play with gadgets. One day when he was four years old, he had been working with a tape recorder an hour or so. He looked up at his mom and said, "Mom, you know what's the trouble with life?" "No, I don't, son, what's the trouble with life?" And the

four-year-old, sitting on the floor, reflecting on his Fisher-Price technology and the human condition, came up with something that is absolutely profound when he looked at her and said, "The trouble with life is that it doesn't have a rewind button." If life had a rewind button, we could change the past, we could live out our days ultimately connected, eternally grateful, and absolutely present. And we would discover the secret of youth and grow younger even as we age. Let us pray.