

Luke 2:36-38

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

“Fountain of Age”
Rev. Charles Schuster
October 9, 2011

That was Emily Krause, and she went to the White House for a reception and parked on the grounds and didn't get towed away. And after I finish talking to you, or with you, or at you, or whatever, I'd like to ask the eighty-year-old-plus members of our church if you'd be willing to walk out with me while we're going to hear a song by Lee Ann Womack. As I leave, if you would, because we want to give you something back there, and we want the congregation to acknowledge what you mean to us.

I think you can imagine, it wouldn't be hard to know that I get a lot of advice on a variety of things about the church, as a preacher here. People tell me how to preach, and they tell me from time to time what I should pray for, and they tell me maybe I shouldn't be using my notes, and sometimes they tell me I talk too fast, and I should slow down. And those reflections in the bulletin, they were given to us by senior members of our church, and the hymns today were chosen by the members of the church. "Chuck, why don't you pick some hymns we can sing?" People's choice. All about ten days ago, maybe a little longer, a man who's twelve years older than I am taught me how to fish, up here at Red Feather Lake. We were in a paddle boat. I got charley houses about the middle of the day. He's a lot older than I am, and he didn't. He showed me how to cast, and how to hook a fish, and how to net a fish, and how to bring it in. We got six of them.

Another member of the church, this past week in fact, taught me how to play golf. How to putt, how to pitch, how to drive. He said, "There's only one way to hit a ball." And then I hit one. I don't think that's the way you hit it. This whole church service today, someone wanted me to play the country western song at the end of the service, a country western song that I was thinking, "What could that be? 'Drop-kick me, Jesus, over goal post of life.' Do you know that one? It's got a religious tone to it. 'Put your snout to the spout where the Gospel comes out.'" I was afraid it might be that one. But no, it was Lee Ann Womack's "I Hope You Dance," and I thought to myself, "What does dancing have to do with church?" and then I thought, "Why does dancing not have something to do with the church? Is there something wrong with us that we don't dance in church?" But it seemed odd. Then I looked at the words and listened to them, and you'll hear them. How lovin' might be mistaken but it's worth takin.' 'I'll never fear the mountain from a distance, never settle for the path of least resistance.' 'And when you get a chance to sit out or dance, I hope you dance, I hope you dance.'

Eighty-plus-year-old members of the church have something to tell us about risk, about being honest, about being true to yourself, about peer pressure. Don't worry about what other people think about you. About morals, about hang in there. Somebody I say this morning going into the 8:00 service. I said, "How are you?" Eighty-some years old, she looked at me, she said "I'm hanging in there." She is. I said, "You going to take a couple of them down with you as you go?" She said "Yes." Walk with God. Those words in the bulletin, they came from senior members of our church and they're telling us, and we need to hear it. We need to hear it for a couple of reasons. We need to hear what they've got to say. First of all, senior members of our church, they've got a past. They've got a past, but it's hidden. Those things you're going to read on those tables, for example, you never heard of some of them, because they didn't tell you. They've been places nobody goes. They've done things nobody sees. They have a past, nobody cares. They have a life nobody knows, because the world doesn't recognize it. They go to the doctor's office, they stand in line at the store, and they think to themselves, "I wonder if they know me? I wonder if they know me? I wonder if they realize I have advanced degrees? I wonder if they know I've written books? I wonder if they see the wisdom in my face? I wonder if they heard me teach a class or preach a sermon, or sung a solo? I wonder if they knew I wrote a poem, or I have spoken to a crowd larger than anything they ever saw. I wonder if they know I can make a lemon meringue pie and put burnt ends on the peaks and the crust will crumble like it's supposed to? Perhaps they admire me from a distance, and maybe they'll call my name?" And they sit there or stand there waiting to hear their name, and then when the moment comes and someone speaks so everyone can hear and their reservation comes up, or their number comes due, someone looks across the board and says to everybody or nobody in particular, "Next." That's their name. "Next." They took a number. They lost their name. They saw the wrinkles, noted the white hair. "Number 44 - next". If you're old, and everyone is, or will be, maybe, God knows, you've got a past. God knows.

Friday, 57 of us old people limped up onto a bus with our walkers and our canes, with our bifocal glasses and our arthritic hands and our hearing aided battery-operated machines squeaking "we've got mail" sort of thing going on, 57 of us old people went to Nederland, where they've got a frozen dead guy in a Tuff shed who gets new dry ice every week, and where they've got a carousel that's pitched with a Wurlitzer organ that goes merrily around. And we got ladders to climb on and we sat on horses and lions and pigs and dragons, and the music started. The first group of us - I watched - the first group as the thing began to move and old began to look different as they were pistoned up and down, they smiled. It was transformation to another time and another place. And I looked at them, and they were young again. The first time around. The second time around, a little faster. The third time around, they looked afraid.

But it occurred to me, old people that got a past. Like the 84-year-old Anna. Luke tells us she was the daughter of Phaniel, of the tribe of Asher. She had a past. She was the first one outside the family to see the Christ child. 84 years old. When we get old, sometimes all we remember is our past, and nobody knows it. We hold onto it. Peter Shaffer said in his play *Equus*, "I just need something so I can see in the dark." And sometimes what we've got, all we've got, is our past. To see in the dark. The past is what we know for

sure, and we hold onto it. If anybody asks, we'll tell them. Don't underestimate old people. An old lady who followed a young man around in the grocery store, followed him around, stared at him, and finally she caught up to him and said, "I know it's going to bother you, my staring at you, but I have to tell you, it wasn't all that long ago my son died and he looked a lot like you." "I'm so sorry," he said. The young man said, "Is there anything I can do for you?" "You know, as I'm leaving the store, if you just call out "Goodbye, Mother," that would mean so much to me, just to hear those words. And so she went through the checkout line and as she got to the door, he said, "Goodbye, Mother," and she turned and smiled and disappeared. As he stepped up to place his purchases on the conveyor belt and the clerk rang up his bill, which to his surprise came to \$227.50. "There's got to be some mistake here, because I just got a few things." And the clerk looked out across the top of her reading glasses and said, "Your mother said that you'd take care of it."

Don't ever underestimate. Old people have a past, don't underestimate them, ever. In our church, we've got a woman, she's sitting in the sixth row right here, she ironed shirts for the governor of Wisconsin. She did. And we've got somebody in our church who stood beside President Eisenhower and played his favorite song on her saxophone, which was, "I got spurs that jingle jangle jingle." And we elected that man president twice. We have someone in our church who played against the Harlem Globe Trotters and made a guest appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show. Some of you remember the Ed Sullivan show. All of you remember the Globe Trotters. He lost.

There's a neurologist at the University of West Virginia medical school. His medical student at the end of the day finished seeing his final patient. The intern came into his office. "Tell me about the patient," Dr Gutman said. "What did you observe?" And the intern said, "Well, he's an elderly gentleman, 82 to be precise. You've been seeing this man for about 20 years. Since his last visit, I would say that things have kind of been stabilized for him, although maybe he's improved just a bit." Dr. Gutman said to the student, "Nice summary. By the way, do you know who he is?" And the student replied, "Yes, he's a nice, retired elderly gentleman." Elderly gentleman is a euphemism, it's a politically correct word that means "old man." The two walked into the examining room together. "Nice to see you, Fred," Dr. Gutman said. Fred rose from his chair. The spring in his step was long since gone. He nodded. A soft smile. And at his full height he filled the entire room. Everything about Fred was extra large. His broad face with its sea of wrinkles was still handsome. And the doctor turned and said to the student, "Ever see an NBA championship ring?" The student looked confused. "What does basketball have to do with medicine?" A gentle chuckle from Fred's wife Barbara filled the silence. Fred filled out his hand. The student gaped in awe at the gold icon encircling one of Fred's fingers. "I was the general manager for the Los Angeles Lakers. I lost the championship series four times as the coach against the Boston Celtics. But we won it all against the Knicks." Coach Fred Schuas was student body president at West Virginia University, basketball all-American, coach of the Mountaineers. Coach Jerry West, some of you know Jerry West, they were national champion. Played in the NBA. Coached the Los Angeles Lakers. He had done it all, and was no longer just an elderly gentleman. Just for a moment Fred Schuas regained the lost luster of decades past.

Today, I'd like to do that to honor those in our church, because they have a past. Like the 84-year-old prophetess Anna, they have a life that is accomplished. They stood on the edge of adventure. They did many things on a large stage, small things that were big in their own way. Small things, but big. Today, we honor them for their past, so they can recover some of the lost luster of yesterday.

Secondly, we don't stop with the past. Old people have a past, but there's more to them than that. They've got a perspective. There's what they know that we can learn from. I'm reminded of the story of the woman who was picking through the frozen turkeys at the grocery store and she couldn't find one big enough for her family, and she said to the stock boy, "Son, do any of these turkeys get bigger?" and he looked at her and said, "No, ma'am, they're dead." Well, the people we honor today, they're not dead. They've got a past, but they've got a perspective. The prophetess Anna, 84 years old, daughter of Phanael, of the tribe of Asher, she came, gave thanks to God, spoke of the Christ child and the redemption of Jerusalem. She was looking forward. She had a perspective.

Sad thing to hear of the death of Steven Jobs, incredible inventor, creative genius. Actually reminds me of many of the older members of our church. Ten years ago, a reporter asked him, "Are you driven to do what you do?" and his answer, "I have such an exciting vision of what my team and I can accomplish that it's like I'm running toward a magnet. I have daydreams where I am literally running toward the image of our goals. I guess you'd say I'm a pulled man, not a driven man." There comes a time when we realize we can stop looking back to find answers to problems that are ahead of us, and move on. Or as Thomas Wolfe once wrote, "To lose the earth we know for greater knowing. To lose the life we love for greater life. To find the land more kind than home, more large than earth." Old doesn't mean dead. Our purpose in life, it starts young, it evolves, and it goes to the end, to the point that the less we make of ourselves something important, more that we find what is important and throw ourselves into it. Life is never a wall, always an open door, and we can turn from the things that are shallow to the things that mean something, and we can walk through from the world of what used to be to the world of what it will become, and we can take that step in the story line that says "No way" and we can say "Way" and we can finally see always.

Betty Friedan's ideas helped shape this service and this sermon, because of what Betty Friedan did with her life. She observed. Her mother told her, her mother was unhappy to have given up her dream to the idea of the biology of destiny. Betty addressed what she called the problem that didn't have a name. Women expected to devote their lives to being wives and mothers, which is to say, to give up all their hopes. Nothing wrong with being a wife and mother, but you don't give up your hopes, and many of them did. So she started the women's movement. She was the founder of the National Organization of Women. She got the Equal Rights Amendment passed. She wrote a book that is an absolute classic, it's like a Bible for feminists, *The Feminine Mystique*. Enough for one life. She had a past. She made her mark. But it's what she did after that that's even, I think, more remarkable. She did for old people what she did for women. In *The Fountain of Age*, an important book, showed us what it means to live to the twilight years and still

see a future. "I am myself at this age," she writes. "It took me all these years to find the missing parts and put them together, and to confront my age in terms of integrity and generativity," a word she learned from Erik Erikson. She studied with him. "Instead of being stuck in the past, I have never felt so free." This perspective.

Sue Monk Kidd recalls the day she took her daughter to the zoo. They stood beside a grandmother and a little girl whose face was sprinkled with bright red freckles, and the children were waiting in line to get their cheeks painted by a local artist who was decorating them with tiger paws. The artist said to this little girl standing beside Sue, "You've got so many freckles, it's hard to find a place to paint." and a little boy in line began to cry, because he had many freckles, and the little girl beside her dropped her head and the grandmother knelt down to her. "I love your freckles," she said. "Not me," said the girl. "When I was a girl, I always wanted freckles," she said, then she started tracing her finger from one freckle to the other, the grandmother did. "Freckles are beautiful. In fact, why you just name one thing that's prettier than freckles." And the little girl peered into the old woman's face and answered softly, "Wrinkles."

Wrinkles are prettier than freckles. Oliver Wendall Holmes was right. He said, "What lies behind us and what lies ahead of us is of very little import when compared to what lies within us." Perspective that comes with age. There's a story we could write. There's a place we could go. A thing we could do. James Michener, 80 years old, he wrote his book *Alaska*. He wanted to write that book when he was 40, but he was afraid because he didn't think he could bear up healthwise to the Alaskan winters, and he would never write a book on a place he hadn't been. And every so often the thought would come up, "Maybe I can write that book." And then he would put it away. He was afraid. And finally at age 80 he had a heart attack, triple bypass surgery, he said, "I guess I'd better get busy and write it." So he went up to Alaska, he studied the salmon industry, he traveled all over Alaska. He learned its history. He got to know the Eskimo children above the Arctic Circle. He lived in Alaska. You think it's cold here? He experienced 52 below zero, and when it was over, he said, "Why didn't I do this 40 years ago?"

It's never too late. We're never too old. We're always in line to learn something new, no matter how long our past or how glorious it's been. You know, age evolves. They will say of us, or we will say of ourselves, we became 21, I turned 30, we push 40, we hit 50. We make it to 60, we're building up speed at 70, we get into our 80s, we reach 100. Those two women in our congregation, I know one of the will be there, both of them may, and you ask them how old they are, you know what they're going to say? "Well, I'm a hundred and a half." That hadn't happened to them since they were kids. "I'm five and a half, going on six." The numbers don't count because we keep learning, we laugh often and loud, we don't take guilt trips, we tell people we love them because life isn't measured by the breaths we take, as somebody said, but by the moments that take our breath away. And Lee Ann Womack wrote it in her song, and we will hear it. It's the perspective of the age. Older people tell us with their lives, when one door closes, another door opens, never fear the mountains from a distance, never settle for the path of least resistance, promise that you'll give faith a fighting chance, and when you get a chance to sit it out or dance, I hope you'll dance, I hope you'll dance. 80 year old members of our

church have a past, they've done so many things and perspective, they can tell us so much, and today we honor them for what they have done and for what they have to teach us. Hear the music. And will the 80 year old seniors, when I get up and leave this place, follow me out so we can honor you today, and by the way, when you leave, as you leave, and as you live, I hope you dance, I hope you dance.