

### **Luke 1:26-38**

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

### **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

### **“How Do We Act Our Age?” (reflections on Anne Lamott)**

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**Rev. Charles Schuster**

Bill Cosby has written a book about aging. It's called *Time Flies*. Time flies. It was written 23 years ago. This is what he said 23 years ago. I think he'd have more to say now. "I recently turned 50, which is young for a tree, mid-life for an elephant, ancient for a quarter-miler whose son now says, 'Dad, I just can't run with you any more, unless I bring something to read.' 50 is a nice number for the states in the union or for the national speed limit, but it's not a number I was prepared to have hung on me. A few days ago a friend tried to cheer me up. He said, '50 is what 40 used to be.' He had made his inspirational point, and while I pondered, my 40-year-old knees suggested I sit down. And my 40-year-old eyes are looking for their glasses, whose location has been forgotten by my 40-year-old mind." Bill Cosby, on aging.

There is a preacher somewhere looking at the first Sunday in November and announcing to the congregation that this is All Saint's Day, it's a big day in the life of the church, All Saints Day. And the preacher made a big deal out of that, announced it a couple of times, "Today is All Saints Day, the first Sunday in November." And a child, sitting a little too close to the microphone or saying it a little loud so that others could hear it, said, "Mommy, we're not saints, we're Methodists." Today, we're giving our children Bibles.

That won't make them saints, and I'm not sure that will make them Methodists. But if they open those Bibles, and if they make it a point to study what's in them, and if that study becomes serious and goes over the course of a lifetime, they will learn what all of us could have learned, to act our age.

This morning we're going to take a look at three stages of life and what it means to live through those stages. But before we do, I wanted to tell you, reminded of a story of a trial, a famous trial. A gangster, a mobster, put on trial for murder. Many witnesses. The case was strong. The judge was shocked, however, when the jury came back and the foreperson announced, "Not guilty." The judge stood in absolute disbelief and said, "Not guilty? How? And by what reason?" And the foreperson answered, "By reason of insanity." "Insanity," said the judge. "All twelve of you?" "We're not saints, we're Methodists." But the world is insane, and we have given our children Bibles, and if they open them, and if they take a lifetime to study what's there, to become scholars, not just Bible students, but Bible scholars, we will have helped prepare them for the insanity that they and we face, simply by being alive.

Let's look at what it means to be young, first of all. Young people are invited to test the water. Young people are full of potential, and some of the potential they have, they don't even know they have. A time to test the water. It's all about them, and it should be. They are invited. We were invited.

Jeremiah, one of the great prophets of Israel, the word of God came to Jeremiah. "Before you were born, I knew you," God said. "Before you were born, I consecrated you to be a great prophet to the nations." And Jeremiah responded, "Lord, how do I know what to say? I'm only a young boy." Jeremiah was invited to test the water. Mary was a young girl. Now, that word that's translated "virgin," the Greek word is *parthenos*, it also means young woman. Mary was a young woman. When the angel of the Lord came to her, and the angel said, "Greetings, favored one, the Lord is with you. Do not be afraid. You have found favor with God. You will conceive and bear a son. He will be great. He will be called the Son of the Most High." And Mary said, "How can this be? I'm a young woman." Mary was invited to test the water.

Theresa Matthew is a United Methodist preacher in Wisconsin. Her skill as a preacher has become legendary. Her dad is a bishop in Africa. Her favorite story, and I know it's one we've all heard, but I love the way she tells it, and I'll try to tell it like she does. It's an eagle's egg. It somehow gets into a chicken's nest, and the mother hen hatches it, and the eagle who's hatched thought she was a chicken. Her mother was a chicken, her brothers and sisters were chickens. Thought she was a chicken. She learned to do all the things that chickens do. She learned to scratch around and make a life out of keeping an eye on the ground, until the day when an eagle flew overhead and saw this eagle scratching around, and the big bird perched on a tree and watched, and then finally said, "Hey you." "Who, me?" "Yes, you. What are you doing, scratching around like that?" "I'm a chicken. It's what chickens do." "You're not a chicken." "Yes I am." "No you're not." "Yes I am." "Not." "Am." "Not." "Am." This went on. Finally, the eagle perched up on the tree said, "Stretch out your wings and flap." And the little eagle flapped, and

flapped, and flapped, and she began to rise and rise and rise, and soon, she was soaring. And she said, "Oh my. All these years I didn't know I could fly."

You see, that's what youth is about. It's about potential. It's all about finding who we are. It's about being invited to try our wings, to test the water. I'm reminded of the young person who put down a large figure on an application where it said "compensation requested." A hundred thousand dollars. And the human resources officer who processed the application and was interviewing the young man said, "You put such a high figure for your salary from our company, how can we justify that figure?" And the young man replied, "It's like this. You really have to work a lot harder when you don't know what you're doing. I should be compensated for my hard work." Youth is a time when we have to learn what we do knowing we don't always know what we're doing. Pearl Buck was right when she said, "The young do not know enough wisdom, and therefore attempt the impossible and achieve it, generation after generation." I think one of the reasons we have been able, and we have, we have been able to attract very, very bright young pastors to this church staff, is because of the reputation the church has. You have welcomed Meg and Joel and Pam and Rebecca onto the staff with a willingness to encourage them to do some things that maybe they've never done before. And you have put confidence that they can do them. You invite them to test the water, and they love it, and they love you for it.

Next Sunday is Children's Sabbath, and we will have children leading us in worship, and the congregation, you know, will once again do what it's done every year. It will be saying to our young people, "Spread your wings and fly. Test the water. See what you can do. Try what you never thought you could. Read that Scripture lesson when you're young. You're invited."

Secondly, there comes a time when we are adult, and we have tested the water, but to act our age as adults, we have to make some waves. We are challenged, and we challenge. We are challenged to do something with our lives. James Moore talks about the man who wanted to join a church because, he said, "I want to be fed." I would never do this, but the pastor looked at him and said, "Well, that's just fine. But I think we'd all be a little better if you would take off your bib and put on an apron." Think about that. The church challenges us to make waves. It's not about being fed. It's about serving. You don't have to read very far into the New Testament to see what happens to all of us, to see what happened to Jesus. John the Baptist threw him in the water and baptized him in the Holy Spirit so he'd make waves, and he did. In the wilderness, he was promised power and prestige, but he chose a path that led to the cross, and he made waves that continue to splash upon our spiritual shores.

And Mary his mother knew about adulthood and how it was time for him to splash the water and turn into wine. He made waves at Cana and Galilee. In adulthood we make waves. In adulthood, we take the time to find ourselves useful, and we're challenged, and we challenge. Middle age, Bennett Cerf said, "It's a time when your classmates are so gray and wrinkled and bald, they do not recognize you." And Jacob \_\_\_\_\_ said the thing about adulthood, middle age, is when men and women take our high school yearbook out

of the bookcase and hide it where our children can't find it. It's not about how we look, it's about what we do. It's not about the potential of childhood and youth, but the realization that it's time for us to do something big, something hard. Anne Lamott got this. She writes, "I wouldn't give a year back of the life I've lived. Age has given me what I've been looking for my entire life. It has given me me." And then she goes on to say, "My feet hurt in the mornings. My body is less forgiving when I exercise more than I'm used to, but I love my life more and more. As the old saying goes, it's not that I think less of myself, but that I think of myself less often." It's being a parent, and we're challenged. It's having a teenager in the house. That's a challenge. It's looking at what we're doing, and asking why we're doing it. It's finding ourselves, and we're challenged. Adulthood is making waves.

Tim Smith tells about the father who was seated in the living room reading the newspaper, and his four-year-old daughter came in, demanding his attention, holding this tube of flavored Chapstick in her hand. She said, "Do you want some, Daddy?" "Of course I do," he said. And he spread it all over his lips, and he continued to read the newspaper, and he noted that there was a sour taste to it, surprising, didn't recognize that, but his lips.. oh, it was so nice. A gift from his daughter, lip balm, life is good, oh, he needed that, until his wife made waves with his peace and said, "Has anyone seen, Kaitlyn, do you know what I did with my glue stick?"

We make waves when we raise our children. Or when we raise questions. Or when we raise the level of anxiety, when we challenge the status quo. We make waves when we think what could be, and how to make it happen. We make waves when we see something wrong and try to make it right. Floyd Little was inducted into the Hall of Fame, and he made a very moving speech, and in that speech he thanked all the people who had helped him along the way. And then the other thing he did with that speech is, he singled out loved ones, and talked about every one of them, and how special they were to him. One of the people he talked about was his granddaughter. He said, "I have this granddaughter, and they have a camera on her. What she does, you know, she teaches men and women in her community how to be good parents." Then he said, "Do not let people who see the least of you get the best of you." Floyd Little walked off the stage and his cell phone rang. He thought he'd turned it off, but his cell phone rang. It was a phone call from Bill Cosby who said, "That is the most moving speech Camille and I have ever heard, and we want you to know that both of us are in tears."

Adulthood is when we make waves. When we are challenged by life, and when we challenge life. We may get our lips glued shut. We may find ourselves in trouble, but it's not about us. We find ourselves, and we put our dreams to work. As adults, we are challenged to do something with life. Youth, we test the water, we're invited. Adulthood, we make waves, we're challenged. Finally, aging. We leave a wake in the water. We clear a path on the road. When we're old, we expect, and people give us respect. It's because we expect, not respect, it's because we expect. All the jokes about old people - the grandfather who was asked a question. "Grandpa," the little girl said, "were you on the boat with Noah?" And he said, "Of course not." There was this long pause, and then she said, "Well, how come you didn't drown?"

You know, there comes a time when you look your age and you don't particularly like it. But when that time comes, you know, it doesn't matter how we look, because it's not about us. A group of senior citizens on the patio at a retirement center, one looked up as a large flock of birds flew over, said to his friend, his roommate, who had dozed off, he said, "Frank, you'd better move a little. Those birds up there look like buzzards, and they're circling." And George Burns who said, "You know you're getting old when you stoop to tie your shoes and you wonder what else you can do while you're down there." There comes a time in life when we have a chance to realize the most important thing we have is not our potential, which we had when we were young, and not our achievements, which we accomplished when we were adult. But the most important thing we have is our presence, and what we can be for those who follow in our wake. Because it's not about doing, it's about being. And it's not about me. It's not about making waves. It's about the wake we leave, and the people who come after us. And if we do it right, we are respected. But we've got to own it. If we can leave them our memories, but not dwell on them. If we can leave them our legacy, but not make them feel guilty because of it. If we can leave them our confidence.

Anna was the old prophet. She was 84. Her days were numbered, and Luke tells us the joy she had a seeing the Christ child. She left this world. Her last act, remembered in the text, praising God, speaking of the child. Old age is a time to look ahead. If we act our age, it's a time to think ahead, to look to the future, and Anna, she was respected because she expected. Pablo Casals said it - "If you continue to work and to absorb beauty in the world around you, you will find that age does not necessarily mean getting old." Age can bring respect, but we have to earn it, and that means we have to look to the future, not the past. It means we have to speak of the promise of tomorrow and not dwell on the problems of today. Old fools live in a time that was. Old fools confuse cynicism with sincerity. They think the only true prophet is the one who predicts the worst. It's easy to negate the hopes of those who are building on their dreams. But nobody wants to be around an old fool who lives in the past and puts people down in the present.

Henri Nouwen is one who said, toward the end of his life, "I have decided to live the last few years of my life with the understanding that life is a short opportunity to say yes to God's love, and death is a time when we are welcomed home to that love." Herb Miller tells the story of the old cowboy who was meeting with the insurance agent. He was getting a policy written up, and the agent said, "Now, have you had any accidents?" and the old cowboy said, "Not really. A horse kicked in a few ribs once, and I got bit by three rattlesnakes, but that's about it." "You don't consider those accidents?" "Oh, no," came the answer. "They did it on purpose." That's what snakes and wild horses do. He wasn't bitter. He expected it. Bad things in the past do not determine how we look at the coming things in the future. Like the cowboy. Things happen, some of them not good. But we do not become bitter. What we leave in our wake, it is the best of times. We learn the importance of legacy, which is more important than inheritance. We learn the value of being present, which is different than dominating every conversation with stories we've already told. And if we think about the wake on the water, we can smooth out the ripples, and even lift people up and raise people's hopes and praise people's efforts. Some may

ask, what's this world coming to? And we will say, "You know, we've been through these hard times before. We'll make it through these times again." And some will wonder, "What's wrong with the young people these days?" And we will say, "When I look at the young people I see promise and hope." We've got to give them a chance. We who expect the best get respect, if we leave a wake in the water and a path for those who follow. Old people act our age. Youth are invited to test the water, adults are challenged to make waves, and old folks are respected if they expect the future and the wake. It's a cycle of life. William Allen White once said, "I'm not afraid of tomorrow, for I have seen yesterday, and I love today." Time flies. How do we act our age? How do we prepare for life? It's in the Bible, and it's in the water, and our children will discover it, and we will remember it if they and we open up the book and study the word of God, which will be an answer to the insanity of life.

Let us pray. If life is an opportunity to say yes to your love, O God, and if death is the full coming home to that love, what else can we do but act our age, invited, challenged, expectant, respected, and blessed, and thankful for your grace and for the gift of life. Amen.