

Sermon for 27 December 2020 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore, Maryland

First Sunday after Christmas Day

Scriptures: Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Psalter: 86:1; Psalm 148; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2 :22-40

“Old folks”

Worship walks a fine line between being mystic and being pragmatic. We say the Bible is, or contains, the word of God, and as our ordination vows put it, is “sufficient for salvation.” Then, like Congress, or old married partners, we go off into individual corners to build meaning about that and everything else.

Like Congress, and old married partners, we eventually, with God’s help, settle on some workable constructs for each of us that don’t ring alarm bells for the other party or person.

Scripture is human, and as we know, everything changes over time. Much of Scripture was written for one time, and then gets used for another time. It’s how we put together a ritual that we can use over and over. It’s like teaching a lesson to ourselves at age 3, and 13, and 23, and 83. It’s the same lesson: Be kind. Don’t steal. Wash your hands. But it means different things at different times and places.

Today the lesson is, “Move ahead. The baby’s been born. It’s a boy, and he’s Jewish. This is important. Make this beautiful as you teach it, raising him, and watching him, from now on.”

What stands out, for me, this day, after the push and dream of Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, is the fact of these two old people at the high point, the remembering moment, of this first time the church gathers after Christmas. Both devout, both very familiar to everybody worshipping in that time and place, each says, “This is important. This is both painful and precious. I’ve been moved to affirm that. Go in peace.”

And Mary does. Joseph does, surely, as well, but scripture features the young mother, and so we give her credit for details. Perhaps Mary years later served as a resource for those who, like the author known as “Luke,” produced the liturgy that binds us together generation after generation as we meditate on Jesus, pray to him, follow him.

That makes me think about the role of old folks in our time. There are more of us all over the world than ever before. There are more of us in the church, comparatively. Sometimes it seems we’re the only ones likely to last out another decade or generation in religious circles. That’s painting it a little starkly. There are beautiful babies and kind, courageous, competent young people in church and in religions all over the world; but today I center on the important role of us elderly in the circles of faith. .

I’m no expert at this. My only credibility is being old and religious... and just being old, and just being religious, are only enough to get me in the door. What I say and think has to be evaluated by you individual hearers and the work of the Holy Spirit among all of us, same as scripture itself.

Look at how important both Simeon and Anna are. They validate this scene. They educate the parents, affirm the temple customs, even speak for God about the light and dark that lies ahead for the child.

I listened to Lamar Alexander, long-time member of Congress, reflecting on his retirement on CNN recently. He spoke of asking an old couple how they were doing. The woman, he said, replied, "We're just fallin' apart together."

What I'd like us to carry away this after-Christmas Sunday is that fact that old folks are falling apart: we have body and spirit troubles we're dealing with, all of us. And at the same time, we deal with boundaries like nobody else. When you really reach a boundary, you deal with it ... sometimes beautifully, sometimes not ... but we have something to say that adds to the total impact of the message, and Luke makes it show this Sunday.

Of course the baby is important. Of course the young parents have critical work in the progress of the Son of God. But let's not leave out the Bible's affirmation of our wisdom, our lives of trust, our power to hold the young life for a moment as significant in its own way as the later baptism, the life of teaching and calling and confronting, and even the journey to the Cross. Love works through old folks. God has meaning for old people. We must claim that, celebrate it, recognize the mystery and the practicality of that, in this turbulent and often not-so-appreciative time we occupy.

Let us love one another, all of us, ourselves, and our neighbors, as we "fall apart together."

Amen.