

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text is from this morning's Psalm — Psalm 71:5-6:

⁵...you are my hope, O Lord God, my confidence since I was young.
⁶I have been sustained by you ever since I was born; from my mother's womb you have been my strength; my praise shall be always of you.

This is a sermon for the young. Oh, I know that I have grey hair and so do one or two others *somewhere* in our parish, yet this sermon for the young is also for us, grey-haired and slowing down that we might be. After all, we are still young compared to Methuselah! (How old did he live to be? Answer: 969 years old.¹) And we are younger than we will be tomorrow. And perhaps most important of all, we are not too old to turn to that path that will make us young again one day. I am not speaking of medicine, but of holiness of life.

Our text speaks of being sustained by the Lord. The Psalmist gives his testimony:

⁶I have been sustained by you ever since I was born;
from my mother's womb you have |
been my strength;*

Let us learn to echo this testimony in our own hearts, for it contains both comfort and a clue about a better life – a comfort and a clue. Let me start with the comfort.

Young folk are liable to doubt themselves. We see an illustration of this in our First Reading, from the First Chapter of Jeremiah. The prophet is recalling the very beginning of his ministry:

⁴Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, ⁵"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." ⁶Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth."

Jeremiah is alarmed at his call to be a prophet. It is a daunting task. He wonders, he doubts whether he is up to it. The obstacles are formidable. For one thing, there is the chance that the prophet will speak, but no one will listen, for the

prophet has neither charm nor power of speech. It is with the ancient prophet, I suppose, as it is with the modern preacher. It is a definite but nerve-racking feature of the job that each time the prophet speaks, he faces the possibility of public humiliation. Each time he steps into the pulpit, he runs the risk that people will disregard him, precisely because he seems to have so little to say.

And then there is the more concrete possibility that the prophet will speak, and the people will get mad at him or her for speaking. This happened to Jeremiah. Another of Israel's prophets, Hananiah, publicly opposed the preaching of Jeremiah. It must have been a dramatic scene. Jeremiah had gone around wearing a yoke, as if he were a burdened mule, to give visible expression to his preaching that until Israel repented, she must continue to wear the yoke of Babylonian rule, for King Nebuchadnezzar had conquered them. But right there in the open, in front of the people, Hananiah took the yoke off Jeremiah and *broke* it, promising in the name of the Lord that the rule of Babylon would itself be broken within two years:

¹⁰Then Hananiah the prophet took the yoke from off the prophet Jeremiah's neck, and brake it. ¹¹And Hananiah spake in the presence of all the people, saying, Thus saith the LORD; Even so will I break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon from the neck of all nations within the space of two full years. And the prophet Jeremiah went his way. (Jer. 28:10-11, KJV)

What could Jeremiah do? He simply went his way. Doubts about his ability to preach troubled not only young Jeremiah, but also young Moses long before him:

¹⁰And Moses said unto the LORD, O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken

¹ And all the days of Methuselah were nine hundred sixty and nine years: and he died. (Gen. 5:27, KJV)

unto thy servant: but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue.

And St. Paul too seems to recognize that he is not considered much of an orator. He has heard the rumors:

For his letters, say they, are weighty and powerful; but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.(2 Cor. 10:10)

Even more dramatic was what happened to Jesus in this morning's Gospel Reading. Jesus comes home to Nazareth. He is a young preacher, trying to preach in his hometown, Nazareth. This is still early in his ministry. So, he goes into the synagogue, as was his practice, receives the book of Isaiah delivered to him, reads it aloud, and gives his good testimony, with the awful result that his own people try to throw him off a cliff:

²⁹And they rose up and put him out of the city, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw him down headlong. ³⁰But passing through the midst of them he went away.(Luke 4:29-30)

Well, I think to myself, that's a pretty good crowd of preachers. Moses, Jeremiah, St. Paul, and Jesus all counted themselves unworthy preachers or were opposed in their preaching. Yet see what God has done through them!

Young people, I say, sometimes doubt themselves, like Moses and Jeremiah. But if they can learn to echo the words of our text, I think they will find some comfort in them. And so, when we are faced with self-doubts, let us repeat the words of the Psalmist. Let us try to make them our own:

⁶¹I have been sustained by you ever since I was born;
from my mother's womb you have |
been my strength;*

And in repeating this testimony, ponder its truth: You are a person of great dignity, for you were formed by the Lord from your mother's womb, and you have been sustained all these years since. Reckon with this: The Lord of heaven and earth would not be without you. He is not content that this world should be empty of you, for your absence would only leave our old world poorer. He is not content that *today* should be without, nor any stretch of your life, no matter how low you might be feeling. You have been *sustained* by the Lord ever

since you were born. He wants you to have this day stretching before you. He wants you to have the following day stretching before you, and every day after that. He grants it to you in hope. He awaits something good from you.

Be comforted then by our faith that our life is no cosmic accident, but the definite desire of our Maker that we should be!

Young people, let no one despise your youth. You children, you teenagers, you are capable of leading the church and leading the city through the power of your example and of your words. It is as St. Paul said to young Timothy:

¹²Let no man despise thy youth ; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.(1 Timothy 4:12, KJV)

I have said that there is both a comfort and a clue for young people in today's psalm. The comfort is that the Lord has known and loved you even from the womb and sustained you continually. The clue, I suggest, can be found in King David's testimony about the real source of strength for him:

...from my mother's womb *you* have |
been my *strength*.*

These are the words of one who does not regret nor resist the Lord's involvement in his or her life. Indeed, he counts the Lord as the strength of his life. He joins Martin Luther in singing "A Mighty Fortress Is Our Lord." He joins the Psalmist. He counts the Lord as the strength of his life, not his weakness, his fullness, not his depletion.

Each life is pointing off in some direction. Each of us is young enough that we can shift that direction toward Jesus, and in doing so, we will help the claim our text as our own. There is strength for a human life to be found in Christ.

And by Holy Baptism, we are claimed and directed toward Jesus as the strength of our lives.

This past week, I slipped away to Mount St. Alphonsus for the annual retreat of the Society of St. Gregory of Nazianzus. At that retreat, my old friend Pastor Jonathan Jenkins brought along a picture directory of his new church, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Lebanon, PA. It is a beautiful English Gothic stone church built in the 1950s, as if transported from some ancient European place. European immigrants with old skills of stone and carving and stained glass built the place.

One aspect of Jonathan's new church that especially caught my fancy was the baptismal font. When the font is open, the top of the font is

elevated into the air by way of way of a counterweight system, so that it sits above the font. It is a carving of what is called the "Celestial City," inspired by book of Revelation's description of the New Jerusalem:

¹⁰And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, ¹¹Having the glory of God: and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal... (Rev 21:10-11, KJV)

And so, when the baby is baptized, it is as if the child comes up out of the waters of baptism and is raised upwards toward the Celestial City.

Such is the good destiny of each of you and of all the Baptized. You rise up from the waters of baptism and are destined for heaven, with unshakeable destiny, since you are in the hands of Jesus.

But the thing is, we have miles to go before then. You young people have your youth to live and all the years afterwards, and each of us has the time apportioned to us. And during these years, our job is to draw closer to Jesus who is the strength of our life for these days ahead of us.

It is as St. Paul says: We are baptized into Christ that we might die to sin and rise to newness of life.

¹What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? ²God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? ³Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? ⁴Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:1-4)

A chief joy of today's liturgy is that we are permitted to see with our own eyes the beginning of the great Christian adventure in the life of one of our little ones. Helena Genevieve Fynn is now to be baptized. She is about to embark on the daily adventure before each of us to die to sin, to rise to newness of life, and to turn back continually toward Jesus as the strength of our lives. As Helena does this, we would do well to follow her and to be led by a little child — a little child who means to follow Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.