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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Jeremiah 1:4-10, Psalm 71:1-6, 1 Corinthians 12:31 - 13:13, Luke 4:21-30
Getting Older

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

This is a sermon called “Getting Older.” I mean to focus on this morning’s Gospel story about Jesus and the rough treatment he received in his hometown, when he’s no longer a boy but a grown man. But I want to begin by lifting up a verse from our First Lesson, from the First Chapter of Jeremiah. This is what the Lord said to Jeremiah:

⁵Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; (Jeremiah 1:5, RSV)

We all love the little ones. No matter what the species, we seem to favor the young, not only babies in their mothers’ arms, but also puppies, kittens, baby bunnies, polar bear cubs, and all God’s baby creatures. It lifts our hearts and does us good to gaze upon the little ones. Indeed, sometimes we are privileged to be charmed by a double vision: both the sight of a little one and the sight of some otherwise gruff, intimidating grown-up rather melt as that older one too gazes at the little one. I’ve seen that on the subway many times. There’s quite a variety of people on our city subways -- rich and poor, strong and frail, with our beautiful mixture of races and tongues -- but everyone seems to smile at a baby.

And it’s not just the baby that delights us. So do little children. Walk by PS 6 and if the children are playing there in the playground, you are likely to slow down and join other grown-ups in gazing at the children. They give us such hope!

In these modern days, I’ve even had expectant mothers and fathers take out their iPhone and show me an image of the recent sonogram of their little one. And that is as it should be, for all life belongs to the Lord and is precious and we *should* love the little ones. In our First Lesson, we hear the Lord’s testimony that he formed Jeremiah in the womb and knew him there, consecrated him and appointed him a prophet to the nations. And in our Psalm, we read the testimony of the Psalmist that the Lord has sustained him all his life, even in the womb:

⁵ For you are my hope, | O Lord God,*
my confidence since | I was young.

⁶ I have been sustained by you ever since I was born;
from my mother’s womb you have | been my strength;*
my praise shall be al- | ways of you.

From the New Testament, we read that Jesus had strong affection for the children, so that in a day and age when children were “better seen than heard,” Jesus nonetheless wanted the children to come near to him:

¹⁵Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. ¹⁶But Jesus called them to him, saying, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God. ¹⁷Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” (Luke 18:15-17, RSV)

So, the natural inclinations of the human heart and sacred scripture are in harmony in affection for the little ones.

But, alas, Jesus is not a little one in this morning’s story. Back when he was a boy, people had looked on him with favor:

⁵²And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man. (Luke 2:52, RSV)

But now he’s getting older. Jesus is no longer twelve years old, but rather thirty years old. The goodwill people felt to him as a child has been supplemented by the goodwill they feel toward him as a hometown boy. But that soon ends, as we read in our story.

The initial hopes of the townsfolk are signaled by their exclamation:

²²And all spoke well of him, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth; and they said, “Is not this *Joseph’s* son?” (Luke 4:22, RSV)

By this, they seem to have meant, “Is this not our neighbor? Why, it is the carpenter’s son! We know him. If he has done miracles in other towns, surely he will do them here!”

Only, Jesus proves contrary about this. Instead of immediately launching into some miracle, he instead argues with them, and the drift of his argument is that he does not intend to favor his hometown:

²³And he said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Physician, heal yourself; what we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here also in your own country.’”

Furthermore, Jesus multiplies the offense by suggesting that he does not even intend to favor Israel, let alone Nazareth. He does this by focusing on the very Bible stories that could well get on the nerves of the Jews -- the miracles of old that were performed not on the Jews but on foreigners:

²⁵But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when there came a great famine over all the land; ²⁶and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. ²⁷And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian.”

The upshot of all this is that the townsfolk forget the affection they once held for him as a boy and as a hometown boy at that. He no longer looked beautiful in their eyes. His mere appearance no longer brought them delight. Now he looked like just another grown-up, with some beginning grey in his temples and some lines in his face, eye, and a disappointing grownup at that. They mean, then, to do away with him: to throw him headlong down off a hill.

The problem with Nazareth is that it shared in humanity’s preference for the young and its willingness to dismiss the grownup. We say, “But look how that beautiful child grew up and *turned out*. Now he is contrary! Now she is full of convictions we do not like. Now he seems to have a mind of his own. Look how he has turned out, I say!”

But the Lord seems to look at us, even at us grownups, as being beautiful little children, still a reason for some hope in this world. He does not count us as done, as “turned out.” His eyes bypass the grey in our temples, the frown lines on our faces. He still seems to see us as lovely children, full of potential, right on the verge of righteous and nobility. Why, he still loves us, though we are no longer young.

It seems to me that one of the great tricks of love is to try to remember that this person who might now be so frustrating to you was at one time a beautiful baby in his mother’s arms, in her mother’s arms. Ponder the possibility that that was the truest apprehension of all: that the smile you would have given this annoying person back when he was a baby is the kind of smile that Almighty God gives this annoying person even now, because God does not lose his hope for people, not even for the grownup, not even for the sinner.

And so we come to one of my favorite passage is the Bible. St. Paul is writing about the nature of God’s love. It is a different kind of love from our ordinary kind. It loves not because of what it sees, but because of what it hopes. God’s kind of love does not love the lovable, but rather smiles on the sinner and invites the sinner to become more lovely. So, in this passage St. Paul starts off talking about our ordinary human love, which is wonderful, but then moves on to talk of God’s kind of love:

⁶While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the *ungodly*.

⁷Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man -- though perhaps for a

good man one will dare even to die. ⁸But God shows *his* love for us in that while we were yet *sinners* Christ died for us. (Romans 5:6-8, RSV)

We are all gettin' older. And the thing is, our Maker loves us just as much as he did when we were babies. Grey hair and wrinkles might be setting in for some of us, but our Maker counts us precious and continues to look upon us with delight. Indeed, sin might beset us, marring our appearance before God and humanity, yet our Maker continues to look upon us as the most lovely sight He has seen in a long time, and He seems to thrill at our potential to become better and to resemble his Son, Jesus.

I was asked to do a funeral recently which turned out to be the most unusual funeral I've ever done. It was unusual because I knew hardly a thing about the lovely elderly woman I was burying. From time to time, funeral homes call upon local clergy to do the funeral of a Christian who might have lived or retired elsewhere, but had made arrangements to be buried here in town. If the funeral arrangement called for a clergyperson and a Christian liturgy, the funeral director certainly tries to arrange for that. Over the years, I have done a fair number of such funerals, maybe one or two per year.

In theory, I guess a pastor could do a funeral in which the pastor knew nothing about the person who had died. The pastor, then, would simply speak of the hope of the resurrection. But I have always wanted to know something about the person I am burying, so that my sermon can more usefully address the hopes and fears and longings of the people.

But for this particular funeral, no one knew the lady who had died. And the main reason for that is that she did not know herself. She had slipped into such forgetfulness before she arrived at the nursing home that none of the staff there had had a chance to get to know her. No one had had a real conversation with her. Their admission records pointed to no surviving family member, but simply to a legal guardian, and that guardian did not know the lady either. The staff took care of the lady, but knew nothing about her. I was baffled. There was no one to talk to about this woman. In fact, the only way I knew she was Christian was that she had arranged for a Christian funeral.

So I did the funeral. Only two people came. One was a social worker and one was a nurse's aid from the nursing home.

In the sermon, I referred to that beautiful passage in Isaiah where God speaks of his people being engraved on the palms of his hand:

¹³Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the LORD has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones. ¹⁴But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me." ¹⁵Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. ¹⁶See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; (Isaiah 49:13-16, NRSV)

I observed that young people sometimes pierce their bodies or put tattoos on them, and that I feel bad about that because fashions change, but that when these fashions change, they are going to be stuck with this damage to their bodies. But, I said, the good news is that our God is willing to be stuck with some very particular scars on his body. They are the scars that came from his crucifixion, and they are scars for you and for me. See, we are inscribed on the palms of our Maker's hands. He does not intend to forget us, though all the world might, and though we might even drift into forgetfulness and forget ourselves.

That is, our Maker continues to be charmed by us, as when we were young and beautiful. He continues to see us that way even into old age. He continues to have hope for us. And he means never to forsake us.

And so, let me point you to the conclusion of today's Psalm -- Psalm 71. I have already referred to that Psalm's testimony that God knows us even in the womb:

⁶ I have been sustained by you ever since I was born;
from my mother's womb you have | been my strength;*
my praise shall be al- | ways of you.

But this Psalm could also be treasured as "the old person's Psalm," for it expresses faith in God even unto old age:

⁹ Do not cast me off in | my old age;*
forsake me not when | my strength fails.
¹⁷ O God, you have taught me since | I was young,*
and to this day I tell of your won- | derful works.
¹⁸ And now that I am old and gray-headed, O God, do | not forsake me,*

This is a prayer that shall be granted. It is the nature of our God that though we become old and gray-headed, he will not forsake us. He is the One who can gaze at us even in our declining years and find himself exclaiming, "You must have been a beautiful baby, 'cause, Baby, look at you now!"

Let us learn to gaze at others that way too. Let us strive to see beauty in them as if they were still young and lovely, for they *are*, in Christ, who loves them steadily, patiently, and delights in them, and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.