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Date: March 24, 2019
Sermon Title: Older Than Dirt, Part II
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Genesis 5:6-27

Genesis 5:6-27

When Seth had lived for one hundred and five years, he became the father of Enosh. Seth lived after the birth of Enosh for eight hundred and seven years, and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Seth were nine hundred and twelve years; and he died.

When Enosh had lived for ninety years, he became the father of Kenan. Enosh lived after the birth of Kenan for eight hundred and fifteen years, and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Enosh were nine hundred and five years; and he died.

When Kenan had lived for seventy years, he became the father of Mahalalel. Kenan lived after the birth of Mahalalel for eight hundred and forty years, and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Kenan were nine hundred and ten years; and he died.

When Mahalalel had lived for sixty-five years, he became the father of Jared. Mahalalel lived after the birth of Jared for eight hundred and thirty years, and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Mahalalel were eight hundred and ninety-five years; and he died.

When Jared had lived for one hundred and sixty-two years he became the father of Enoch. Jared lived after the birth of Enoch for eight hundred years, and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Jared were nine hundred and sixty-two years; and he died.

When Enoch had lived for sixty-five years, he became the father of Methuselah. Enoch walked with God after the birth of Methuselah for three hundred years, and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him.

When Methuselah had lived for one hundred and eighty-seven years, he became the father of Lamech. Methuselah lived after the birth of Lamech for seven hundred and eighty-two years, and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Methuselah were nine hundred and sixty-nine years; and he died.

"Older Than Dirt, Part II." when I turned 50, I preached a sermon entitled "Older Than Dirt," and with yet another birthday a couple of weeks ago, I am substantially beyond 50; hence, today's sermon title, "Older Than Dirt, Part II."

Aging in a youth-oriented world is quite an experience, good and bad. There are so many advances in health and medicine, so much more awareness. In many ways this is a great time to be old and to be alive, so I'm not complaining. I'm still here. That's a good thing.

You may remember the Colorado governor some years back who advised that older Americans should just die, get out of the way, make room for the younger generation. He must have envisioned a sort of political "Soylent Green," that awful science fiction movie in which, at a certain age, older people get turned into a nutritional drink for the more valued younger generation.

Being downgraded comes in various ways. I long for the good old days, when, if I cut somebody off while driving or backed up carelessly into oncoming traffic, that would elicit road rage. People would yell and scream and be vulgar, maybe even jump out of their car and challenge me. That gets your blood rushing, makes you feel alive! Now? Well, this week I did that down on the Post Road—backed out into traffic, almost crashed into a Jeep. And the driver just sat there, looking at me with such pity, and then gave me that exasperated, condescending hand motion that 35-year-olds use, indicating that I should just go on, I wasn't worth fighting anymore.

That's what got me thinking about today's Scripture lesson you just heard. I think I saw your eyes glaze over with that Scripture, but there aren't many Scriptures about old people, and not many occasions to use those verses. Think about those people we just heard about and their lifespans: Seth, 912 years; Enosh, 905. Kenan, 910. Mahalalel, 895. Jared, 962. Enoch, 365. Methuselah, 969. And think of Seth, 105 when he became a father for the first time and had more kids after that. Enosh started parenting at 90. Jared started at 162. Methuselah, 187. Stop and think about that. You're 187, and you're still alive, A.; B, you're still married; C, you're raising a kid; 187, and you're changing diapers, putting on their winter clothes, going to Little League games and parent-teacher conferences. Saving for their college education.

These people were having kids at 100, raising kids at 200, playing with grandkids at 300. I have no idea if they ever retired. What kind of 401(k) would you have at, say, 500? Of course, a lot of people dismiss those Bible stories as typical Biblical myths, not to be taken seriously.

When I was a pastor in New York City, I had a great scientist in my church, Dr. Raymond Damadian, the actual inventor of the MRI. He took me once to Brooklyn to see his lab and the prototype of that first MRI. It was gigantic, like something out of "Star Trek." Damadian was a great scientist, inventor, and a devout, serious Christian. He took the Bible seriously. Yet, he believed these stories of 895-year-old Mahalalel, 365-year-old Enoch, and 969-year-old Methuselah.

He told me to go back 5,000 years, remove all the carcinogens from daily life, clean up the air, eat healthy—what you can catch and what you can grow; walk everywhere, don't be sedentary, don't smoke, and eat yogurt . . . Then, sure, he told me, the outliers, the best of the best, could live to 300, 500, 900 years.

The more interesting question is what did they do with all those years? What would you do with all those years? Take me, for example. I recently had another birthday, and I'm still here. Imagine if I were just getting started! Our four kids? Just a beginning. My 22 years as your pastor? Only a warm-up. All my degrees and experience? Just practice for what's ahead. And all those books I keep making you buy? Wait until you see my encyclopedia!

O.K., let's be a bit more serious. Let's look at one of those long-lived people. I'll pick Enoch, one of the young whippersnappers in the group. He made it to only 365, 365. For perspective, that means that if he died today, he was born in 1654; and if he was born today, he would live to 2384.

When I do funerals of older folks, say 85, 90, 95, I always ask the people at the funeral to think about all of the changes that person experienced: transportation, technology, jobs, medicine, daily life. With a little imagination, we can do it. This spring we'll do the funeral for Eleanor Lobdell. She goes back before the cell phone—even the telephone itself, before the computer or TV, before integration or women's suffrage. Before the NFL, the NBA, women's soccer; heck, before women's sports. You get the picture. Now try 365 years!

Let's review what the Bible tells us about Enoch: "*When Enoch had lived for sixty-five years*" . . . 65 years, retirement, mandatory retirement, Social Security, early bird specials, out to pasture, 65 . . . "*he became the father of Methuselah. Enoch walked with God after the birth of Methuselah for three hundred years, and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him.*" (Genesis 5:21-24)

Granted, a short obituary for 365 years. What was his job? Where did he go to school? His hobbies, clubs, awards? No mention. Except God. God is in his obituary three times. There are only four sentences there, and God is in three of them. Twice it says, "Enoch walked with God," and when all was said and done, "God took him."

As you know, I have this weekly adult class, "Religion in the News," and it is exactly what it sounds like. I look for news stories that pertain to the world of religion and, my goodness, the news is full of religion! One of the first articles I used years ago was a simple obituary: "Walter Jones, Deacon, Dead at 82." Think of that. If you read obituaries, you know that the obituaries of prominent people who get a whole article feature the thing they are known for in the headline. Like, "Walter Jones, Broadway Star . . ." "Walter Jones, Nobel Prize Winner in Physics . . ." "Walter Jones, Engineer . . ." "Walter Jones, Yankee Hero of 1946 World Series." OR, the real Walter Jones, "Deacon." Or, "Enoch, Walked with God, Dead at 365." The "walked with God" seems important, doesn't it? It's his defining characteristic. It could be on his headstone.

Brighter minds than mine have pointed out that when you look at a headstone, you see the date of birth, date of death, and then they put a dash in between. It is the dash that's really important. The dash is where all the action takes place. Birth? You don't get much credit for that; your mother did all the work. Death? Not really an accomplishment, per se. But the dash? Well, therein lies the story. Enoch's story is, "He walked with God." An interesting lesson. On some level you might think he got shortchanged. His father lived to be 962; his son, 969. Enoch got about 35 percent of what they got. But that's life, isn't it? Since time immemorial, some get more, some get less; some have tougher luck, greater challenges, fewer opportunities, bigger houses, or shorter retirements, better health or worse troubles. Luck of the draw or fate or karma or God's will or genes. We all get what we get.

The great equalizer is the dash. What do you do with your dash? Sure, it's my one millionth birthday that has me thinking about this: the passage of time, the changes that come, looking at the world speeding by all around, and wondering about the intersection of youth and age. Are we all just waiting for that moment when younger drivers treat us with pity? Or do we all still have something to share? Wasn't I taught in geometry that two lines eventually intersect? Well, then, what about your dash and mine?

Our Adult Education Board has launched a new initiative, getting our teenagers and adults to sit together, talk, share about faith and life, lessons learned, "God moments." Two "dashes" intersecting, each gaining strength, even wisdom, from the other. The younger generation not dismissed as babes in the woods, wet

behind the ears, immature; the older generation not over the hill, out to pasture, irrelevant, in the way. I live in in both of those two worlds.

Last Sunday night, Alida and I had our usual meeting with the Junior Deacons, sophomores and juniors in high school. A few days earlier, our state senator and church member, Tony Hwang, hosted a meeting in our church on bullying, open to the public. So we followed up with the Junior Deacons. My goodness, they gave us a tutorial on modern life in high school, the role of technology, the power of words and images. The stresses and pressures of daily life, the desire to do the right thing and be the best person.

On Thursday, I led two Bible studies—22 people, the oldest, 103; the rest of us with varying lengths of dashes. And once again, what wisdom, what insight, what ideas, what profound depths of faith! There we have it. My 15-year-olds, full of compassion, confronted by an exhausting world, determined to be a force for change, living daily life with their faith always within arm's reach; my adults, with a world of experience, a depth of knowledge, and hearts as big as all outdoors.

Yes, of course, age has its differences. At a youth meeting a few years ago, I was trying to impress our teenagers with how hip I am. I was bragging about my favorite rock 'n' roll band, "Green Day." My favorite teenager said out loud, "Oh, David, that's so fifth grade!" That's why I'm never getting a tattoo.

The New York Times Magazine, my birth week issue, was titled "The Top 25 Songs That Matter Right Now." Get that? The 25 songs that today's young people really know, respond to, think about, that matter. Twenty-one of the songs I'd never heard of; 19 of the performers I'd never heard of. But this isn't about loving each other's music.

Let's face it; at least part of the purpose of every generation is to annoy the generation above and embarrass the generation below. I worked hard to annoy my parents, and I love embarrassing my kids and grandkids. We're all each other's fair game: culture, hairstyles, music, fads, trends, and heck, even politics. But that's not our dashes. The dash is where we live. *Live* live, not *play* live.

Enoch "walked with God." That was his dash. So what the heck is "walking with God"? Well, think about it. What's walking with anybody? Doesn't it imply camaraderie, a side-by-sideness, an intimacy? If you're walking down the street and find yourself next to someone you don't know or don't care to know, you'll speed up to pass or slow down to avoid them. If you're going to walk "cheek by jowl" with someone, it's going to be someone you like, you want to bond with, someone who makes the walking special. So "Enoch walked with God."

Some years ago, while president of Habitat for Humanity, I had to make an emergency trip to Zaire, the Congo. We had a young male volunteer who was "misbehaving" (that's what some missionaries said) with an African woman. They were outraged at such immorality, and I needed to come over there and drag that boy back to America. He was a disgrace. So I went over and met with everybody—the young American boy, the young African girl, the irate missionaries, and finally with the village elders and the village pastor. The elders and pastor were not scandalized at all. "Of course they are together, that boy and girl," they told me. "We knew about it from the very first day. Everybody knows. Once they were seen walking together, everything was known." You see, walking together meant something. Walking together meant you are together, meant intimacy, meant commitment. So, the elders said, "Let us now have the marriage." The next day, I married the couple. That was 40 years ago, and they're still walking together. Every imaginable difference, challenge, complication, obstacle—they are still "walking" with each other. That's "God and Enoch" intimacy. Closeness. In each other's heads. In each other's hearts. In each other's space.

I think a lot about what we are trying to do in this wonderful church of ours. And I think it's to help each of us be like Enoch. To walk with God. We do that in many ways, often each in our own way. Some like quiet. Some need community. Some choose an activity. Some have a place or time. Some use rituals and ritual objects: incense, candles, music, prayer beads. Some like to read. Some like to listen. Some like to talk. It's the same with our human friends. Sometimes you literally walk together—a power walk in the morning, a walk in the woods on a weekend, a beach walk on vacation—the two of you, chatting away, sharing in depth.

Nowadays, walking together can mean FaceTime, Skype, emails, texts, each keeping each other in your prayers. All ways of your walking with your friend. But here's the take-home lesson from Enoch's 300-year walk with God:

Number 1, you can bet it was intentional. Being connected, staying connected doesn't just happen. A relationship, even with God, takes connection. You have to be intentional about it. You want to "walk with God"? I'm dead serious: make an appointment, make it real, and show up. Bring your full self, and be into it. Be intentional.

Number 2, you can bet it was regular. Real friendships, real relationships are not "catch as catch can," not "maybe, maybe not," not "iffy." They're regular.

Number 3, you can bet it was personal. When Enoch and God "walk together," they got into it. They got down to brass tacks. I'll use that word again: *real*. It was real. They were real with each other, and real means real time, real life, real emotions. You can't stand on ceremony for 300 years. You can't talk "fluff" and

sports and weather for 300 years. At some point, you bare your soul, you get personal.

And Number 4, you can bet it was effective. You can't do something for 300 years if it doesn't work. Enoch got something out of it. Pleasure, inspiration, confidence, ideas, guidance. Enoch walked with God because walking with God was better than *not* walking with God. So he kept at it for 300 years. Intentional. Regular. Personal. And as a result, effective.

The point of my sermon is that those of us who've been around a while and those just sort of getting started in life and those midway in everything, we're all living out our dashes, and we all have something worth sharing. You may not like the way I drive at this stage of my life, and I may not like your music, but that's really not where our dashes intersect. Our dashes intersect here.

This old wooden church, this Sunday-morning-going-to-church ritual, this 84 years of Dogwood Festivals, this 41 years of going to Appalachia, this 20 years of feeding the hungry at St. George's Kitchen, this prayer candle stand, always lit every day by someone, this prayer on a Sunday morning that covers so much ground, this million-dollar church budget that helps and loves and touches so many, this everyday effort you and I make to be Christlike, this tireless commitment to do-goodism and loveism and to Bible study and visiting, these Pennies for People cans and building your Lenten garden bowl and writing the Lenten devotions and volunteering.

This weekly "confession" of where we've gone wrong, and weekly "assurance of forgiveness" to start the new week, and weekly offering to say, "Thank you."

Well, it's all our "walking with God." Keep it up for another 300.

Let's sing together our final hymn, No. 97, "Fairest Lord Jesus".

*Fairest Lord Jesus,
ruler of all nature,
O thou of God to earth come down;
thee will I cherish,
thee will I honor,
thou, my soul's glory, joy, and crown.*

*Fair are the meadows,
fairer still the woodlands,
robed in the blooming garb of spring:
Jesus is fairer,*

*Jesus is purer,
who makes the woeful heart to sing.*

*Fair is the sunshine,
fairer still the moonlight,
and all the twinkling, starry hosts:
Jesus shines brighter,
Jesus shines purer,
than all the angels heaven can boast.*