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Date: December 12, 2021
Sermon: "Old People"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Luke 1:5-15

Luke 1:5-15 - The Birth of John the Baptist Foretold

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit.'

Did you note that juxtaposition of our sermon title? For those worshipping online, our Sunday bulletin says this: "Sermon: 'Old People.'" And right next to it, "David Johnson Rowe." "Old people . . . David Johnson Rowe."

I'm at the stage of life when it's no longer useful to go to a doctor. It doesn't matter what ailment I have, the diagnosis is the same: "You're old." Or the gentler version, "You're getting older." Or the bitter truth: "This is what happens at your age." For my barber to my podiatrist and every inch of me in between, it's the same.

Perhaps as proof of aging is for a month I lost my favorite Bible. Poof! Gone. Misplaced. I couldn't remember where I left it.

As further proof of aging, my Bible is no longer available, no longer in print. It's out of date. It's too old. I have to go to breaking in a new one, but it's the old timey King James Version, with the old language we old folks grew up with in the Bible. Listen to today's Scripture in that old version: "There was a certain priest name Zachariah and his wife, Elizabeth. They were both righteous before God, walking in all Commandments, and blameless. They had no child because Elizabeth was barren, and"

Catch this now, listen up . . . they were both well stricken in years." *Well stricken in years.*

That's a good description. I actually prefer that. Instead of the doctor saying to me, "It's because you're old," I'd prefer, "You know, sir, you are well stricken in years." It sounds more honorable. It's how I've earned every ache and pain. And the truth is the Christmas story begins and ends with old people "well stricken in years," still necessary to God.

The Christmas story begins with Zechariah and Elizabeth and ends with Anna and Simeon.

(How many of you would have gotten that right on "Jeopardy"?)

The two ends of the spectrum: preparation and affirmation. Zechariah and Elizabeth are in the story for preparation, to set the story for Jesus, "to prepare the way of the Lord."

Despite being "well stricken in years," old man Zechariah and old woman Elizabeth produce a child who is Jesus's cousin and who grows up to be John the Baptist. Who cares? Why is this important? Because, as I preached two weeks ago, the Jewish people had been waiting for a long time for the Messiah, and part of the preparation is that God will send someone first "to prepare the way of the Lord," which is what John the Baptist grows up to do.

Before Jesus goes public, John is out there telling tilling the soil, planting the seeds, getting everybody ready; preaching up repentance and changing your life and forgiveness; and, of course, baptizing people in the River Jordan. Hence the name, "John the Baptist."

When I first saw "Godspell" on Broadway, and in every production since, you're sitting in the theater, the lights go down, the stage curtain goes up, expectation builds, and to everyone's surprise, the action begins behind you!

A solitary figure, John the Baptist, enters from the back, walking down the aisle, singing, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Prepare ye the way of the Lord."

And then the stage explodes with colors and sounds, exuberance and dance, as Jesus's life unfolds all the way to crucifixion . . . and resurrection.

But it's John the Baptist who kicks it all off. He prepares the way for Jesus. And we get John because two old people, "well stricken in years," let God use them to create the first Christmas miracle.

At the other end of the Christmas story are Anna and Simeon—they're the affirmation. We know they're old because one, they've both been waiting for the Messiah a long time, not just in terms of the nation, but in their own lives; and two, once they see the Baby Jesus, they are ready to embrace death.

And that's an old people thing. You'd never hear a Mets fan or a Rangers fan, or, God help us, a Jets fan, who is 25 to 50 years old, say, "If they'd just win a championship, I could die in peace."

No, old people say that. People who have lived a long, full life. Maybe there's one more experience they'd like to have, one more place to see, one more bucket list to check off, one more hope fulfilled, and then they can say, "Now I can die in peace."

As for Anna, the Christmas story tells us bluntly, "She was very old," and a widow most of her life; she was at least 84. So why are these two old people in the Christmas story? Well, Jewish people, like every group of people I've ever met, of every religion and culture and ethnicity, have various customs connected to the birth of a child. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Bethlehem is practically next door to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the place of the Great Jewish Temple, so the Jewish Mary and Joseph brought their Jewish baby Jesus to the Great Temple for all the rituals connected to thanking God for this new life.

In my travels, I've been present for celebrations and rituals connected to a child's birth in many cultures: the "naming ceremony," or first haircut, first solid food, first steps. In our Church, Baptism is the main event celebrating a new life, and in our Church, Baptism is a big deal. Family and friends take it very seriously. Godparents are chosen with great care. People fly in from all over. They all dress up fine. A lovely party afterward. All this, even during Covid.

In fact, it was our Baptisms that led the way in keeping our Church alive and active. Funerals were restricted or delayed, weddings postponed. But Baptism families motivated us to find ways, new ways, creative ways to celebrate each new life.

That's what Mary and Joseph were up to when they made their way to the Temple in Jerusalem. They were living a mystery: their lives were uprooted.

They were far from home. They were being hunted by the evil King Herod. They would soon escape to Egypt, crossing borders to save their lives and to protect their child.

But amidst it all, they first brought their baby to the Temple. And waiting there were two old people, Anna and Simeon, two old people assigned by God to wait; two people trusting in God that the wait would be worth it, two people ready and willing to believe, even before there was much to show for it. Two people, two old people who chose to live out their days with purpose and expectation. Not fear. Not dread. Not resignation. Expectation.

Alida and I, we love our Church, we love you—our people—our congregation. We could go generation by generation, decade by decade. From little kids to vibrant teens to young adults to midlife, mid-career go-getters, to us old folks, and we could itemize the characteristics of each generation and why you all amaze us.

We'd mention energy, compassion, vision, generosity, imagination, creativity, stick-to-itiveness, a can-do spirit. And faith, faith, and more faith.

But today is my salute to our elders. That used to be the main honorific word of respect for older folks, before we switched to "golden agers," "senior citizens," "old codgers," the "over-the-hill gang," "put out to pasture." We used to be the elders.

And in our Church, our elders live up to the original meaning. Our elders, our old people, my cohorts and I, O.K., we move more slowly, but we think fast, we work hard, we believe strong, we panic less, we pray more, we've seen too much to ever give up because, of course, long life gives perspective.

That's why I love that old saying that some old character in a movie or a book says to some young whippersnapper, "I've forgotten more than you've ever known."

Maybe that's why our beautiful, baby-centered, youth-filled Christmas story gets started and ended with old people. Old people have been at it for the long haul. Old folks have the long view.

So God used Zechariah and Elizabeth, "stricken in years," to prepare the way. And to close the Christmas story, God used Anna and Simeon, who, despite all the jokes about "senior moments" and forgetfulness, they were the folks who actually remembered what God was up to.

So I'll close with an old classic David Rowe story. I'm sure it's in one of my

books and several sermons, but that's what old people do, right? We repeat ourselves!

So here goes. On one of my early trips to Africa, to the old Zaire, now the Congo, I was taken to the village of Ntondo on the Equator. We were building up the work of Habitat for Humanity and establishing other projects that required the full endorsement of the village. Word was spread throughout the village of the big meeting to be held that night.

A large bonfire was lit, and all the people of the village gathered, young and old. In a village with no electricity, the bonfire was the only light. And here's what's fascinating. Important decisions were about to be made. The future of the village was at stake. Hundreds were gathered around the only light. Sitting closest to the bonfire were the oldest people, in a big circle around the fire. Then, a little farther out were the 50-year-olds. Farther back, far away from the fire, were the 30- and 40-year-olds. Way out, where it was dark, and you couldn't see anything, were young people, teenagers, kids.

Being young at the time, I figured the old people were seated close to the fire to stay warm. You know how old people are always cold, right? Nope. That wasn't it. The old people, the elders, were closest to the fire because this meeting was important, and the people closest to the fire were the ones who could be seen, the only ones who would be heard. It was their wisdom that was counted on, their experience that was needed, valued.

Maybe that's why the Christmas story is book-ended by old people. God needed some rock-steady people, seasoned veterans of life, gifted with patience and perspective, ready to believe that "Joy to the World" could come from "Away in a Manger" during a "Silent Night, Holy Night," making real the jaunty greeting of another old man, "Ho, ho, ho! Merry Christmas!"

Our final hymn today is "Song of Simeon" No. 56 in your Hymnal.

"Song of Simeon" (Nunc Dimittis)

*Now let us sing our Savior's praise,
and tell God's goodness all our days.*

*Lord, now let your servant go in peace;
your word has been fulfilled:
my own eyes have seen the salvation
which you have prepared in the presence of all people,
a light to reveal you to the nations
and the glory of your people Israel.*