

God Saves the Hardest Part Until Last

Psalm for the Summer – Psalm 71

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Pastor Vern Christopherson

I have a couple questions for you today: 1) How many of you are getting older? And 2) How many of you are happy about getting older?

It wouldn't take much effort to come up with a list of the challenges we might face as the years go by. Things like aches and pains in places we didn't even know we had; cataracts; mobility issues; hearing loss; and...*ahem*...the need to get up in the middle of the night, and often more than once.

There are other challenges too, more serious ones: high blood pressure, heart disease, cancer, cognitive decline. Clearly, these things are not easy to think about, much less to talk about. Bette Davis once quipped, "Old age ain't no place for sissies." Pretty much anyone old enough to qualify for AARP knows exactly what she means.

Psalm 71 ain't no place for sissies, either. The psalmist is praying for refuge: *Lord, deliver me...rescue me...save me.* As with a lot of the psalms, it's hard to know what the specific problems are. But there are calamities of some sort, and also there are onlookers who aren't supportive. They taunt: *Has God forsaken you? Is there no one to deliver you?*

By the time we get to verse 9 – *Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength is spent* – we get the sense that this psalm was composed by someone who's seen more than his share of troubles. This is followed up with a plea in verse 18 – *Even to my old age and gray hair, O God, do not forsake me.*

Notice the claims of this aging psalmist: *that God was there to take him from his mother's womb, that God has been with him ever since his youth, that he has walked with the Lord all the days of his life.* And yet despite all these faith-filled claims, he still needs reassurance that no matter what comes his way, God will be there to care for him. Or, to put it another way, there seems to be no point at which we finally "arrive" in our faith, when we no longer need the assurance and comfort of a gracious God.

So, what does it mean to put our trust in God our whole life long? I want to tell you a story about a woman named Audrey who spent a lifetime learning to trust. When I first heard it, Audrey's story was a great inspiration to me.

Audrey was a member of my congregation in Bloomington. She was 88 years old when she died. When the family sat down to plan the funeral, they handed me Audrey's personal copy of the LBW, the green hymnal. They said, "Take a look at the psalms. They will tell you everything you need to know, and then some, about her life.

I started glancing through the pages. They were well-worn. There were hundreds of notes written in the margins. It was a treasure trove, an incredible testimony to who Audrey was and how she had lived her life with God.

Psalm 139 was starred as one of Audrey's favorites. She praised God because she was *fearfully and wonderfully made*. She'd grown up on a farm near Houston, MN. She attended a one-room country school. Her family went to worship at the Stone Church. All these were notes in the margins.

Audrey was confirmed at Houston Lutheran Church. It was a memorable day. She took her vows seriously. She worried that she might not be able to live up to them. And yet, in her own quiet way, she did some celebrating too. *Happy are they who trust in the Lord*, she highlighted in Psalm 40, *How great are your plans for us!*

God did have plans for Audrey. God had blessed her with a keen mind and an inquiring spirit. She learned her lessons well. In high school she met a young man named Bob. Audrey took a liking to him, but Bob was off to the Navy soon after high school. America was in the thick of WW II. Audrey went to Winona State to become a teacher.

Granddaughter Katie once had a school assignment to interview someone who had lived during World War II. Naturally Katie chose her grandmother. Katie asked her: "What was the hardest thing about going through the war?" Katie expected a rather serious reply. Instead, Audrey blurted out, "There weren't any boys to date. They were all either too young or too old."

After getting her teaching degree, Audrey returned to the Houston area. She was back in a one-room country school. She drove a well-used Model T that she named "Leapin' Lena." She absolutely loved learning about the world and

sharing it with her students. And she did so with great humility and purpose. Again from Psalm 139: *There is not a word on my lips, but you, O Lord, know it all together.....Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.*

Bob came home from the war. He and Audrey were married. Bob got a job as an air traffic controller. It took them to Aberdeen, South Dakota, then to St Paul, and finally to Bloomington. They were blessed with a couple of children, Eric and Barbara. Audrey continued to do some substitute teaching, but her first love was raising those children. She highlighted a verse in Psalm 103: *As a father and mother care for their children, so does the Lord care for those who fear him.*

Then, in 1967, the unthinkable happened. Young Barbara was tired much of the time. She stopped growing. After some tests, the doctors discovered a hole in her heart. It could not be repaired. Sadly, a year later she died.

I don't know what it's like to lose a child, but I'm pretty sure that a part of Audrey's heart died right along with Barbara. Sometime later she underlined words of lament from Psalm 103: *Our days are like the grass; we flourish like a flower of the field; but when the wind blows over it, it is gone, and its place shall know it no more.*

Audrey described the loss of Barbara as a turning point in her life. She wrote: "My personality changed. I went from the very insecure, shy person that I was to a person who believed more strongly in God. I was much bolder and more secure. Why was that?" Audrey answered her own question. She shared that shortly after Barbara's death, she had a dream. She called it an "Easter gift." She saw Barbara floating away like a spirit. Barbara was saying to her, "Don't worry, Mom, it's okay." And even though the loss was heartbreaking, that fleeting glimpse gave Audrey the strength she needed to go on. She commented on Psalm 71: "Lord, be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress. You have made me see many troubles and calamities, and you will revive me again."

The years passed. Bob died. Audrey was getting older. She began to struggle with health issues of her own. One day she had a minor stroke. She could no longer write in the flowing cursive she used as a teacher. Then a month later she had a major stroke, a stroke from which she would not recover. As the time grew closer, Audrey reflected on Psalm 90: *The span of our life is seventy*

years, perhaps in strength even eighty; and we are gone. Teach us to number our days, O Lord, that we may gain a wise heart.

Perhaps my favorite comment from Audrey's LBW was also from Psalm 139: *Lord, you have searched me and known me; you know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar. Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I climb up to heaven, you are there; if I make the grave my bed, you are there also.* In the margin of the psalm, Audrey penned a simple, heartfelt response: "What a God!" That was all. What a God!

Old age ain't no place for sissies. That's what we say. Maybe another way to say it is this: "God saves the hardest part until last." Old age can be hard. But here's the way I see it: People like Audrey and the author of Psalm 71 have staying power. That staying power is rooted in trust. And trust is rooted in an ongoing relationship with God. Lament is a part of that relationship, an honest outpouring of our problems in prayer. So too is praise. Again and again folks like Audrey and the psalmist respond with praise. *O God, you have done great things, who is like you? You are my hope.* And finally, as the end drew near, Audrey – and I suspect the psalmist too – were moved to lift their voices and proclaim, "What a God!"

Friends, in an uncertain world like ours, we need this kind of hope. Indeed, we need this kind of ongoing and spirited relationship with the One who has given us life. For the truth of the matter is, none of us here today has any idea what tomorrow will bring. We may live to a ripe old age. We may not. That uncertainty can make us more than a little anxious.

When our "Psalms for the Summer" series started in July, we knew we'd soon be celebrating Jean Carlson's retirement from music ministry at Good Shepherd. We planned on using Psalm 95: *O come, let us sing to the Lord, let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.* But little did we know that Arnie would be gone only a month later. And we'd be reading from Psalm 23: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

Friends, I encourage you to keep reading the psalms. They are a hymnbook and a prayer book wrapped into one. The psalms cover the span between birth and death, between incredible joy and heartbreaking sorrow. And maybe, just maybe, they help us proclaim, "What a God!" Amen.