***ABRAHAM AND SARAH: WHY ME?***

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Texts: Genesis 17:1-8, 15-21 and Hebrews 11:8-12

When my grandfather, for whom I was named, was in his early 80s he was still working a couple of days a week for the trust department at the bank in his hometown of McKeesport, PA where he spent most of his career. His role was to introduce folks who were making their estate and trust plans to the younger members of the trust department who would be working with them. At one such meeting with an older woman who my grandfather did not know very well the trust officer asked who she would like to have serve as the executor and trustee of her estate. The woman pointed a finger at my grandfather and said, “Him.” “But I am over 80,” my grandfather protested. “You should choose someone younger.” “Are you sick?” the woman asked. “No,” replied my grandfather. “Then I want you,” she said. And so my grandfather was appointed trustee and executor of her estate – with an alternate trustee appointed at my grandfather’s insistence, just in case!

When, if ever, are you too old to do what you do? I have an arthritic hip and aching knees that tell me the day is coming when I will not be able to play basketball with the young pups anymore, but that day has not yet arrived. For Brett Favre that day arrived several times over before he finally hung up his cleats and ended his football career. It seems a lot easier to retire from something you hate or have grown weary of than to retire from something you love. You certainly want to retire before everyone else wishes you had. But how do you know when to say when?

I have always contended that the retirement question is not “what are you retiring from?”, but “what are you retiring to?” What is it that God is calling you to do after you stop doing what you’ve done for a long, long time? What will you do with the rest of your life, or more appropriately, what might God do with you for the rest of your life? That same question sometimes arises deep into retirement. What new thing might God have in mind for an old mind and body?

In my first two years of law school I lived next door to Mrs. Leming. She was in her 80s and not very mobile, so she had a woman named Hilda Dysart who would come to care for her, cook her meals, clean the house and generally run her life. Hilda was not much younger than Mrs. Leming. I would leave my dying plants with them when I was away at breaks from school, and when I returned the plants were always thriving. “What is your secret?” I asked Hilda. “Well,” she said, “I give them plenty of water and a little plant food, and I have Mrs. Leming talk to them each day. I told her, ‘Mrs. Leming, John has entrusted these plants to you and the least you can do is sit here and talk to them.’” And so she did and the plants thrived. Some years later when Hilda was approaching 90 she would go to the local nursing home and set up ten pins for the residents to bowl. She said she did it because she liked to help the elderly!

Not everyone is blessed with Hilda’s good health late in life. Bodies or minds or both sometimes break down. In his book *Have a Little Faith* Mitch Albom recounts a conversation with his elderly rabbi Albert Lewis, who was very ill.

“You see?” [the rabbi] whispered. “This is man’s dilemma. We rail against it.”

“Getting old?” [asked Mitch.]

“Getting old, we can deal with,” [replied the rabbi]. “*Being* old is the problem.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

At the end of getting old is being old, and the human dilemma which *being old* poses is what does God have in store for me now? What can God do with these brittle bones and brain? It is a question I have met repeatedly with folks in their later years, especially after a health crisis that has left the person more fragile than ever. It is the existential question, “Why am I here?” framed by the comment of the woman who said to me, “I guess God isn’t done with me yet! But I can’t imagine what God expects me to do at this point.” Some argue that age is only a state of mind despite what your body is telling you, but sometimes your body is right, and the question is, “Can God still use me in this condition? And if so, how?”

Abraham and Sarah confronted a variation on that question when God came to them with the promise of a covenant. The text notes that Sarah was 90 years old and Abraham was 99 when the Lord appeared to him, and while ages are somewhat skewed in these early accounts of our ancestors in faith (remember Noah supposedly lived to a ripe old age of 950), it is also clear that Abraham and Sarah were no spring chickens. Sarah was beyond child-bearing years, and Abraham was beyond imagining child-bearing years. When God suggested that the covenant would be with them and their descendants, it seemed impossible, for they had no descendants apart from Ishmael, a child Abraham had conceived with his wife’s maid. When God said that Sarah would bear a child to Abraham and they would have their own heir, both Sarah and Abraham laughed in God’s face at the absurdity of the suggestion. They were too old for such a miracle, too old to become parents, too old to be used in this pregnant plan of God. God would be wise to revise the plan around a covenant with Ishmael. But God does what God chooses to do, and while God blessed Ishmael, the covenant in God’s plan was with Abraham and Sarah and their descendants. Age was not a limitation. So 90 year-old Sarah gave birth to a child who was named Isaac, which means “he laughs.”

It is tempting at times to laugh at God and God’s plans for us which seem unrealistic or even impossible. But with God all things are possible; God can do whatever God chooses to do. God is not limited by age – by God’s age or our ages. God can use any of us, regardless of age, and the living proof of that truth is the child Isaac, son of Abraham and Sarah, heir to the covenant. That is not to suggest that you ladies beyond child-bearing years should run out and get pregnancy test kits. It is to suggest that God can do more with each of us than we can imagine – can use us when we are *getting* old and even when we *are* old. Even when we think God can do no more with us, God may yet have something in store, something surprising, some purpose for our lives and for our living, some way in which God may yet use us for God’s good purposes.

A good friend of my grandfather lives in a retirement home in McKeesport. Several years ago she suffered a stroke which has limited her mobility significantly and affected her speech and emotions as well. She is confined to a wheelchair and can no longer do what she used to do – at age 95 she was still counting the offering at her church on Sundays and getting it right! Then she suffered the stroke. She has wrestled with why she is still living, with what God can possibly do with her given her condition. The answer seems to have come from one of the aides who helps to care for her. On one of my visits the aide told me that there are a lot of difficult days caring for difficult people in that home, and on those days, it is our friend June with her good sense of humor and gracious, loving spirit who lifts the aide’s spirits and helps her get through the day. Caring for June gives that aide a respite from the difficulties of the day, makes her smile and laugh and helps her keep on keeping on in her job. It doesn’t seem like a very big thing – to brighten someone’s day in such a small way – but it is sustaining to that aide and thus to those others for whom that aide cares.

We don’t always know just how God will use us or those older folks in our midst, but this story of Abraham and Sarah reminds us that there are no age limits in God’s plans, no ceiling for when God is through with us and can do no more, no time when “I’m too old” excuses us from whatever God has in mind. With every breath we take until the last breath we take, God can use us in some way to further the Kingdom of God, to make the world a little more the way God wants it to be. As we are *getting* old our role in that divine plan is to allow God to work through us and to open our eyes and ears to how God is working through those older folks among us, however old they may be. And when we *are* old, our role in that divine plan is just to breathe and be willing instruments by which God will do whatever it is God will do – to God’s glory.

A proverb says, “Gray hair is a crown of glory.” (16:31) I am just sure the lost portion of that proverb must be “No hair is a shiny crown of glory.” But whether our hair turns gray or falls out or not, our prayer as we age is that of the psalmist: *Even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me,*[[2]](#endnote-2) *but use me, Lord. Use even me*. Amen

1. Mitch Albom, quoting his rabbi Albert Lewis in *Have a Little Faith*, Hyperion: New York, 2009, p.125 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Psalm 71:18 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)