

FIVE FORKS BRETHERN IN CHRIST CHURCH
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SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 11:13-16

DATE: 2020-11-22

SUBJECT: Generations

Series: For Someone Your Age

THEME: Faithfulness over the long haul

SERMON: "Long, Long Journey"

Introduction It is good meet with you on line this morning. Thanks for checking in.

As a college student, author and now pastor, Heidi Neumark, did a one year missions trip to Johns Island—off the Carolina coast. The residents there are mostly the sons and daughters of plantation slaves. Heidi spent time gaining wisdom listening to their stories. She writes about her time with **Miss Ellie**. She writes:

"The most important lesson I learned on Johns Island was from Miss Ellie, who lived miles down a small dirt road in a one-room, wooden home. I loved to visit her. We'd sit in old rocking chairs on the front porch, drinking tall glasses of sweet tea, while she'd tell me stories. Miss Ellie would use phrases like: 'Girl, I be so happy I could jump the sky!'

Heidi could never find out Miss Ellie's precise age, but it was somewhere between 90 and 100. Maybe Miss Ellie didn't know herself. She still chopped her own firewood, and stacked it in neat little piles behind the house.

"Miss Ellie had a friend named Netta whom she'd known since they were little girls. In order to get to Netta's house, Miss Ellie had to walk for miles through fields of tall grass. This was the grass that Sea Island women make famous baskets out of. It was also home to numerous poisonous snakes: coral snakes, rattlesnakes, water moccasins, and copperheads.

"Actually, Netta's home was not that far from Miss Ellie's place, but there was a stream that cut across the fields. You had to walk quite a distance to get to the place where it narrowed enough to cross.

Heidi said, "I admired Miss Ellie, who would set off to visit her friend full of bouncy enthusiasm, with no worry for the snakes or the long miles. I also felt sorry for her. Poor Miss Ellie, I thought, old and arthritic, having to walk all that way, pushing through the thick summer heat, not to mention the snakes.

"I felt sorry—until I hit upon the perfect plan. I arranged with some men to help build a simple plank bridge across the stream near Miss Ellie's house. I scouted out the ideal place—not too wide, but too deep to cross. I bought and helped carry the planks there myself. Our bridge was built in a day. I was so excited that I could hardly wait to see Miss Ellie's reaction.

I went to her house, where she wanted to sit in her rocker and tell stories, but I was too impatient with my project. I practically dragged her off with me. 'Look!' I shouted, 'a shortcut for you to visit Netta!'

"Miss Ellie's face didn't register the grateful, happy look I expected. There was no smile, no 'jumping the sky.' Instead, for a long time, she looked puzzled, then she shook her head and looked at me as though I were the one who needed pity.

'Child, I don't need a shortcut.' And she told about all the friends she kept up with on her way to visit Netta. A shortcut would cut her off from Mr. Jenkins, with whom she always swapped gossip; from Miss Hunter, who so looked forward to the quilt scraps she'd bring by; A short cut would cut her off from the raisin wine she'd taste at one place in exchange for her biscuits. A short cut would take away the chance to look in on the "old folks" who were sick.

""Child,' she said again, 'can't take shortcuts if you want friends in this world. Shortcuts don't mix with love.'"

This is our final week in our series, **"For Someone Your Age..."** I hope we are learning to appreciate all the different age groups we have in the congregation and what each age group adds to our community. I also hope we are learning how each of us can do a better job of meeting the needs of each other. So we can be a thriving intergenerational community of Jesus followers.

Today we talk about the oldest age group and for lack of a more original term I will use

“Seniors.” Those who are about 65 or older. And I have titled this sermon: **“Long, Long Journey”**. And once again we will address these two questions:

What does this generation contribute/offer to the church?

What does this generation need from the church?

There are many ‘seniors’ mentioned in the bible. Our text this morning, **Hebrews 11:13-16**, doesn’t mention any by name, but refers to some particularly, and implies principles that apply to everyone in this age group.

Hebrews 11:13-16

All these people died still believing what God had promised them. They did not receive what was promised, but they saw it all from a distance and welcomed it. They agreed that they were foreigners and nomads here on earth. ¹⁴ Obviously people who say such things are looking forward to a country they can call their own. ¹⁵ If they had longed for the country they came from, they could have gone back. ¹⁶ But they were looking for a better place, a heavenly homeland. That is why God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

Who is the author referring to by: **“All these people?”**

Chapter 11 of Hebrews makes reference to many people – as great examples of faith, or examples of people who trusted God.

Verse 2 “Through their faith, the people in days of old earned a good reputation.”

Some names mentioned, Abel, Enoch, and Noah and then the author hones in on:

I. Abraham (and Sarah), Isaac, Jacob. The Hebrew patriarchs. Almost all of the people mentioned are ones who had a **‘Long, Long Journey’** with God. They were **“seniors.”** They have testimonies of enduring faith for many years.

Let’s do just a quick review of the Patriarch stories, found in Genesis. And I want you to pay attention to the time frames in these stories.

Abraham lived in Ur (most likely in modern Iraq) and was called by God to travel to Canaan. (Modern Palestine) God promised to give Abraham land to occupy, and a large number of descendants. Abraham started off but there was a problem. He and his wife, Sarah, were well up in years. They were seniors, and didn't have any children. How was God going to keep God's promise to Abraham?

Abraham tried to take a short cut to fulfill God's promise, and slept with his wife's servant girl. The servant girl got pregnant. This created a significant conflict in the family.

What did Miss Ellie say? **"Shortcuts don't mix with love."**

Later on Sarah did get pregnant and had a son, **Isaac**. The bible says after Isaac was born, Abraham lived as a foreigner for a long, long time, and then died when he was 175 years old. That's a senior.

Isaac married Rebekah when he was 40 years old and they weren't able to get pregnant until he was 60 years old. Rebekah had twins, Esau and Jacob. Although Esau was older, God told Rebekah, Esau would be servant to his younger brother Jacob. This was practically unheard of in that culture.

The bible says **Isaac** lived as a foreigner until he died at the ripe old age of 180.

When the twins grew up, **Jacob** decided to take a short cut to fulfill God's prophesy and stole Esau's birthright and the family blessing. That created all kinds of conflict in the family and Jacob had to run away from home for over 20 years.

You see, **"Shortcuts don't mix with love."**

Jacob, whose name was changed later to Israel, moved to Egypt. He died there at the ripe old age of 147, still trusting God's promise that his family would move back to Canaan. That promise took 400 years to be fulfilled.

Those are very brief summaries of the **Long, Long Journey's** these men and their wives had with God. Did you notice the time frames between God's promises and the fulfillment of those promises? No just months, or a few years. We are talking decades, even centuries.

If someone made you a promise today, but added, “Hey, it won’t be fulfilled for at least 50 years.” How would you respond? Would you trust their word? Would it make a difference in the way you lived your life, now? This is what seniors help us understand.

Back to book of Hebrews. Hebrews was likely written to a group of Jewish Christians. They were probably experiencing significant persecution. They had given evidence of their faith in God by serving their community, especially by caring for those who had suffered the most.

The author is concerned that they may give up. Turn away from the faith, because it seemed that the promised return of Jesus was taking too long. So **chapter 10** of Hebrews is a call to **Persevering in their Faith** – hanging in there, trusting God – being willing to wait on God’s timing.

In **chapter 11**, the author uses these examples of people who have gone before them but have held on to their trust in God. They are called ‘heroes of faith.’ And as I said, most of them were “seniors.”

What are these heroes of faith, these ‘seniors’, noted for?

1. Faithful trust in the promises of God

Vs 13a “All these people died still believing what God had promised them. They saw it all from a distance and welcomed it.

These people made the honors list because they trusted God to the very end of their lives. Many of them living long lives - just waiting. Waiting for God to do what he promised.

The patriarchs never saw a land of their own, or a whole nation of descendants. But they held on to the promise God made to them. Jacob actually died in Egypt and so did his son Joseph, both believing that God would take their families back to Canaan. That promise and hope was passed on from generation to generation, for 400 years, through hardship and even generations of cruel slavery.

Think about it - many Israelites lived their whole lives waiting for God to do what God said he would do and it never happened in their lifetime. They only envisioned the promises being fulfilled, in the future and that was good enough for them. They welcomed that perspective. The belief and the possibility of the promise being fulfilled sometime, brought them joy. It was a long, long journey, but generation after generation they trusted God and believed God would keep his promises. Trusting God for the long haul – very admirable.

What else are these heroes of faith, these seniors, noted for?

2. Their 'Pilgrim' Attitude – they considered themselves to be exiles and strangers from another country

Vs 13b “They agreed that they were foreigners and nomads here on earth.”

The patriarchs considered that the land or nation where they lived was not their homeland. But neither was their former place of residence their homeland. They had this sense that wherever they were, they were just passing through.

As missionaries we were often asked, “When do you hope to return home?” Meaning, when do you hope to return to America? Darlyss and I lived in Zambia for 12 of the first 13 years of our marriage. Our children were born while we lived there. When we lived in Zambia, that was our home – it felt like home. Now that we have lived in PA, for a long while, this feels like home. But really, both places are temporary homes from the perspective of our loyalty and allegiance.

The patriarchs lived long lives but always gave their first allegiance to God – and were commended for it. At issue here is, to whom you do you give your first allegiance. The patriarchs understood their loyalty was first to God and obedience to God’s instructions, not to the king or nation in which they were living.

The author of Hebrews understood how his readers would have felt like exiles, strangers, foreigners. They would have felt misplaced. They would have struggled with where to place their allegiance. In one sense, all of God’s people are strangers and aliens on this earth. We belong to a heavenly kingdom.

Peter reminds believers to live in this world as aliens and exiles. (1 Peter 2:11). Paul reminds the Philippians that their “citizenship is in heaven.”

Today it is a struggle for many of us to have this perspective. The perspective that we are just passing through and our allegiance is to Jesus and following him.

It seems like in the twilight years of our lives, people become more aware of this perspective. Seniors help to remind us of this perspective.

Having said that, it is important to note that the patriarchs were not unpractical people.

3. Their practical impact.

If you read the stories in detail in Genesis, you find Abraham’s neighbors were enriched by his presence in the land and how he conducted himself. He added wealth to the whole region. He was the one who came to the rescue of the local inhabitants when they were raided by thieves.

Isaac and Jacob both made significant contributions by digging wells in this parched land.

So as we live as pilgrims – just passing through, we do all we can to be good stewards and caretakers of this earth. We do all we can to improve our lot and the lives of people around us. Being made in the image of God means we have this desire to make a positive impact on the world.

And seniors tend to reflect on life and whether they feel they have had a positive impact. And out of that reflection comes the opportunity to advise younger people on how to live and prioritize their lives. So

II. What does this generation contribute to the church? This generation of people who have been around for a while? First they have:

1. Testimonies of Faithful Perseverance

A person does not have a testimony of a long, long journey of faith, until one has had a long, long journey. Until you have lived a long time. I know when you are standing in line at the check-out counter and the person in front of you is struggling to find their cash or a card to pay for their groceries, it seems like an eternity. That is not what we are talking about. We are talking about years and years of faithfulness.

One of the things I get to do as a pastor when an elderly person has passed away, is listen to the family tell stories about their loved one. I hear so many stories about people being **selfless, loving** their children and grandchildren no matter what, **accepting** others, **giving** the shirt off their backs to help those in need. I hear testimony of **perseverance** through long bouts with disease without complaining. Stories of people who were **prayer warriors** for the church. For years they have prayed every day for the church and you and me. They have written **letters** to missionaries, regularly for years. And on and on the stories go.

This is what seniors have to contribute – stories of their long, long journeys with God and how God has been faithful to them for years. Such stories are a great encouragement to the rest of us and a challenge for others to pick up this mantle. Sometimes as I sit with seniors, I will ask them to tell me about their life experiences.

Our seniors are also a great source of:

2. **Wisdom** – What is wisdom? Wisdom is defined generally as: **the quality of having experience, knowledge, and good judgment**. For a follower of Jesus it includes: **godly application of knowledge**. Wisdom comes from knowing the scriptures and how Jesus wants us to apply what we know and then doing it. That is the experience part. You have been through it before, so now you can make better decisions. That is wisdom. Seniors have it.

I love some of the humorous statements I have heard, working with some of the work teams and moving teams as we try to decide the best way to accomplish something. I hear phrases like:

“I didn’t just fall off the turnip wagon.”

“I’ve been around the block a few times.”

“I may have been born at night, but it wasn’t last night.”

I love these types of sayings. They are all implying wisdom that comes from experience. From one’s experience one has the advantage of having been through a similar situation and can advise on a good way to move forward. That is wisdom.

Our seniors have a wealth of experience to draw from. They have already made many good decisions. They have learned from a few mistakes. They have had time to see how decisions work out and learn from that. They can share their wisdom with us if we will listen.

Many of our seniors also contribute:

3. **Time to volunteer**

I have the privilege of working with many of our community outreach ministries – food pantry, clothes closet, construction teams, moving ministry and others. Most of the volunteers are retired seniors. It makes sense. They are not required to go to their jobs, their time is more flexible and many of them still have lots of energy and enthusiasm. God has seen fit to bring so many seniors to be active volunteers among us here at Five Forks. Some even help in our Children’s Ministry. Quite honestly, Five Forks would have trouble doing much of the ministry we do if it were not for our senior volunteers.

Seniors also remind us how the patriarchs not only looked back at what God had done, but also looked forward with joyful anticipation to what God will do. One way I have heard to express this concept or perspective of life is an:

4. **“Already, Not Yet”** perspective.

God has **already** done some great things. But we have **not yet** received every blessing from God. So there is this sense of rejoicing in the **past** and also exciting anticipation of the **future**.

Back in the late 1980’s Five Forks Church was growing. It was time to build so we would have more space for people to gather. Some wanted to build a new sanctuary. Others wanted

to build a gym for the young people.

Many seniors preferred a sanctuary but saw the immediate value of a gym or multi-purpose room. They were willing to put their own desire on hold, believing that down the road, a beautiful sanctuary would be possible. And so they enthusiastically participated in the effort to build the gym. They had this “already not yet” perspective of what God was doing at Five Forks. God had already blessed Five Forks in so many ways but they believed God was not done yet. Some never saw this new beautiful auditorium.

One person in particular comes to my mind. It was Pastor Brady’s great grandmother, **Peal Carbaugh**. She was just shy of 90 years old. She loved what was happening at Five Forks – all the people coming, the activities, the ministries to all the different age groups. She loved the craft shows, the Christian Rock concerts, and was looking forward to when we could host those in the new auditorium.

We had a campaign to raise money for the **seats** here in the auditorium. We invited individuals and families to “purchase” a seat or seats. Pearl was the first one to make a donation to purchase a seat. She told someone she “wanted to be sure she had a seat to sit in when she came to church.”

Pearl did not live long enough to ever sit in her seat. But she was not buying a seat for herself. She was buying a seat for some of you who have come after her. She had that ‘already not yet’ perspective of what God is doing.

The longevity of the life of a senior seems to produce a better understanding, that while God has already been faithful in so many ways, there are many benefits of following Jesus still to come. And some of those may not come even in your life time.

Imagine if you were a Hebrew slave in Egypt. Every year you would hear the stories of God’s great goodness. You would also hear of God’s promise to free you and take you to the Promised Land. That scenario was repeated year after year for generation after generation, for 400 years. “God is coming to rescue us – but not yet. Remain faithful, persevere.”

This is what our seniors are particularly gifted at contributing to us – perseverance in the face of “Not Yet.” Continuing to press on even though the fruit of your work may not come for a long while down the road. May we have that patient faithfulness.

But:

III. What Does this generation need from the church?

1. Honor/Respect

Interesting verse in [Leviticus 19:32](#)

Stand up in the presence of the elderly and show respect for the aged.

When I was in school, it was expected to take that verse literally. Whenever a teacher walked into the room – we literally all stood up. Even if it was right in the middle of a lesson.

I was always taught to remove my hat if I was talking to an older person. I was taught to always allow an older person to go through a doorway before me. Two people come to a doorway at the same time – the younger person should always step back and allow the older person to proceed first. These are just some of the ways, I was taught to respect or honor my elders, in the culture in which I grew up.

Paul tells Timothy:

[1 Timothy 5:1-2](#) Never speak harshly to an older man, but appeal to him respectfully...treat older women as you would your mother...

Showing respect for the aged. While the ways we show respect may change over time and be different in different cultures, it seems clear to me that respect or honor for our seniors is a must. Here are some ways we can do it. These are not original with me.

1. Put away your phone in their presence

- 2. Pay attention to what they are saying**
- 3. Accept their opinions**
- 4. Engage in their conversations**
- 5. Look at them with respect**
- 6. Praise them**
- 7. Speak well of their friends and loved ones to them.**
- 8. Remember the good things they did.**

We need to be a church where seniors are honored and respected.

Another thing seniors need is:

2. Patience

Some seniors I was talking to said, please mention patience. “We need you to be patient with us. We don’t move as fast. We don’t think as fast and we don’t understand as fast. And we have trouble learning how to use the smart phones you are sure we need to have. So be patient with us, please.” As we age, our stories take longer to tell, our decisions take longer to make. What did Miss Ellie say? “Shortcuts don’t mix with love.”

Seniors also need our:

3. Understanding of, and grace for, the effects of aging

I believe we need to gain an understanding of how the aging process affects us. My mother died when she was relatively young. My father lived well into his 80’s. I had the privilege and also the heartache of that long, long journey with my father.

My father, when he was younger was the most careful person I have ever met. When he got older, he started doing things that seemed careless to me. More than once I scolded him to be more careful. Little did I know then that his aging was depriving him of the ability to be careful. I am ashamed of how I spoke to him sometimes. He couldn’t help some of his behaviors. He needed me to love and honor and respect him in spite of those behaviors.

I believe we have a responsibility as followers of Jesus, to understand how the aging process affects our seniors and treat them with compassion and honor.

Our seniors need:

4. Personal Contact

Many seniors become and feel, isolated, alone, left out, unappreciated. They can't take the initiative to stay in contact. They need us to take the initiative to have regular quality time with them, listening to their stories, asking for their advice, praying with them, loving them.

Would you decide to get in contact with a senior this week? You may not be able to visit them due to Covid, but you could start by calling them and introducing yourself to them. They may not answer the phone right away if they don't recognize your number. But leave them a message and often they will call you back. Our seniors need to know they are still valuable to Jesus and the work of his Kingdom.

It takes effort, but remember:

"It's a long, long journey and shortcuts don't mix with love."

So there you have it. **For someone your age.** People of every age have something valuable to add. Let us gain the **wonder and awe** of God's goodness, like the **children**.

Let us be willing to **take risks** like the **young people**, stepping out in faith.

Let us take seriously gift of **mentoring** during which we can pass the baton to those coming after us.

Let us draw deeply from the well of **wisdom** of those who have already been on a long, long journey with God.

May Five Forks truly be an intergenerational community of faith, knowing, loving following Jesus, no matter the age group we find ourselves in.

PRAY