

“The Spirit of Consolation”

Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:22-40 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that all your children might be consoled by your arrival in our hearts. In the name of the One coming into the world, Amen.

Before we begin, there is something I need to clarify, so we can avoid the distraction of ruffled feathers. I’m going to be talking about age demographics today, and I’m going to be using the word “old” a lot. I want to be clear that I am using the word simply as a descriptor, with no intention to disparage or insult. The passage we just heard from Luke describes Anna as being “of great age,” which is lovely and poetic, but simply not as efficient or useful as the word “old.” I will admit that what I’m going to say about being old is based on outside observation, given that I’m only a little old at this point.

The opportunity to witness people outside our own families growing old is one of the great blessings of a small-membership congregation. To experience many different ways of being old, to watch elders navigate the unfortunate burdens and unexpected blessings of aging, to gain a second-hand awareness of the loss that comes with growing old, all of these possibilities help prepare us to mature more maturely. So I hope you won’t hear this word, “old,” in a negative light in our discussion today, because that’s not how it’s intended. It’s a description of one aspect of identity that shapes our lives. People will say that “you’re only as old as you feel,” but I think that

puts way too much pressure on us to pretend we feel better than we do in any given situation, as if a better attitude could somehow change our circumstances. The truth is that you're also as old as society treats you, which is often unpleasant. To remain silent about these realities doesn't make them go away; it merely isolates each of us in our experience of them. So while there is much that is disagreeable about being old, the word itself is not the problem. We need to be able to talk about these things, especially when there are lessons we can glean about our faith from the conversation.

I state all of this at the outset because the thing that struck me about our scripture readings today is the contrast between ages. Jesus is just a baby, eight days old, and the prophet Anna is 84. Simeon's age isn't specified or even clearly stated, but the way the writer implies he's only still alive because God's promise to him hadn't unfolded yet communicates that Simeon is also "of great age." Meanwhile, over in Galatians, we're all children, adopted into the family of God, as our spirits cry out "Daddy!" There's something going on here, relating to the young and the old.

The second thing that struck me about these passages is the word "consolation," in the description of what kept Simeon going. He was "looking forward to the consolation of Israel," it says, "and the Holy Spirit rested on him." "Consolation" is a good word. It's not a word we use very often, but I wonder if it might be a powerful word for these difficult times. Certainly, our present circumstances don't have much in common with living under occupation, as Simeon and Anna were. Without getting into unhelpful comparisons, I think it is fair to say

we, too, are in need of the Spirit of Consolation. And when you combine this idea of the Spirit of Consolation with the focus on the young and the old, interesting things emerge.

One of the things it's important to note, as I covered in the children's moment today, is that there are more commonalities between the old and the young than we might at first expect. Shel Silverstein got at this in his poem, "The Little Boy and the Old Man": *Said the little boy, "Sometimes I drop my spoon."/ Said the old man, "I do that too."/ The little boy whispered, "I wet my pants."/ "I do that too," laughed the little old man./ Said the little boy, "I often cry."/ The old man nodded, "So do I."/ "But worst of all," said the boy, "it seems/ Grown-ups don't pay attention to me."/ And he felt the warmth of a wrinkled old hand./ "I know what you mean," said the little old man.*

In the midst of this devastating pandemic, we need to recognize all the ways in which things have been hard on the young and the old. Not necessarily for the same reasons, but these portions of the population have been similarly affected. We've heard very clearly from the beginning that those over 65 are at greater risk from the virus, so the pressure to self-isolate has been strong. And those who are older are more likely to live alone, having lost partners along the way. Older folks may be less likely to have the experiences that make for easy adaptation to new technologies that provide safer ways to connect with others. (Though I see you learning and doing it!). As a congregation, we've tried to keep you safe, so we've had to reduce volunteer opportunities, removing a big way older people find a sense of purpose.

Meanwhile, our kids are going a period of childhood the rest of us can only imagine. School has been turned inside out, with impacts varying widely depending on resources and each individual student's capacities and personality. Extracurricular activities are in chaos. And what I think our kids would say is the most important loss – they aren't able to interact with their friends the way they need to. It's impossible to quantify all the formative experiences they are losing or experiencing in unprecedented and stunted ways. Rates of childhood depression are through the roof, experts say, and it's not clear there's any solution other than getting the virus under control.

My guess is that the occupation that Simeon and Anna and Jesus lived under affected children and old people with similar disproportionate impacts too. The truth is that children and old people are simply some of the most vulnerable people in our society and perhaps the most in need of consolation. The fact that they figure so prominently in the Christmas story, though, may be a source of consolation. This post-nativity narrative focusing on the interaction between the Baby Jesus and the elderly Simeon and Anna reminds us, again, of one of the most important lessons of Christmas: God's power comes into our world and takes action in our world through the most vulnerable people. Poor shepherds, foreigners, old people, a baby! For some reason, God always seems to send the benchwarmers rather than the A-team. We need to pay attention to that.

Christmas calls us to take special care of the young and the old, for they are particularly vulnerable in hard times. But it's not just that. Christmas calls us to listen to the young and the old, to look to them for guidance and even leadership. Galatians pushes us further, encouraging us to remember how we're very like the young, (who are very like the old). Even those of us who are very much "in between" can still be children. And though it may feel scary to admit to such vulnerability, there is also something relieving about crying out, "Abba! Daddy!" and trusting that we will be held. We will be consoled.

The Spirit of Consolation is gifted to us all. Children may symbolize hope and innocence. Old folks may symbolize wisdom and endurance. Embracing the totality of the human lifespan can help all of us hold onto resilience. Re-telling the Christmas story can help us remember how God's power emerges from vulnerability and weakness, which is itself a consolation when we feel helpless. May we feel the comfort of God's wrinkled, old hand, even as we welcome the Christ Child into our midst! Hallelujah and Amen!