

“Who am I now?”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
February 28, 2021

*Genesis 17:1-7 and Psalm 22:1-5*

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Jenna and I have this really kind neighbor. He’s loaned us tools, mowed our lawn when our lawnmower broke, snow blowed for us when our snowblower broke (our things seem to break a lot). In fact, he clears snow for the whole neighborhood; he’ll spend hours, pushing his snowblower down sidewalks and up driveways. He says he likes it. In fact, one day, when we only got flurries, he was disappointed. He said, “Now what am I going to do?”

Our neighbor is retired. In fact, we seem to have moved into a neighborhood of mostly retirees, which is our MO. Jenna and I are apparently drawn only to things enjoyed either by people older than ourselves or by children, never our peers—you know, like the church.

Our neighbor likes to be active. His house and yard are immaculate. He washes his car, it seems like every day. He’s always out talking to someone, or doing a project. One morning, he said to me, “Don’t ever retire. It’s so boring!”

Not everyone feels that way of course. My mom loved her retirement; in fact, those were some of her best years. And I know that a lot of you who’ve retired are busier than ever; you’re volunteering, you’re caring for grandchildren, you’re traveling. But there are a lot of people who feel like my neighbor. Jobs give us purpose. They tell us that what we do matters. It’s the first thing we ask someone: “What do you do?” As if the answer might unlock the secret of who we are.

I guess the *good news* (?) is that now, thanks to a retirement crisis, most of us who haven’t already retired will never have the chance to. Between a depleted Social Security, student loans and other debt, the lack of a living wage, and rising costs matched by falling incomes, we won’t be able to afford to retire. Yay...

But retirement is just one of life’s many big changes. We change careers. We move. We begin new relationships or end old ones. We become parents or grandparents, or our children grow up and move out. We may experience significant health, or financial, or even faith changes. And with each change comes the question: Who am I now? So often we have defined ourselves by the very things that are changing: our jobs, our families, our activities, our physical abilities. Take them away, and we feel lost.

I was talking the other day with someone who described retirement and aging as a progressive shrinking of their world. Once, their world was expansive: they were rising in their career, leading and helping others, parenting children, going out with friends, learning new things, going for runs and hikes and sports. But piece by piece, life took it away—their job, their health, their money, their relationships, until it shrunk to sitting in a chair.

In some ways, this past year of COVID has been a microcosm of that experience. We have all felt reduced, robbed of the things and the people that give us joy and purpose.

Abraham surely felt this way. Abraham's an old man when God calls him to leave his country and everything and everyone he ever knew, to follow God into new and strange lands. Here, in his homeland, he's somebody; people know and respect him. But out there, who will he be? And of course, it gets better. He and Sarah had resigned themselves to a life without children, and then God comes along to this elderly couple and tells them they're going to have a child. I bet that was pretty scary for Abraham.

Jesus surely felt this way too, when he was up on that cross, the man of power and miracle made so helpless. Here *he's* been the one showing everyone else God, performing works of power, and now he's crying the first verse of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The psalm goes on to reflect a crisis of identity, the Psalmist singing: "I am a worm, and not human... All who see me mock at me... I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax."

But what Jesus knew when he spoke those terrible words on the cross was that the psalm does not end there. "Yet you [God] are holy," the Psalmist replies to his own lament. "Yet it was you who took me from the womb... On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God." *Who am I?* he asks. *I am who I've always been. I am the child of God. I am the one whom God knows and loves. Take away my work, and I remain. Take away my health, my possessions, my dignity, everything I thought so important, and I remain.*

It is a revelation that often comes only with age or crisis: who we are isn't what we do or achieve; who we are is how God loves us. Everything else changes; it always has. Which is not to say that they are insignificant. The things we do, the people and things we love, these are expressions of who we are, like colors we choose to paint with. But they are not the essence of who we are.

In Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*, the Rev. John Ames married late in life and had a child, much like our Abraham. He is dying, and so he writes a letter to his young son. He writes, "I'd never have believed I'd see a wife of mine dotting on a child of mine. It still amazes me every time I think of it. I'm writing this in part to tell you that if you ever wonder what you've done in your life, and everyone does wonder sooner or later, you have been God's grace to me, a miracle, something more than a miracle. You may not remember me very well at all, and it may seem to you to be no great thing to have been the good child of an old man in a shabby little town you will no doubt leave behind. If only I had the words to tell you."

I wonder if we might not hear God the Father say the same to Christ, his son, and through him to us: by the mere fact of our existence, we are miracles. We are God's grace to each other. We are the light of God shining in a terrible, beautiful world—even if all we can do is sit in a chair.

Life is like a painter's palette. You have all these colors to choose from, and you have painted with some for so long that they have become dear to you, seemingly indispensable, but there are

more colors to try. So many variations and combinations. Retirement isn't the end of life; it's the opportunity to paint a new life. New adventures. New wisdom. New relationships. New purpose. Not just to relax and play golf or lie on a beach, though those are nice, but to express God's grace with new colors.

Abram became Abraham. He picked up and followed God. And God promised to be with him, to bless him. "Kings shall come from you," God says, not because of any great thing Abraham will do, but because he dared to be an expression of God's grace.

When my Mom retired from teaching, she became a businesswoman and entrepreneur; she traveled; she spent time with her grandchildren; she volunteered at church; and she loved it all.

Ed Alfonsin, a retired professor of English, started operating streetcars at a railway for families. He went into schools and helped kids struggling with alcohol and substance abuse. Johanna Quass, at 87 years old, became the oldest gymnast in the world. Carlos Soria Fontan, at the age of 80, became the world's oldest mountain climber, successfully climbing all 14 of the world's highest mountains. Bill Brown built a woodworking shed in his backyard, crafting furniture and birdhouses. Murray Block began writing memoirs. Tom Bowes developed a scholarship for college students. Grayce Burian volunteered with a food pantry and with a literacy program in inner city schools. Anne Donnelly got involved with her local arboretum and explored a passion for nature. And when her son died at the age of 35 from brain cancer, Rhoda Fischman became like a second mother to her young granddaughter. She started a cancer support group, and began volunteering to arrange flights on corporate jets for cancer patients needing to visit their doctors. They have flown more than 35,000 patients.

Look at all those colors!

But should you find that you just don't have the energy or health or even the faith to paint a new life, when it's all you can do to get out of bed in the morning, it's OK. Because when you can't, God paints your life. Your life can matter, even when you feel like you have nothing to give. Because God is in you.

Think about it: Jesus was helpless on that cross. His whole world had shrunk to the length of two wooden boards. It was God's love—the divine in him, the Son of God in him—that made him rise. Rise to new life. To new colors.

So, I guess the only thing left to ask is: What will your colors be? **Amen.**