

“Falling towers”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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1 Corinthians 1:18-25 and John 2:13-22

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Today, we’re talking about the infamous midlife crisis. We all know the stereotype: a man (it’s almost always a man) quits his steady, good paying job, leaves his marriage, gets a motorcycle, and becomes a beat poet. I think I started to have a midlife crisis as I was preparing this sermon. Research says that people begin to have midlife crises between the ages of 35 and 40. Um, I am between the ages of 35 and 40. And their descriptions of this stage of life were not encouraging. This is from an actual paper produced by the US government in 1972: “A general feeling of obsolescence appears to overtake [them]... Their careers appear to have reached a plateau, and they realize that life from here on will be a long and inevitable decline.” Others go on: *You begin to realize that you are closer to death than you are to birth. All that you have ever done is of little consequence and will be forgotten. Life is meaningless.*

It was so depressing that I almost quit writing this sermon. But because I love you, I persisted. And you know, it’s sort of my job. Also, because beneath all the jokes and Facebook memes and depressing government reports is a serious concern for a threshold in life, when we begin to reexamine who we are and why we are, when we begin to crave something more.

Turns out that prior to 1957 no one had ever heard about a midlife crisis. It was invented in London at a meeting of the British Psycho-Analytical Society. Suddenly, there were reams of books about it, T-shirts and mugs, even boardgames. Businesses made it a centerpiece of management theory. “The midlife crisis, which had scarcely existed five or six years earlier, was suddenly treated like a biological inevitability that could possess and even kill you,” writes Pamela Druckerman for *The Atlantic*.

In some ways, this made sense. By the mid-20th century, people were living longer, which meant that at age 40, you were getting ready for a whole new half of life. Women were becoming financially and legally independent. The rise of the middle class meant time and money for things like counseling. Divorce laws loosened. Society was changing.

Eventually, however, scientists began to wonder if the midlife crisis was real. Anthropologist Stanley Brandes turned to the work of Margaret Mead in Samoa, where she observed that the so-called *teenage* crisis was a creation of our society. Americans expected teenagers to have a crisis, and so many of them did. But Samoans, Mead observed, didn’t have that expectation, and almost no teenagers went through crisis. Brandes wondered if the same might be true for midlife. He wrote, “It was kind of a trick that my culture was playing on me, and I didn’t have to feel that way.”

A national research study discovered that most people at midlife were leading healthy, busy, happy lives. Only 10 to 20 percent of Americans experience a midlife crisis. For the rest of us, it's a myth.

What is real, however, is the fact that all of us face crisis. It may not be a part of midlife, but it is a part of aging.

You *will* suffer. Not because you were bad, or unlucky, but because you exist. Everyone falls. We lose our job, get divorced, experience death, endure illness, lose our reputation, face violence or injustice; something happens that tears down everything we took for granted, something we can't "fix, control, explain, change, or even understand" (Rohr).

Jesus himself tells us this will happen. The temple will be torn down. The wisdom of the world will be made to look foolish. We will all eventually meet a cross that we cannot circumvent.

The question then is not "Will we experience crisis?" but "How will we respond to crisis?"

According to author and Franciscan priest Richard Rohr, there are two seasons to life. In the first phase of life, we are building our tower: we're developing our career, forming friends, establishing a family, creating an identity, following a plan. We have clear ideas about what's right and what's wrong, and what God has called us to do. This is not bad. Great things result from these ambitions and passions. But we all hit a point, whether early or late, when that tower comes crashing down.

It's then that we have a choice. We can either set ourselves endlessly to rebuilding and repairing this first phase of life, desperately trying to stay young and remain as we were, or we can look honestly upon these ruins, learn from them, and embrace a second season of life.

In some ways, this is Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, when he is presented with all the power and fame and adoration he could achieve, a great tower from which he is told he need never fall, for the angels would catch him. I'm sure it was tempting. But Jesus grew up. He chose to let himself fall and not be caught. He chose a ministry, not of power, but of foot washing, and forgiveness, and a simple people walking together facing the mystery of love and life. He said, Drop your nets, leave behind your possessions and plans, and follow me. And then, on the cross, he let his tower fall, trusting that what would rise in its place would not be he himself, but God.

If the first phase of life is about building our tower, the second phase is about giving it away. Relationships become our priority, more important than any need to be superior, or to judge, or even to be certain of what is true. We embrace complexity, learning that in life all things are wedded: joy and terror, meaning and absurdity. Or, as James Hollis writes, we discover that "the world is more magical, less predictable... less controllable... more infinite... more wonderfully troubling than we could have imagined being able to tolerate when we were young."

We seek not to control but to encounter, to learn. "Your concern is not so much to have what you love anymore, but to love what you have—right now," writes Richard Rohr.

It is in this second phase that our lives become not about building ourselves up, but about allowing God to be built up in us. And we only do that by falling.

Here's Richard Rohr again: "The genius of the Gospel was that it included the problem inside the solution. The falling became the standing. The stumbling became the finding. The dying became the rising. The raft became the shore... Jesus must be crucified, or there can be no resurrection."

That is what Paul means when he says in 1 Corinthians this foolish thing: "We proclaim Christ crucified." We proclaim the one who was knocked down. Or as Jesus says today in John: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

For here is the truth of the gospel: we do not fall from God; we fall with God, toward God. We meet God, and are changed, our priorities are changed, here in the fall.

If we need our young people to push us, we need our elders to reorient us. Our elders have something to teach. Bev Miller was just talking to me about this—how we can reach an age where there's so little that we can do, but there remains one vital task: to pass on wisdom, to share the stories of our people, the stories of falling and rising, to aid new generations in the moments of crisis and transitioning.

We are a people obsessed with youthfulness, so much so that in the past year we had people actually suggesting that it was OK to sacrifice a whole generation to COVID if it meant we could go on buying things and building our towers. The implication was: What do they contribute anyway? I'll tell you: they who have walked among the rubble of towers know the path to new life, to God, to resurrection, and without them to take us by the hand, we who are still bent on building our towers would be lost.

Not all who are old, of course, have this wisdom; many are still trying to reassemble their towers. And not all who are young are still in that first phase, for to some comes age sooner than others. And of course, the path is rarely linear or perfect. It's not like once you get into the second phase of life, you're set! In fact, that's the whole point of the second part of life: you realize you're never set; we won't hold onto this enlightenment any better than we held onto our tower. But in understanding this, we let go of what was once so important; we face mystery and terror and beauty, knowing we are imperfect, and knowing that is OK, for we walk with the One who requires no towers but has always been here, on earth: our God. **Amen.**