***Moses in Midlife*** *a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno September 3, 2023 based on Exodus 2:11-22*

Here is a cartoon: two cavemen are sitting outside their cave making stone tools. One says to the other: “Something’s just not right – our air is clean, our water is pure, we all get plenty of exercise, everything we eat is organic and free-range, and look … nobody lives past 30.”

This joke reflects a very common view of ancient lifespans, but, according to the best information, it’s based on a myth. People in the past were *not* all dead by 30 or 40. Actually, ancient documents point this out. 4400 years ago, an Egyptian poet (Vizier Ptahhotep) wrote verses about the troubles of old age. The ancient Greeks wrote of old age as a divine curse, and their tombstones attest to survival well past 80 years.

There is also contemporary evidence to back this up. Studies of tribal people who live far away from modern medicines in such places as Tanzania and remote regions of the Amazon have demonstrated that the most likely age at death is far higher than most people assume: it’s about 70 years old. I begin with this because I want to try and establish what mid-life might be now and also in the remote past.

By popular definition, midlife is deemed to be between age 40 and 60. But let me suggest that today, life expectancy lengthening as it is, due to recent medical advances, a better spread would be 45 – 65.

Now, let me say that midlife is more than a mathematical demarcation. I think it is a psychological and social one, too. I remember somewhere between 42 and 45 as a time when I quit looking up to the people I admired and began to think I was their peer, I had begun to measure up. But just as one senses that one’s mental maturity is finding footing, one can’t help but notice the body beginning to weaken. The stamina that one once counted on begins to lag.

And, of course, one begins to think differently about the future. You don’t worry about your demise quite yet, unless, of course, you are ill, but you find yourself unable to take seriously some dreams you once had.

You know, that one day you would … (fill in the blank).

I had improved all aspects of my golf game into my 40s but it was becoming more and more clear to me that entering the Senior Tour at age 50 was not going to happen.

As for our more realistic dreams, they too become less realizable due to the prior choices we have made – there are the needs of a marriage partner, or the demands of child-rearing, or the requirements of a career path. You feel it may be too late to start something brand new. This may or may not be true, but you feel the specific gravity of these, nevertheless.

Middle-age brings with it a foretaste of death, the ultimate closing of doors on the future. Which, of course, is why some people may feel a little desperation at this time of life. A now-or-never feeling sets in.

The choices one makes in the face of this can be healthy or unhealthy, depending on who you are, of course. This is where we get the term midlife crisis, but I think that term is over-hyped.

I mean, anyone who is alive and paying attention to their own life is bound to think, “It’s now or never” from time to time. You may feel it a little too early or a little too late. I remember a woman who decided she needed to find a husband fast – she was 23. That seemed a bit hasty. In fact it was way too hasty.

Long, long ago, before we had terms like midlife crisis, a man named Moses had one. He was born a Jew at a time when it was a really lousy time to be one. There were better times – during the reign of King David or Solomon, for instance -- but not during this time. Moses was born when (as the story goes) all the Jewish people were born into slavery.

But, also, in the providence of God, he was adopted into a high-born Egyptian family -- Pharaoh’s family, in fact, and he had a luxurious upbringing. Unlike his Hebrew family, Moses never knew want – he knew only privilege.

It didn’t include an Audi or a laptop computer, of course, but it was still pretty cushy. But there comes a time when the book of Exodus says he had “grown up.” We aren’t told how old he is, but in another book of the Bible, the book of Acts, we’re told he is 40 at this time.

Now, maybe that is just the writer of Acts’ way of saying that Moses was at a point in life where a person gets introspective, starts asking himself questions about who he really is and is not.

Whatever his age, Moses was at a place in life when he began to connect some dots about himself.

I’m sure he was not raised like the Buddha who was brought up behind a high wall by a controlling father who didn’t want him to see death or illness or old age. No, it looks like Moses was free to see everything going on in the Pharaoh’s kingdom, and what he saw was slave drivers beating slaves with no mercy, and that is, in actual fact, what he saw on the day in question.

Now, I doubt very much that it was the first time he’d seen this kind of treatment. I doubt it was the first time that seeing it bothered him. What made the day unique was that this was the day when “enough was finally enough” and Moses could no longer just look away and go on with his business.

It was the day when he could no longer look at himself in the little shaving mirror he owned and ignore what he sensed was a gross injustice.

Somehow, whatever filters Moses had that worked for the first 40 years of his life, would not work any longer. He could no longer turn a blind eye to things that, before, he was so very used to seeing.

Why? Why now? Because maybe somewhere around 40 we come into our own as human beings. If we are healthy, at that age we embrace who we believe we are and let go of identities we know, finally, are limiting or inauthentic. Moses let go of his false Egyptian pedigree and embraced his Hebrew roots.

But here is the most interesting part of this -- notice that in the text there is something that signals to us that there may be a step that comes *before* a person embraces the new. That step is, as you might imagine, the disengagement step. Here is the part of the story I’m talking about.

At the end of this morning’s passage we hear that Moses, having run away from Pharaoh’s court, hides in the hinterlands with a third ethnic group, the Midianites. He becomes a shepherd and is invited to marry a Midianite young woman named, Zipporah. Then, in verse 22 we read, “She bore a son and he (Moses) named him Gershom, for he said, “I have been an alien residing in a foreign land.’” Which is what Gershom means.

“I have been an alien residing in a foreign land.” Of course, living in Midian, Moses is estranged from both his Hebrew brothers and sisters and his adopted Egyptian family, as well. But there is clearly more here. To wake up in mid-life and feel an alien in a foreign land is a metaphor; it is to know in your bones what it feels like to become a stranger to your own self.

That’s what is going on inside Moses at this “disengagement” stage in his life. He had grown up firmly identified as an Egyptian prince; a totally unique privileged individual. Now he had become a common shepherd, someone who would blend in with a million others. But neither of these was who he really was.

He had become an alien to who he had been and who he was yet to become. It would take him a while to mature further, but in the meantime it was okay for him to hide out in shepherd’s garb with only the responsibilities of a small time animal raiser and family man. It’s a necessary and formative time of respite for him.

Now, for comparison’s sake, let me remind you of the story of the apostle Paul. He was raised a religious Jew in a corner of Turkey. He claimed Roman citizenship. He fulfilled an early dream to become a prominent Pharisee and, as a young man, he identified as a proud persecutor of Christians. He stood by and watched as others stoned prominent saints, like Stephen.

Does that sound familiar? It’s Moses’s story. Moses stood by and watched as Hebrews were whipped and killed. Both men did that, identifying with the upper echelons of the societies into which they were born.

They both benefited from injustice, that is, until conscience kicked in -- until they could look on no more. Until they were fed up; said, “Enough is enough.” And then they parted company with … themselves -- their old selves. Think about that. Has that ever happened to you, maybe in a small way?

This led to a time of walking in the wilderness for both. That’s interestingly where both end up, for a time, before they become the great liberators they will eventually become.

Each has an encounter with God. Paul’s is so poignant. The risen Jesus Christ appears out of nothing and says to him, “Saul” (his former name and identity) “Saul, why do you persecute me? Why do you kick against the goads?” That is, “Why do you perpetuate the injustice that your best self detests?”

And the dam breaks, as it broke for Moses.

Moses too had an encounter with God. All we know is that he went back to Egypt and became Charlton Heston – the great liberator and lawgiver of Israel.

Stuff happens in life, and these speed bumps we hit on the way to old age aren’t easy.

C.S. Lewis warned that middle age was “excellent campaigning weather for the Devil.” Midlife awakenings *are* a testing time in life, but look, every stage in a life is a testing time. The tests simply change. And blaming it on the devil is to miss,

I think, what is often a necessary threshold to growth.

I mean, look, Lewis, himself had a mid-life reset. He thought himself a confirmed bachelor, and all that changed when he was 58. He must have wondered at first if meeting an American woman writer and thinker he cared about was the work of God or something more sinister.

In the end he believed Joy Davidman to be a gift from God.

There is often if not always, some opportunity for a rebirth that comes somewhere in the middle of life. Some people embrace it, and many, out of fear, perhaps, do their best to ignore those impulses and just continue to accommodate themselves to where they have come from.

I mean, consider the pressures to accommodate that Moses must have felt – outwardly and also inwardly.

Though it is never said, might there have been the expectation that he would become the next Pharaoh? I mean, look, someone intent on becoming Pharaoh couldn’t work to undermine the slave system.

Then there was the inner pressure he would feel, living a massively privileged life.

I have heard it said that every one of us lives a better life than the richest of Egypt’s Pharaohs, but still, it must have been amazing, being one in 100,000 to have hot water and the best food you could imagine, every single day. Not easy to give up.

Now, let me discuss a much more common midlife wake-up call. One that does not involve a bad conscience

A few years ago when I lived in Utah, the Salt Lake Tribune ran a piece on depression. The article said that depression manifests most typically in Utah this way: in 50 year old women.

90% of Utah women spend their whole marriage submitting to their husbands. Not like slaves to a king, exactly. This usually manifested subtly. The women had been told since they were little that submission was therule; yes, and they’d had that modeled for them by their mothers.

These women simply let their husbands be the main act. And then, according to the article, many began waking up in their late forties wondering what had become of their young dreams.

Now, this isn’t exclusively an experience of Utah women, or even just women, though it’s common. Many people, both men and women, have at least a slight midlife malaise. Here are two examples. The first is from Ada Calhoun, author of, *Why We Can’t Sleep: Women’s New Midlife Crisis.*

“In my experience, Gen X women spend lots of time minimizing the importance of their uncomfortable or confusing feelings. They often tell me that they are embarrassed to even bring them up. Some of the unhappiest women I spoke with, no matter how depressed or exhausted they were, apologized for “whining.” Almost every one of them also described herself as “lucky.”

This next one is from John Darnielle:

“I remember … feeling like there wasn't all that much to say about my life. I'd had several satisfying relationships, they hadn't amounted to much. I'd gotten better at my work and been rewarded for it, but I sometimes felt like life had run out of surprises for me. I did what I did and got the results I expected. I kept up my practice and it paid my way. My wheels made an agreeable noise when they spun.”

See – just subtle awakenings to wheels spinning in the dust.

Now, let me share some wisdom from a psychologist named Marcia Reynolds. It’s from a short piece called, *How To Get Through A Mid-life Crisis – 5 Hints from a 73Year Old Woman Who’s Been There.*

On a particular day when she was 50, Marcia says the filters she had used for decades no longer worked for her. Her previous sense of who she was suddenly seemed inauthentic.

Here are five questions she says she realized had been plaguing her for years:

1. *What did I feel I should have accomplished by that time in my life?*
2. *Was there something more important and fulfilling that I could focus on?*
3. *What did I want more of in my life?*
4. *What had I imprisoned that was crying to be free?*
5. *How could I ensure my commitment to living a significant life?*

She adds, “I didn’t know the answers to any of those questions. All I knew was that on that particular day, finding the answer to them became real for me.”

Here’s her advice on how to get through, should you be facing a passage of your own:

1. *Don’t believe anyone who tells you that you have no right to be unhappy with your life.*
2. *It’s okay to lose your equilibrium when others think your life should be smooth sailing.*
3. *It is okay to question your life’s purpose.*
4. *It’s okay to say, “I don’t know who I am.”*
5. *It’s better to ask the questions and seek the answers than to live a numb life.*

Moses and Saul must have asked themselves similar questions.

Here is Marcia Reynold’s last word of wisdom: “Sometimes we have to lose ourselves to find ourselves.” That sounds so like the wisdom of Jesus, doesn’t it?

Yes, and, like the wisdom of Jesus, it sounds scary. But here’s the deal -- once you come out of the wilderness of mid-life, life gets better for most people. It can actually get easier.

Happiness levels seem to follow a U-shape curve with their lowest point in the mid-40s after which they rise as people move into older age.

People in mid-life can find firmer ground to stand on – they can figure out who they are and they can let go of who they are not. They can get comfortable in their own bodies and lives. They can come to own their own choices. They can finally get past the expectations others have set down for them over the decades, and they can begin doing what truly pleases them.

And if, like Moses and Paul, they aren’t narcissists, they can begin working to make the world what they believe it should be, not what their parents told them it should be.

Amen.

Midway along life's journey  
I woke to find myself in a dark wood”  
― **Dante Alighieri**