***A Whole New Life***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on May 4, 2025*

*based on Revelation 21:1-6*

Friday’s *NYTimes* contained a fun piece called, “My Miserable Week in the ‘Happiest Country on Earth.’” (Guesses?) For eight years running, it seems, Finland has topped the “World Happiness Report.” All in all, Finns have very few complaints about their country – and yet they are so far north that their children have to wear reflectors on their jackets just to play safely outside in winter.

The long stretch of darkness aside, the country has much to recommend it – free schooling for life, low poverty, and a very low crime. The journalist who wrote the piece, Molly Young, confesses to being hard to impress, but finds their spas and low-stress culture awfully attractive.

Interestingly, she also finds that Finns do not crow about their rating. In fact, no Finn she spoke to could even account for it.

The last sentence in the essay is a direct quote from a Finn who (considering how hard life is for most of the world’s people) is happy to be a Finn, however, he looks at life very skeptically, as if it was just a kind of accident: “I’m only having this one life,” he says, having nothing to compare it to when it comes to judging happiness. He sums his span of years up this way: “There was darkness, now something is happening and I’m confused, and then there will be darkness again.”

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In that, he is very like the author of the Biblical book, *Ecclesiastes*. *Ecclesiastes*, in fact, is about the lurking fear that life is just one accident following another – “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity,” the writer says.

No matter where we live, we, all of us, have moments when we feel this way –

like when we feel that an achievement from years ago we once were proud of seems now, if only for a moment, like so much chasing after the wind.

Happiness is illusive.

“There is nothing new under the sun,” the writer says, cynically, not unlike Shakespeare’s Macbeth who said, Life is “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

Well, I’d like to address that notion this morning, and I want to do it by speaking a little about something that, along with the dollar, has been threatened in the last couple of weeks. That thing is retirement.

We all will remember people who lost their nest-eggs in 2008. That, or the promise of a pension. A lot of people thought that age 65 would mean they would live out their days in sunnier climes than Oregon, or that somehow they would find a bit of happiness that has eluded them until their “Golden Years.” They’ve put that idea off. Some of them have put if off forever.

Let me quickly interject that I am not announcing anything here.

I’m definitely NOT retiring.

Anyway, the funny thing about the business of retirement is that it is only a relatively recent development. It has only been a recent phenomenon that humans lived long enough to have the luxury of dropping out of the work force. Here is some history on the subject.

In 1881 Otto von Bismarck, the president of Prussia, presented a radical idea to the Reichstag --- government subsidized financial support for older members of society. In other words, retirement. The idea was radical because back then, people simply didn’t do that. [If you were alive, you worked](http://www.nber.org/chapters/c6108.pdf)—probably on a farm, until your family took care of you.

But von Bismarck was under pressure from socialist opponents to do better by the people in his country, so he argued to the Reichstag that "those who are disabled from work by age and ill-health have a well-grounded claim to receive care from the state.”

It took eight years, but by the end of the decade, the German government would create a retirement system, one [which provided for citizens over the age of … 70](http://www.ssa.gov/history/ottob.html), if they lived that long.

You know, the Bible speaks of old age as a blessing from God that some receive, but it knows nothing of retirement.

I am not particularly fond of the word. It’s a cousin of other passive words like retreat, remove, regress. It sounds as if you just withdraw, settle down, tune out and hunker down. But we know that each new stage of living comes with its own set of challenges, demands, and sense of adventure.

I know a fellow pastor who, in mid-career, began mentoring a younger one.

The younger one, describing his congregation, said, “The median age of my congregation is over sixty, and you know how old people are.”

My friend said, “No, how are they?” And the young fellow said, “You know, settled in their ways, slow to change, stuck in a rut.” To which my friend, who’d recently done some study on this subject, said, “I don’t believe they are.”

He had read and passed on to us information about how, of the six or eight most traumatic changes in life, four or five of them will occur after 65.

These folks have to deal with declining health, loss of independence, loss of mobility, loss of a spouse, unemployment, even loss of parents who are often, now, IN THEIR 90s.

Far from stuck in a rut, sixty-five year olds are about to drown in some of the most dramatic changes life can offer.

Ironically, young folk who are done with formal schooling and yet not quite up to speed in the world of work and family often say to themselves, “I’m pretty confused and in flux now, but when I am 30, I will have decided who I want to be, who I want to do that alongside, and I will settle down, and settle in to a routine.”

But life is seldom like that … for anyone. There are just too many surprises. At Duke University they did a study of engineering graduates and found that only 30% of them were still in the engineering field just 20 years after. 30%.

Sociologists tell us that people nowadays will, on average, go through seven job changes in a lifetime; maybe even seven distinct careers. An increasing number of educators are coming to speak of intelligence in terms of the ability to adapt, as opposed to IQ.

Why? Because life, for all of us, is a series of adaptations, moves, beginnings and endings.

But who among us is good at endings? The eventuality of endings, can, though, shake our world up in surprisingly healthy ways.

I read something about a woman who was in her mid-thirties and she got a terminal diagnosis -- some sort of cancer. It was something that would likely kill her but not right away, maybe not for a decade or two.

She was working in a non-tenure track academic position that frustrated her, so she quit, but she still had to work, so she got a job at *Trader Joe’s* because she loved the cheerful friendly atmosphere. It didn’t pay much, but it got her up in the morning. I get that.

I’m borrowing the title for this sermon this morning from the title of a memoir by the late Reynolds Price, *A Whole New Life*. It’s Price’s moving account of his struggle through cancer surgery, recovery, and beyond. As you might guess, Reynolds Price came to believe that his illness was, in fact, an invitation to a whole new life. But that took a lot of time to play out.

He tells how, at first, he denied his cancer. He was filled with anger and resentment when he found out how sick he was. He struggled during the pain laden months after his debilitating but life saving surgery.

Here he was; he’d once been a robust man, active, athletic, at the prime of his life, the peak of his career.

Now he was relegated to a wheelchair (the price of that life-saving surgery). But Reynolds depicts his path back from anger as a dawning realization that, in his words, “The old Reynolds has died.” His old self, so many of the aspects of his former existence, were over. He could not get them back.

Now, he could spend the rest of his life in grief over what he had lost, pitifully attempting to salvage some bits and pieces, OR he could choose to begin a new life.

He chose the latter. He began all over again. It was not the life he would have chosen if he were able to choose, but it would prove to be a life very much worth living.

In fact, he embarked upon the greatest period of personal productivity of his life.

“Find your way to be somebody else,” he advises; “the next viable you –

a stripped-down whole other clear-eyed person; realistic as a sawed-off shotgun and thankful for air, not to speak of the human kindness you’ll meet if you get normal luck.”

Now, retirement is rarely as traumatic as spinal cancer. Still, I think there are analogies.

From what I have observed, the people who fail miserably at the challenges of their later years are those who fail to see retirement as a definite transition from one plane of existence to another. They attempt to salvage too much of their former life.

I’m haunted by a story of a woman who had worked at a low wage job in a garment factory for over forty years. When she finally retired, her children thought she would be thrilled. She was miserable. She wept.

Worse than that, she took to hanging around the gate of the factory many mornings, vainly hoping they would call her back to work. She even took an assumed name and tried to get hired, representing herself as some one else. That’s way too sad!

That just won’t work. Your old life goes on without you. Somehow they get by without you down at the plant, down at the office, the hospital, down at the University. Whether you were stellar, or ho-hum, it’s the same. They usually carry on just fine.

No, you can’t get your old life back. You need to lay your hands on a whole new life. Whether we have hope for retirement or not, all of us still need to find ways to prepare ourselves better for transitions that will come inevitably.

If our only life is our work we are to be pitied, unless we can find some *new* work after the old.

It has been said, “We neither get better or worse as we grow older, but more like ourselves.” (Robert Anthony) There you are.

Here is what may be Exhibit A for that observation … It’s a first person story told by an anonymous woman …

***AFTER WORKING THIRTY YEARS****in a civil-service job in upstate New York, I decided to retire and collect my pension. It was like the end of a long prison sentence. With my reduced income, I’d have to give up my annual winter vacation in Florida, but I wouldn’t need it. I would be on permanent vacation.*

*I retired in August and spent the first month taking long walks or sitting in my lawn chair, reading and feeling as if I were playing hooky. Toward the middle of September there were several days of cool weather, and I sat in my lawn chair wrapped in a sweater. By the end of October I needed mittens on my walks. Eventually I stopped spending time outdoors.*

*Stuck inside that winter, I longed for human contact. I would visit coffee shops, grocery stores, and shopping malls just to get out of the house. I took to wearing the same pair of sweat pants for days and having conversations with myself. I considered letting the feral cats who congregated on my deck come inside.*

*Finally I went back to work — not at my former job, where I’d had seniority and a decent paycheck, but in a seasonal minimum-wage position.*

*My boss was younger than my children and interested only in the high-school girls who wore yoga pants to work. But at least I wasn’t stuck at home.*

Maybe if we had some good rituals for retirement. In Japan, for example, there is a tradition in which, when a woman reaches retirement age, she takes all of her pots and pans and she presents them to her daughter or daughter-in-law. From then on she is expected to *not* enter the kitchen. That part of her life is over. A new one has begun. Some of you might want to try this at home.

Many Japanese men begin retirement by dressing in a red kimono and doing something adventuresome that they have not done before, like climbing Mt. Fuji.

I think that would be a very good idea. I know of an American man who,

on the first morning of his retirement from an executive job came into the kitchen, looked into a cabinet and asked his wife— “Why do we need four cans of anchovies?”

She heard that and she thought, “Oh, my God.”

As I said at the outset, the book of *Ecclesiastes* sees life as one accident following another, but the New Testament demurs. In the last book of the Bible we are told that God is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. God not only gets us going at the beginning, but also meets us at the end. More to the point of the challenges of retirement, God gives us fresh beginnings along the way; new days, new lives.

The Bible ends with today’s scripture from *Revelation*:

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.****2****I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.****3****I heard a loud voice from the throne say, “Look! God’s dwelling is here with humankind. God will dwell with them, and they will be God’s peoples. God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”****5****Then the one seated on the throne said, “Look! I’m making all things new.”*

All along the way of our lives there is transition after transition. Those transitions are not accidental. They are a crucial part of our lives. Because, you know, people don’t burn out from working too hard, or working too many hours -- they burn out from having work to do that they find meaningless.

People can go on and on and on as long as they keep taking a fresh look at life, as long as they keep finding new things to do or new ways to do what they have long found to be meaningful.

Remember Reynold’s Price’s encouragement:

“Find your way to be somebody else,” he advises; “the next viable you – a stripped-down, whole other, clear-eyed person; realistic as a sawed-off shotgun and thankful for air, not to speak of the human kindness you’ll meet if you get normal luck.”

Amen