

One hundred years is a long time to live. Rarely does anyone live that long. But our Scripture lesson speaks of a time when "he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth." If you remember your OT history, before the flood we read of men and women living up to 969 years. After the flood there was a drastic reduction in the life span. But even then we read of Moses leading his people through the wilderness when he was 120 years old and Sarah giving birth to Isaac at the age of 90. But as mankind multiplied and sin increased the average lifespan was reduced still further. In fact there was a time not terribly long ago in terms of the history of mankind when the average lifespan was about 32 years old. It has been only within the last 75 years or so that the so-called "miracle drugs", including the sulphas, cortisone and antibiotics have added years to the average lifespan of all of us. Now the average lifespan in the United States is around 76 years. A census bureau report indicated that if current trends continue, 17 percent of American's population will be 65 or older by the year 2030. The figure is already over 10%. Dr. Robert A. Davidson once wrote that "doctors of the future will spend most of their time maintaining health rather

than restoring it. To live to be 115 or 120 will be expected. To live to be 140 will be desired."

When Isaiah the prophet wrote our Scripture lesson some 2600 years ago he was not thinking in terms of a steady increase in the average life-span due to new medical knowledge and care. He was not predicting that the world would naturally progress and that as a result of mankind's research in the area of medicine and aging that there would come a day when medical science could guarantee an average life-span of well over a hundred years. This new dramatically increased life span will come about as a new creative act of God, not because of mankind's accomplishments.

"Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth."
 In Isaiah 66:22 Isaiah again prophesies, "As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me so will your name and descendants endure." This vision of a new creation is developed further in the NT. The apostle Peter gives Christians this very wise advice,

"Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be kindled and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire! But according to his promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." (2 Peter 3:11-13)

The apostle John concludes the book of Revelation and the Bible with this vision of a new creation. He writes,

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away... and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away. And he who sat upon the throne said, 'Behold, I make all things new.'" (Rev. 21:1-5, selections)

The prophet Isaiah saw dimly what Peter and John saw more clearly. The OT prophets did not usually make clear distinctions between the first and second advents of Christ. When Isaiah peered into the future he saw death as still being a part of the Messiah's kingdom, even though the span of life was greatly extended. And so it is. Christ has come. He now reigns. The new creation has already begun. St. Paul writes, "If any man is in Christ he is a new creation." Jesus spoke of the "new birth". He instituted the "new covenant". And wherever the church has gone with the Gospel, material as well as spiritual blessings have followed. Men and women do live longer in those nations which have been more deeply penetrated with the Gospel. And even today as missionaries take the Gospel to third world countries the life-span of the average person is lengthened as a result of the care and medication that Christianity has nurtured. "What marvels must lie ahead when nations the world

over are Christian. Then Christianity will become the controlling and transforming influence not only in the moral and spiritual life of some individuals, but also in the entire social, economic, and cultural life of nations."

The Messiah's reign has begun. The new creation has begun,

Yet, still it is rare for someone to live to be a hundred and death continues to ~~reign~~ ^{claim victims.}. The promises of Isaiah

^{therefore} point forward to conditions that have not yet been fully enjoyed on this earth, ^{at this stage of the new creation.} But Peter and John make clear that when the new creation is completed, death shall be no more..

It's interesting that the prophets and the apostles rarely look back to the good old days. There is no longing for the old-fashioned but a hope for a completely new and different world. So often as we grow older (and we are all growing older, even the youngest of us) we romanticise the past. Some people begin to live in the past. We want to return to the good old days when things were different. Change irritates us. I know it's true of me. I tend to romanticise some periods of history. I love to read about the reformation of the church in the 16th century. I love to read about Jonathan Edwards and the Great Awakening and sometimes feel that I would have been more suited to the 18th century. I'm fascinated with Victorian England and Scotland. I love tradition and the metrical Psalms as you

know. I like all things old. But our Scripture lesson points us forward to a new heaven and earth. It doesn't look back nostalgically at the past. In fact he says, "The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind."

As I visit and talk with older people I so often sense that they turn to the past and romanticise it because they see no real hope in the future. The Rev. Cecil Myers, in his book, When Crisis Comes, writes of the onset of old age, "There is failing health, loss of eyesight and hearing. We lose our own teeth. Our physical strength lessens. Friends die, and there is an increasing loneliness. A husband or wife dies, and life seems empty. The children grow up, marry, move away, and there is a feeling of purposelessness. Diminished income makes it necessary to cut expenses. Sometimes old age means moving from a loved home. But the greatest crisis in later years is the lack of purpose for living. Many times an older person has plenty to live on, someone to live with, but nothing to live for. Often the older person feels neglected, unwanted, and unnecessary. Science is lengthening life expectancy. Unless ways can be found to increase the purpose for living, science is not doing us a favor, but only creating more crises."

John Barrymore, the great actor of an earlier generation was once asked if acting was as much fun at 70 as it was at 40. He replied, "Nothing is as much fun at 70 as it was at 40!"

Very rarely do I hear expressed the feelings of Robert Browning in his poem Rabbi Ben Ezra when he wrote,

Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made."

The crisis of growing old has often been ignored by the church. We can be thankful, however, for the way our Presbyterian church has led the way in the study and care of the elderly. We can be proud of the Presbyterian Homes of our Presbytery which try to give dignity and purpose to the last of life for which the first was made. But, unfortunately, the older person who has been raised in the Presbyterian church has gone through a period when the church and its ministers have been somewhat embarrassed about talking about the Christian hope of ~~the coming kingdom of God, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting~~ *The new heavens and the new earth, The new Jerusalem of the fully consummated Kingdom of God; The resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.* We have over-reacted, perhaps, to an otherworldliness that turns its back on social problems and have gone to the opposite extreme of ignoring what the Bible says about the

new heavens and new earth.

Yet Bruno Bettelheim, a Jewish psychologist and survivor of the Nazi concentration camps states flatly, "It is a well known fact of the concentration camps that those who had strong religious and moral convictions managed life there much better than the rest. Their beliefs, including belief in an afterlife, gave them a strength to endure which was far above that of others." And I would suggest that same faith would give strength to all of us as we grow older.

Let's take a look at what Isaiah says about the new heavens and earth. What's it going to be like? He says that the past will be forgotten. I'm sure that he is thinking of the painful past. I'm sure that he is also thinking that past glories will be forgotten because they will grow pale in the glory of the new heavens and earth. There will be gladness and rejoicing in the new Jerusalem. There will be no more sorrow, tears and crying. No more will babies die. No more will men and women die in their youth like David Rife. A person will still be young at a hundred years old. "When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun; we've no less days, to sing God's praise, then when we first begun."

God's people will fully enjoy the fruits of their labor. There will be no earthly government taking away our hard

earned money. No threat of war or invasion or nuclear holocaust. The new heavens and earth will be a place of full employment and not a place of idleness. There will be no calamity. Our children won't grow up to become rebellious. God's people will live with their descendants. Nature will be reconciled so that the lion and lamb will lie down together. The old serpent, the devil, will lick the dust in final ignominious defeat. No injustice. No injury. And best of all, the Lord says, "Before they call to me I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear."

How do you react to that description? Do you smile in polite disbelief and think of the naivete of those men and women who really hope and believe this? Would you like to believe but are unable to because there seems to be so little evidence for the reality of this vision? Or do you frankly approach your closing years with the cynical resignation of William Ernest Henley who wrote,

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.

However you respond to Isaiah's prophecy of new heavens and earth I want to leave you with these thoughts. If we live in the past, or if we live only for the present we will

still grow old and will be left with nothing eventually.

cf. John Cheevers short story. "Of youth & beauty"

Those who live simply to preserve this old building without living to preserve and pass on the faith of Christ which is ever new will be left with nothing. Those who live simply to collect material possessions, what will they have unless they begin now to store up for themselves treasures in heaven? I love life and have enjoyed my life, I love the sights, sounds, smells, and feelings of this beautiful world and the people in it, yet I sincerely believe that this world is a preparation for the world to come and the new heavens and the new earth.

Alexander Solshenitzyn, in his memoirs, wrote, "The meaning of earthly existence lies not, as we have grown use to thinking, in prospering, but in the development of the soul ." The Rev. John Brown of Haddington in Scotland once gave this advice to a young man, "... our life on earth is of great importance, as it is our only season of preparation for eternity, and therefore concern for our eternal welfare ought to make us as careful about our natural life and health as we can. And while God is shaping your natural constitution in the days of your youth, see that your soul be deeply concerned to receive Jesus Christ into your heart as the free gift of God. Without this there can be no

solid happiness in this world, and nothing but inexpressible misery in the eternal state hereafter."

I'm sure you are concerned about your life and your health, but are you concerned about your soul's eternal welfare. Where will you be when you are a hundred years old? The new heavens and the new earth which God is creating will be for those who in this life have been made new men and women through repentance and faith in Christ. The new heavens and the new earth are for those who are God's people who in this life have been given a new heart, a new song, a new name, and a new birth.

AMEN