THE SEASONS OF AGING

Invocation
From age to age, O God, you bless your people with tender care. In every age, Eternal Wisdom, bless us with your constant companionship and you fiery presence. 
Jan L. Richardson in Sacred Journeys

Call to Worship – Psalm 90:1-6
From Swallow’s Nest by Marchiene Vroon Rienstra, Eerdman’s 1992 (out of print)

ALL: O God, You have been our home in every generation.
One: Before You gave birth to the earth or the mountains came to be, You were and are and are to come – God without beginning or end.
ALL: You made us children of earth, and we return to dust.
One: In Your eyes, a thousand years ago is like yesterday to us. The ages pass as swiftly for You as nights do for us.
ALL: Our lives are dreams, dreams that slip away when we awake.
One: We bloom, like flowers, for a day. Fresh in the morning, we wither and die in the evening.
ALL: O God, You have been our home in every generation.

A Scripture Litany on Age
Leader: Rid yourselves of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. (1 Peter 2:1-3)

Youth and Children: Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. (Mark 10:14b)

Leader: Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God, as a little child will never enter it. (Mark 10:15)

Women: For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.

Men: When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

Women: For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.

Men: Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. (1 Corinthians 13:11-12)

All: Let us speak the truth in love and grow to the full maturity of Christ, the head. Through Christ, the whole body grows. With the proper functioning of each member, firmly joined together by each supporting ligament with which it is equipped, the body grows building itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:15-16)

**Scripture texts**
Psalm 90:1-6; 1 Peter 2:1-3; Mark 10:14b; Mark 10:15; 1 Corinthians 13:11-12; Ephesians 4:15-16; Psalm 71:5-21
Core message
When we are children we can’t wait to grow up. Many of us eagerly count the months, the weeks, the days until we can date or drive a car. We look forward to getting a job and our own place to live. At some point we begin to feel as though time is passing too quickly and we wish we could slow things down as we watch our children grow up and move out, or we get near retirement and think of all those dreams that look as though they will never happen.

Aging – it happens to all of us. It begins the moment we are born and continues until we die. We don’t usually call it aging until sometime in midlife. Early in life we call it growing up or maturing and it is a positive thing. When we feel like we are losing stamina, physical strength and flexibility, or mental ability then we call it aging and feel upset about it. The aspects of aging which we fear or would like to avoid such as illness, lessening of energy, increased dependence on others, the threat and certainty of death are really nothing new. They are the natural, ever-present realities of what it means to be living embodied human beings. Pain and illness are not strangers to the young; our reserves of bodily energy have always been limited; we are dependent on others throughout our lives; and death has always been a certainty. In youth it is easier (at least for some) to ignore the facts of our finitude, to pretend that they are unimportant. When we grow older, it becomes difficult to keep up the pretense. It is also easier to maintain the illusion that we have immunity from illness, disability, dependency and death when we have plenty of material resources. In poor, less developed parts of the world people witness daily these givens of human life.

So how do we cope with this uncertain endeavor we call life and especially with the lengthening of our days and years?

I’d like to share the reflections of two different women. The first is well-known author, Madeleine L’Engle from her book, A Circle of Quiet. “I am still

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every age that I have been. Because I was once a child, I am always a child. Because I was once a searching adolescent, given to moods and ecstasies, these are still part of me, and always will be. Because I was once a rebellious student, there is and always will be in me the student crying out for reform.

This does not mean that I ought to be trapped or enclosed in any of these ages, the perpetual student, the delayed adolescent, the childish adult, but they are in me to be drawn on; to forget is a form of suicide; my past is part of what makes the present Madeleine and must not be denied or rejected or forgotten.

Far too many people misunderstand what putting away childish things means, and think that forgetting what it is like to think and feel and touch and smell and taste and see and hear like a three-year-old or a thirteen-year-old or a twenty-three-year-old means being grownup. When I’m with these people I, like the kids, feel that if this is what it means to be a grownup, then I don’t ever want to be one.

Instead of which, if I can retain a child’s awareness and joy, and be fifty-one, then I will really learn what it means to be grownup. I still have a long way to go.”

Certainly an important aspect of aging with integrity is integrating what has happened to us in the past with the needs of the present. We can sort our life experiences - deciding what we want to keep, what is still useful to us in the present and what is out of date and we need to let go of. In this process of sifting and learning from our past we gain wisdom and often a sense of peace.

Another woman tells this story: “I remember when I said out loud to myself, ‘You’re old!’ I do not recall the exact date, but I remember the event vividly. In retrospect, I believe that I uttered my declaration of independence in

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defiance of a television commercial that I had just heard in which someone had exclaimed that she was not old, was not going to be old, and in short, seemed to be promising to live forever. I was indignant at her denial of an inevitable reality, and I said to the commercial, ‘You’re so busy trying to recapture the fantasy of youth that you’re wasting the reality of age and the life it has given you!’

When I went to the mirror, looked myself straight in the eye, and said, ‘I’m old!’ it became real. But the corners of my mouth were turned down, and my frown was grim and joyless. Those two words went downhill all the way to the bottom. Then I said it again; my eyes gleamed, the corners of my mouth turned up in a wide grin, and my voice rang out as if in a proud declaration. That day I learned something important to my being eighty-five—for oldness is very special and very precious; it is not to be denied. We have to make age work for us; we can’t treat it as an enemy.”

-----Elizabeth Welch in Learning to be 85, 1991  The Upper Room

To not treat our own aging as an enemy we will be working counter to the values and standard operating procedures of our youth oriented culture. To advocate for dignity and justice for aging members of our communities will likely put us in conflict with business-as-usual in our society. But treating aging as an enemy and allowing the elders among us to become sidelined or invisible deprives our churches and communities of the rich, full experience of a large segment of the population at a time when pressing global issues require all the wisdom humanity can muster.

To change this negative view, we need an understanding of the realities and possibilities of the second half of people’s lives. But it is difficult to talk about an experience as diverse as aging. In our discussions we tend to veer back and forth, like someone just learning to ride a bicycle, between a consideration of the gifts of aging and a focus on its losses. Is it the best of times or the worst of times? An effort to stress the positive side of aging,
naming it “The Golden Years” can mask its adversities. A focus on the problems of aging can obscure its possibilities. We are asked to somehow hold together a paradox encompassing the reality of suffering and loss with the truth of resurrection and new life.

A woman described it in terms of the seasons. Her life felt like the autumn she was enjoying in nature in early October that year: “The days are gorgeous and full of color,” she said, “but I know that it will be cold at night and get dark earlier. It is a very good time, but more lies behind than ahead. There is a poignancy and sadness along with the happiness.”

(From Autumn Gospel – by Kathleen Fischer)

**Benediction**

May you embrace the wisdom of each age with wit, with grace, with power, and with faith. And may the blessing of the God of all ages be with us in youth and old age and fill our mouths with praise for such goodness. Amen.

**Optional Scriptural Text:** Psalm 71:5-21

From *Swallow’s Nest* by Marchiene Vroon Rienstra, Eerdman’s 1992 (out of print)

You, El Shaddai, are my only hope.
Since I was a child I have trusted in You.
Since birth I leaned on Your everlasting arms,
You delivered me from my mother’s womb.
I will always praise You!

Because You have been my constant refuge and strength,
I have been a sign of Your saving power for many.
My mouth is filled with songs of Your glory all the day long.

Now that I am old, do not cast me away!
Do not forsake me now that my strength fails.
Hostile people live around me, watching my every move,
They plot and scheme together to harm me.
“God has left her,” they say. “Pursue and seize her.
She has no one to help her.”
O God, do not be far from me.
Come quickly to my rescue, El Shaddai!
Shame those who would put me to shame.
Let those who would hurt me be heaped with disgrace!

As for me, I will hope in You always.
I will praise You more and more without ceasing.
I will speak of Your just deeds and saving acts all the day long,
Though their number is beyond all telling.
I will come and go in Your strength along, El Shaddai.
I will declare Your generous goodness.

O God, You have been my teacher since I was a youth.
To this day I sing of Your wonders.
Now that I am old and gray, do not forsake me.
I want to declare Your salvation to the coming generation,
For Your power and justice are as great as the heavens.
You are an incomparable God who has done marvelous things.
Though You have let me see trouble and evil multiply,
You have always revived me again,
I know You will continue to grant me well-being,
Will fill me with comfort and calm . . . .

**Suggested Hymns**

Great is thy faithfulness #327
God of our Life #486
O God, your constant care #481
Lord of our growing years #479
Help us to help each other #362

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