



SENIORS, ELDERS, AND GRANDPARENTS DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection – Isaiah 46:3-4 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 3) Listen to me, O house of Jacob,
all the remnant of the house of Israel,
who have been borne by me from your birth,
carried from the womb;

(v. 4) even to your old age I am he,
even when you turn grey I will carry you.
I have made, and I will bear;
I will carry and will save.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Seniors, Elders, and Grandparents day, for me, is a high holy day on the liturgical calendar. It is a day that provides opportunity for faith communities around the country to honor its members who have labored in so many ways to help build faith communities and families. The name of

the day is apt as well. Some revere being seniors. Others, who may either not take the whole aging bit well (our society certainly doesn't) or who believe age is just a number, can be called elders. Then, there are those who are due particular thanks and even praise—our grandparents.

This moment on the calendar reminds us of those whose fortitude, self-sacrifice, and hard work cleared paths for us. Some did it by making their homes safety nets. Some did it by working on jobs that were decent but difficult, because their main concern was the welfare of their families. They built things, invented things, and laid the foundation for the ever-shrinking manufacturing industry in America. Others did it by being community-minded and working in movements and arenas as unsung heroes who were concerned about what type of future they were leaving for the next generation. Still others served in churches, temples, mosques and synagogues, faithfully helping their faith communities grow, hold on to treasured traditions, and remain forces for good.

In Africa, especially West Africa, which is the part of the continent I know most about, seniors and elders have long been venerated. They were the village leaders to whom others went for counsel, for comfort, and for an understanding of important traditions. We can learn much from those countries in which elders are venerated.

Finally, and unfortunately, too often now we are seeing young grandparents, some even in their thirties. These grandparents have had to put on hold their own personal and financial maturation to aid their children and grandchildren. They typically pay a great price for doing so but believe that the sacrifice is worth it to buttress the strength of their family.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Isaiah 46:3-4

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

In my context, the Bay Area of California, most of the seniors, elders, and grandparents I know and meet are not faring well. Instead of golden years filled with old friends, a decent place to live, grandchildren, a favorite volunteer project, and leisure travel every now and then, too many face a far different and almost depressing reality. Some have had to go back to work because their pension plans have fallen apart or medical costs gobbled up their savings; it seems to take only one major illness to do that these days. Many did not save enough to retire and are barely scraping by on Social Security and other limited government benefits and a few have children who can afford to chip in some times. Then there are those who are taking care of grandchildren on a regular basis, mainly because their children are incarcerated or on drugs. Finally, there are the seniors who are disabled; they are in the worst of the worst social and economic condition. They face skyrocketing medical costs, discrimination due to their disabilities, and communities ill-equipped and/or perhaps lacking the will to assist them.

I do not know where you're living as you read this commentary, but where I live so many seniors and grandparents are not doing well at all. For those in this predicament, Isaiah 46:3-4 is a word they need.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

“Second Isaiah is the name given to the anonymous author of chapters 40–55 of the book of Isaiah. The name distinguishes him from “First” Isaiah of the late eighth century to whom the bulk of chapters 1–30 is traditionally attributed, and from the author of chapters 55–66 judged by most scholars to be of the late sixth or early fifth century. Chapters 40–55 are a collection of speeches of the 540s B.C., and perhaps of the following decade, delivered to the Jews who had been deported to Babylon from their native Judah a half century earlier.”¹ After the Babylonians fall, the Persians under King Cyrus, rise to take their place.

This passage begins with polarities Zion and Babylon. Verses 1 and 2 speak of pack animals carrying statues of the Babylonian gods Bel and Nebo. They are part of the general flight from the destroyed city, as is implied in verse 2b.² Bel and Nebo cannot carry the Babylonians through destruction; these God need to be carried themselves. Against this backdrop, God speaks to the people of God in verses 3-4.

God calls these Israelites who have suffered under the Babylonians a “remnant” and calls for their attention, “Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel” (v. 3). God can command their attention because the God who beckons them is the same God who has created them and brought them out of Egypt, their first exile. Even more, with tenderness and certainly with greater care than the pack animals used by the Babylonians, God has carried this remnant through multiple exiles and so much more.

This is not a God who begins to care for a people and then abandons them. No, not at all. This is the God who carries through old age; even when people “turn grey,” God will carry. Then, to show the comprehensiveness of her care, the Creator says, “I have made, I will bear, I will carry and will save.” This is all anyone needs from God: creation, bearing with, to be carried, and salvation.

Even to your old age, when you turn grey

These are words of hope, love, and expectation for seniors, elders, and grandparents. It is not easy being an elder in much of today’s world. Elders are no longer held in the esteem that characterized great dynasties of old and even America of old. Too often today, seniors are seen as disposable or are ignored altogether until needed by some entity such as politicians. In America, youth reigns, power reigns. But God affirms his continued presence. You will not be forgotten; I will be with you even as the world chases youth and physical strength. This is not a some-timey God. This is the God who remembers and remains.

I Will Carry You

What a promise! As a senior, I can tell you with confidence that getting out of bed, up and down stairs, and even in and out of cars, is not always a walk in the park. Even if one is physically fit, time has a slowing effect and a drooping effect on the body. But the Ruler and Sustainer of the universe uses the word “carry” as a metaphor that gives comfort to those who know exactly how it feels when limbs are no longer very dependable. Moreover, in a world of constant turbulence

and so many unpleasant surprises, might not even the young be thankful for a God who is willing to carry them? Yes, through physical challenges God carries elders, but moreover God carries us through any life challenge that we encounter.

Remember, this passage was spoken to exiles. Not all of them were seniors, but they all needed God to carry them. But for those who were seniors, those who thought that they would not see total freedom again, it was an even bigger deal that the God of Israel, in spite of their repeated ungodly behavior, had not only never deserted, but also helped them endure to old age even in exile. But God's promise to carry them in Isaiah 46 is more than God's promise to help them endure; the passage speaks of an actual restored place to which the exiles will be carried—Zion.

I Have Made You

The God who made us takes responsibility for being our creator. Our God does not shirk her responsibility to us, even though we often cannot make the same claim, even in our old age. In creating us, God also knows our life cycle and is intimately acquainted with the nature of the aging process. God is not surprised by how our bodies function in old age and knows what they will and will no longer do. We are the creation of God, and God blesses us at every phase of life. In old age, as we watch our bodies almost seem to betray us, it is great comfort to know that the one who created us has formed and fashioned us in a way that was pleasing to her.

This is also a word to seniors who are not caring for their bodies as well as they could. Too many of us are sick, scooter-bound, and a burden to our children and grandchildren because of our bad habits. Since we have been given the gift of such magnificent bodies, we owe it to God, ourselves, our families, and our friends to treat our bodies with the utmost care all of the days of our lives. I have acquaintances who in their seventies and eighties have regular exercise routines and stay involved with the world to keep their minds sharp. Aging poorly is our choice, not God's.

I Will Bear

So much is placed on the shoulders of today's seniors, especially those who serve as grandparents due to so many circumstances (the death of a parent, the mental illness of a parent, the substance abuse of a parent, the incarceration of a parent, and even due to the inability of a young parents to parent). These grandparents need help! Yes, God will bear them up, but we are the hands and feet of God. God needs us to co-labor with God in insuring that our seniors are not over-burdened, over-stretched economically and emotionally, and over-worked. More than ever, faith communities need initiatives that aid grandparents so that they do not continue to fall through social cracks and are not left alone to bear such heavy burdens. Yes, God will bear, but what about society?

I Will Carry and Will Save

Here, repetition of "I will carry" is a way to offer assurance to those in exile. God is giving emphasis to this point. Then, the one who provides salvation declares that he "will save." First,

those to whom this passage was first written need saving. They have been overrun by the Babylonians in one of three deportations. Those who were seniors had seen much and endured much from captors and dictator kings. In fact, some had been in exile so long that by the time of Second Isaiah they were largely second-generation exiles.³ Into this circumstance comes Isaiah with a strong word declaring God's intent—to save and be sustain the people of Israel; but to be saved, they also must act. They are not to passively accept their circumstance of exile.

Celebration

If we live long enough, as an anonymous writer has said, we will get old. In every age, especially when our hair turns grey and turns toward the ground (meaning starts to thin and fall out), as I've heard old folk say, we take great consolation in a God who sticks and stays, creates and carries, bears and saves! This is the God to whom we shall cling. Sometimes up, sometimes down, sometimes almost level with the ground, but we're holding on. For we are assured that when all else fails, when storm clouds assail, when our bodies begin to sink, and the world from us attention withholds, we serve a God who will never, never leave us alone. To every senior, every elder, and every grandparent of all ages, this is our hope and this is our great consolation. Amen.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details brought to mind in and by this passage include:

Sounds: God asking the remnant of Israel to listen; God bringing forth and birthing God's people; the sounds of elders;

Sights: The second generation of Israelites living in exile in Babylon (some poor and some wealthy); God bringing forth people from the wombs of their mothers; old people with grey hair and frail limbs; wheelchairs; scooters carrying seniors; elders carrying canes; young people showing deference and offering assistance to elders as the hands and feet of God; grandchildren; the wrinkles of seniors; a regal elder addressing an audience; and

Textures: The texture of a senior's knees and hands; and the texture of a grandchild's skin.

III. Additional Material That Preachers and Others Can Use

- Please visit <http://www.usa.gov/Topics/Seniors.shtml> for a list of more than one hundred services for seniors and grandparents including senior housing, health, and consumer protection. **All churches need to be aware of and utilize as many of these services as possible along with those in their state and county.** Often seniors are too overwhelmed, for one reason or another, and may also lack the educational capacity to fend off unscrupulous predators pretending to offer worthwhile services. In such circumstances, seniors need to be able to count on the Church for assistance; will your church be ready to offer it? Also, those who care for grandchildren are particularly in need of assistance. Finally, those who care for seniors also need support and help (though limited) is provided through some of the entities listed on this website.

- Please use in your bulletin, on screens, or in some fashion, the wonderful poems and proverbs provided into today's cultural resource unit, particularly the poem, "Bring dat College Home."

Notes

1. Clifford, Robert. Fair Spoken and Persuading: An Interpretation of Second Isaiah. New York and Toronto: Paulist Press, 1984. p. 3.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid. p. 13.