

## **“The Age of Opportunities”**

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Text: Genesis 12: 1-9

Quote: “May I suggest that [human] potential for change and growth is much greater than we are willing to admit and that old age be regarded not as the age of stagnation but as ***the age of opportunities for inner growth?***”—Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in “To Grow in Wisdom”

This past June, a group of 30 congregants and friends of the Riverside Church fled the city for a 2-day retreat in a convent along the Hudson River; the theme we decided upon: “The Gift of Years: Embracing A Spiritual Journey of Discovery & Engagement as We Age.” We began the retreat by focusing on Psalm 90 in which the psalmist writes: “So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.” Other versions read: “So teach us to **number** our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.”

We began the retreat by taking the psalmist literally—by counting or numbering our days. In the middle of the room sat a big basket full of small stones, and every participant was to take one stone for every year they had lived. A couple group members held 30 some odd rocks; some held 40 or 50; most held 65 or more stones.

This exercise produced a lot of laughter. One participant, who is 89, said that her hands weren’t big enough to hold all her years; she laughed wildly as her stones kept escaping her grasp and tumbling to the floor! “Here let me help you hold your years!” said the woman sitting next to her, who had a little more room in her

hands. Another participant, who is 92, decided that—*well, just forget it!*—she was just going to count by 2s—each stone equaling 2 years!

Soon, our joking gave way to a more pensive mood, to quiet reverence, as we beheld our own and each others' palms—full, to varying extents, with rocks—with our *counted* years. The group conversation turned to reflecting on our lives. We spoke of the blessings and burdens contained within our piles, and admired the beautiful collection of someone else's. Some years were hard—the question came: “would you give any of them back?” Most in the group decided no; each year was somehow necessary to the next. We marveled at the weight of our individual and collective lives.

We realized how rarely we pause for this kind of inventory, and we discussed how often we feel the urge to deny or disown or downplay the number of days we've lived—to lie about or make light of our gathering years—as if accumulating years was a source of shame.

I recalled how some years back, when my family threw my grandmother a surprise 85<sup>th</sup> birthday party, we were surprised when my grandmother's friends pushed back: *But she's not 85*, they protested. *Well, yes, she is*, we insisted. And it was then that we learned that my grandmother had lied about her age for years—the surprise party was a surprise indeed...her gig was up!

Rather than disowning our years, the psalmist recommends *counting* them—to become keenly aware of them, to honor them and their potential... in order to “gain a wise heart.”

Wisdom, of course, is not something that magically happens to us as we age; it seems that part of gaining wisdom is learning the reflective practice of taking stock, of “counting our days,”—and making the turn from seeing the passage of time, advancing age, as a source of shame, to a source of strength. Wisdom, it seems, entails approaching each stage of life—perhaps especially the later stages—as an age of opportunities for engagement, discovery, and spiritual growth.

The call story of Abram—one of our earliest and foundational stories of faith—speaks directly to older age as an age of rich opportunities. It is no insignificant detail that we are told that Abram is 75-years-old when he receives the call to “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” Here, at the center of this “linchpin story” of the Old Testament, if not the entire Bible, is a septagenarian. It is here in the Genesis narrative when the Almighty comes close, choosing one family who will have a special role in passing, fulfilling, and spreading divine promise. While God will always think global, God has now decided to act local—and the “local” comes in the form of an aging couple, Abram and Sarai, soon-to-be Abraham and Sarah.

Before this story, Abraham has simply been mentioned in a genealogical list, and Sarah has been mentioned as his barren wife. We know very little about them: they are a married couple in the ancient Mesopotamian town of Haran, they are without progeny in a patrilineal culture, and they are relatively old. We know nothing of their character or their faith; nothing of their fears or hopes. Maybe they had been restless, struggling to discern what to do with their lives in these late years, searching for a purpose. Or maybe they had been perfectly content, ready to live out their days in the comfortable confines of a known way of life, among the familiarity of their extended family. Whatever the case, we can only imagine that the radical call to completely “uproot and go” could not have been anticipated—and yet, seemingly without hesitation, Abraham agrees, launching himself and his family into a highly uncertain future, onto a path with an unknown destination, clinging to a distant promise of blessing.

Even in their old age—perhaps, *especially* in their old age—God has surprises for Abraham and Sarah; calling them into a new stage of life, that entails a high calling to carry forth blessing to all the earth. Here, in this pivotal story of faith, we find aging persons who are responsive, adaptable, faithful, and courageous. We find older age, not as a barrier but as a beginning; not as a burden but as a blessing. This depiction stands in direct contrast to our ageist culture, in which portrayals of advanced age range from the openly disparaging to the subtly dismissive. Old age is characterized as either an extended vacation, some kind of

a perpetual cruise-ship care-free existence, or as a sad, static existence, in which one hunkers down to wait for death; old people are said to be out-of-touch; past their prime. They are given diminutive descriptors: cute; cranky; curmudgeon; stuck; senile; sweet. If one were to purely read the signs of our dominant culture, old age is to be hidden or erased, and old people are made invisible, or branded as obstacles to progress. The challenges and the gifts, the beautiful and at times difficult complexities of aging, are simply incomprehensible or invisible in and to a youth-obsessed culture. And, sadly, this is what ageism does: it flattens out the rich variety and possibilities of advanced age, making it a liability rather than a gift. It is an “ism” that goes largely unchallenged in our culture, including our churches.

But our faith points us in a different direction. Theologian and civil rights activist, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, argues that old age is not to be regarded “as the age of stagnation but as the age of opportunities for inner growth.” These opportunities, according to Heschel, are not about material gain or traditional ideas of success, but rather he talks about older age as “formative years”...“rich in possibilities”...possibilities to “unlearn the follies of a lifetime...to deepen understanding and compassion, to widen the horizon of honesty, to refine the sense of fairness.”

Perhaps it should come as little surprise that it is during these “formative years” that Sarah and Abraham are called to leave Haran, to set out on a new phase of

life, to widen their own horizons and the horizons of their faith—and the horizon of our own, thousands of years later. We don't know exactly why God waits until Abraham is 75 years old, why God doesn't call a 35-year-old Abraham when perhaps he may have been more "up" for the journey. But perhaps it isn't until this point in Abraham's life that he is ready; maybe his faith has matured and deepened enough to be ready to follow. It is not until he is up in years a bit that Abraham is *spiritually* up to the task of turning his entire life upside down in faithfulness to God. (Maybe you identify—as you feel spiritually "up" for something that you didn't some years ago.) Perhaps, Abraham is at a point in his life where he is willing and able to consent to the call; that he has a wise enough heart to trust; maybe, only now, after seven decades on the planet, do he and Sarah have the clarity, the inner strength and freedom to GO.

I think of one of the older adults in my congregation; she is a climate-change activist. She told me her goal is to make Riverside a zero-waste church, and she has devised a comprehensive plan to present to the council to this end! Her cognitive difficulties and memory challenges have not served to sideline her, but to *engage* her. She shared that this is the most passionate and clarifying time of her life. "These are my best years," she declared. And by "best years" she is not talking about having perfect health or a cushy retirement; she is talking about a deep inner faith and fire that propels her to heal the world in the ways she can.

Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi, author of the modern classic *From Aging to Saging: A Revolutionary Approach to Growing Older*, talks about shifting from seeing ourselves as victims of aging, to seeing ourselves as engaging a process of *saging*. He envisions old age as the culminating stage of our spiritual development. A stage of growth, elderhood provides opportunities to reconnect with the sacred dimensions of life and help initiate other spiritual seekers. His is a joyous vision of elders as wisdomkeepers and as guides for others toward expanded consciousness and compassion.

I appreciate this recasting of old age. And it seems it is best not to wait for advanced age to engage saging processes. After all, we are all aging. And no matter our chronical age, the work of spiritual maturation, openness to growth, and expanding our capacity to give and receive blessing, are available for us to engage now.

There's a little line at the end of today's Genesis reading that seems to perfectly capture the process of spiritual growth across the life span; did you catch it?:  
"And Abram *journeyed on by stages* toward the Negeb." Journeyed on by stages. Certainly not unlike our own lives, Abraham and Sarah's course was not a sprint or a straight line to a known outcome or destination. Their journey unfolded in stages. Their story is not a bee-line to blessing; it contains a lot of suffering—

some of which, they inflict on others; it contains failure, frustration, and waiting; and it contains laughter, joy, and fulfillment. Their unfolding story is a journey of fits and starts, of serious errors—recall their mistreatment of Hagar—and of tremendous grace: recall the birth of Isaac.

Like our faith ancestors, we, too, journey on by stages through the landscapes of our own lives, our purposes and callings coming slowly and in pieces. Through various seasons and stages, we may learn and grow in fits and starts; we may rediscover old passions or find new ones; we may let go of once-important pursuits and find other, daily ways to contribute to the well-being of another and the community.

Maybe you've been tossed onto a path you never would've chosen—a path of grief, illness, pain; a path of financial stress or stress at the state of these United States—and it's frightening and frustrating at times. But wherever we find ourselves in our journey-by-stages, it is important to remember that the call story of Abraham has little to do with how put-together and smart and healthy Abraham and Sarah are—in fact, we know little of their condition, of their “fitness”—and much more to do with an openness to God's grace, with God's promise of blessing, and with God's assurance of holy presence. So, we can take heart today, as we go forward, that this same divine presence accompanies us as at 5, 25, 55, 75, 95. As we journey by stages, may we count our days in order to gain a wise heart; may we sense the opportunities before us...and the living God

within us, alongside us, leading us, into a future of hope. Throughout our years—  
and maybe especially in our later years—may our unfolding journey of faith be  
passionate, clarifying, and compassionate...may it be an age of opportunities!

Amen.