



PASTORING FOR LIFE

AGING

GROWING OLD

IN CHURCH

WILL WILLIMON

JASON BYASSEE, SERIES EDITOR

AGING

GROWING OLD
IN CHURCH

WILL WILLIMON



Baker Academic

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Contents

Series Preface ix

Introduction 1

1. Aging with Scripture 7
2. The Storm of Aging 17
3. Retiring with God 25
4. Successful Aging 47
5. With God in the Last Quarter of Life 75
6. Growing Old in Church 123
7. Ending in God 157

Notes 165

Name Index 175

Scripture Index 177

Introduction

One of my favorite photos of my namesake, Will, is of the two of us, he in his second summer of life on his first trip to the South Carolina coast. I'm leading into the surf at sunset one who only recently had learned to walk. I expected him to be afraid at his first meeting of the sea. He is no fear and all joy. He holds my hand. In the photo, you can see only our backs, an old man stooping toward the child, the child eagerly pushing forward. You can't see, but I'll never forget, the smile on his face, Will's delight as he eagerly entered the waves at my encouraging, "Jump!"

I love that photo's depiction of one of the great joys of aging—leading a little one toward the grand adventure of the wide world, gripping his hand reassuringly, egging him on to face into the wind and to leap the waves.

But yesterday, when I looked at that picture of the two of us—the little boy and the old man, the growing child and the aging adult—it occurred to me that I had misread that moment. I, who presumed to be leading the child, saw that I was being led. Here at sunset, the sea, the vast eternity of time that was rushing toward him with promise, was ebbing away from me, taking from me all that I loved, including the little boy named for me.

He was all future; I was now mostly past. Most of his life was ahead of him; most of my life was behind me. In truth, the little one, still fresh in the world, had me by the hand, encouraging me

to make my way into the deep, departing. He begins life by eagerly jumping forward. I clutch his tiny hand tightly, my last grasp of the future, at the end of day as I stagger uncertainly, unwillingly toward the engulfing, eternal sea. Not long from now, much sooner than I'd like, he'll have to let go and venture on without me. His grip is not tight enough to rescue me from the encroaching dark, the inundating deep.

When all is said and done (which will occur before long for this septuagenarian), there's no cure for that but God.¹ Just about everybody wants a long life; nobody wants to be old. Well, I'm growing old. So are you. Whether that's good news or bad depends not only on our physical and mental health, our financial situation, and our friends and family but also on the God who created us to be tethered to temporality and is our sole hope for resurrection.

"I grow old. . . . I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled," I read at nineteen and snickered.² Aging is diminishment, finding yourself on the short end of life, with more yesterdays and fewer tomorrows, too small for your britches. Poet Dylan Thomas famously urged his aged father, "Do not go gentle into that good night. . . . Rage against dying of the light."³ Is there somewhere to stand between stoic acquiescence and impotent wrath to the diminishment of aging before the gathering dark?

The day I began research on this book a colleague asked menacingly, "Ought not you to be thinking of . . . retirement?" I replied that I felt I was making a solid contribution to the school, my classes were well filled, and I expected to be teaching for a few more years. "But don't you think there's a time to back away?" she asked. Was the Lord behind this colleague's efforts to point this septuagenarian to the door? Maybe. All I know for sure is that the humbling conversation filled me with new enthusiasm for writing this book.

I write not only as a pastor, bishop, author, and theological educator but also as someone with personal experience of elderhood. I'm an aging Baby Boomer Christian. A widespread generational desire of us Boomers is to pioneer fresh ways of aging. A study of us Boomers approaching retirement by Princeton Survey Research Associates International found that we have "a vision of the post-midlife years that is inimical to the notion of decline, whether that be . . . pulling

back gradually but steadily, or phasing out.”⁴ This book is proof that we Boomers plan to age differently.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote his essay “Old-Age” at age fifty-seven. Simone D. Beauvoir wrote her rather depressing *The Coming of Age* at sixty. Cicero wrote his classic *De Senectute* at sixty-two. While I am not as smart as these earlier commentators on aging, I have one thing on them—I am actually old!

As a doctor looks at a sick man on his deathbed, shakes his head, and says, “He won’t get over this,” one could look into our crib, said Augustine in a sermon, and say on the first day of life, “He won’t get out of this alive.”⁵ Aging is a natural, predictable life process that imperceptibly begins at birth, accelerates in a few decades, eventually becomes undeniable, ends in death, and is the dominant factor in the last third of most people’s lives. Natural and predictable though aging may be, let’s be honest: one of the reasons aging requires courage is the looming, encroaching specter of death. Though mortality may have resided somewhere in our consciousness—as something unpleasant that happens to others—after sixty-five, most of us become more aware of what’s next.

All of us are either participants or observers in a longevity revolution. Old age isn’t as short as it used to be. If people retire at fifty, they can expect to spend nearly half their lives doing something other than their job. Just this week I read another book on the predicted doom of pension plans in North America (the crash comes in 2050). The reason for the coming pension crisis? People like me are refusing to die according to actuarial expectations. Genesis 6:3 defines maximum human longevity as “one hundred twenty years” (which is now the official maximum life span for humans). Psalm 90:10 more realistically says,

The days of our life are seventy years,
or perhaps eighty, if we are strong. (NRSV)

Defying biblical marks for longevity, most of us will live thirty-four years longer than our great-grandparents.

During his earthly ministry, Jesus probably met few people my age. The average life span for men in the Roman Empire was twenty-five,

probably less for women, and, as everyone knows, Jesus and many of his disciples were denied the opportunity to grow old.⁶ Many of our quandaries about aging were unknown in biblical times or in the early church. However, that does not mean that Scripture, Christian theology, and local church life have nothing to contribute to our reflection on aging. As we think about aging *as Christians*, we should expect fresh insights and a fundamental reframing of what the world considers to be “the problem of aging.”

Though any interest in math was killed in me by the time I hit junior high, even I can't talk about aging without first doing the numbers: In the United States the average life span is eighty, double that of two hundred years ago. Seventy million people will be over sixty-five by 2030, double today's numbers. Because women have a longer life span than men, American women beyond age seventy-five outnumber men three to one. The very old—those over eighty-six—are one of the fastest-growing age groups. This group numbered four million in 2000 and are projected to grow to nearly nine million by 2030 and to sixteen million by 2050. Centenarians increased from fifteen thousand in 1982 to well over one hundred thousand today. The aged segment of the population will grow from 12 percent to 21 percent, compared with 1900, when those sixty-five and over were only 4 percent of the population.⁷ By 2058 the number of people sixty and older worldwide will triple to two billion, with aging persons comprising one-fifth of the world's population. Most will be living in rural poverty.

Dramatic changes in life spans have shifted our views of aging and our expectations for how adults function in the last quarter of life. The challenges of caring for the aged and the sheer size of the exploding aging population have made aging not only a major public policy dilemma and a disruption in millions of families but also an opportunity for Christians to rediscover the unique consolations and challenges that our faith has to offer in the last quarter of life.

Churches in North America are graying even faster than the general American population. Though there are few explicit resources in Scripture for aging, the Christian faith has the capacity to find fresh meaning in the last decades of our life cycle. After interviews and visits in dozens of congregations for whom ministry with the

aging is a major part of their mission, I believe that Christians can prepare for the predictable crises of aging and that congregational leaders can be key to that preparation.

The Christian is commissioned to give testimony throughout the entire life cycle—including retirement, aging, sickness, and death—that God is faithful all the days of our lives. We can retire from our careers but not from discipleship; the church has a responsibility to equip us for discipleship in the last years of our lives. Even though growing old usually includes some painful events, the Christian faith can enable us to live through both the joys and the anguish of aging with confidence and hope.

Those who care for, work with, preach to, and counsel the exploding aging population need help to understand the aging process and its predictable crises as well as theological resources for speaking to aging persons and helping them to conceive of and negotiate the crises of growing old. This book hopes to help people answer the question, “Where is God leading me in this time of life?”

Some of us in my generation of aging Americans are the first to have the extraordinary financial resources that enabled us to retire earlier than ever imaginable for previous generations. For others, unaffordable health care, poverty, housing insecurity, and painful dislocation fill their last years with anxiety and fear. Many find that they are unprepared intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually for those years. Personal resolve and positive attitudes cannot rescue the aging from systemic injustices that make their last years of life anything but golden. This book is written to help Christians—the young who care for the aging and who are themselves preparing to age as well as those entering into and living through aging—think like Christians about elderhood and to see their congregations as ideal locations for ministry with and for the aging.

The median age of my own denomination is now sixty-two. “If you plan to be a Methodist preacher,” I recently told a group of seminarians, “learn to love ministry with the elderly.” Caring for and caring about, working with and understanding better, and offering compassionate support for the elderly and their caregivers have become a major mission opportunity. This book intends to offer biblical and theological reflection in conversation with some of the latest

research on aging to provide specific, practical steps for congregations to engage in elder ministry. I hope that you will read this book as my joyful testimony that though working for and with Jesus can be daunting at any time of life, his light is our life and in his service is our joy, particularly toward the end of our lives.

Thanks to Carsten Bryant, who helped with the research and editing, and to Jason Byassee, who asked me for the book. My goal? To assist Christians to love God by honoring their elders and to help us prepare for aging like Christians so that we can die holy deaths.

Aging with Scripture

The most expensive advertisements on the nightly news tout drugs for the aging. Some drugs promise relief for the aches, pains, and illnesses of aging; other drugs swear they can stem the effects of growing old. In these ads, older adults appear peddling bicycles, bungee jumping, or gleefully splashing about in the pool with their grandkids. “Grow old along with me! / The best is yet to be.”¹ We wish the exaggerated claims of these advertisements were true because when people are asked what comes to mind when they hear the term *growing old*, the majority respond not with words about golden years but with talk of loss, loneliness, dependency, grief, sadness, abandonment, dementia, and regret.

Somewhere between bungee jumping and despondent loneliness lies the truth of old age.

As Christians, we gather weekly in order to bend our lives toward an ancient text, a collection of writings that we believe to be strong evidence that God has graciously condescended toward us. Yet when we search the Scriptures, we find that the Bible’s verdict on human aging is ambiguous.

Aging in the Old Testament

Well into his retirement, Billy Graham wrote a little book, *Nearing Home: Life, Faith, and Finishing Well*, in which he assembled his

favorite Scripture passages related to aging.² While he found 175 references to elders in the Bible, even one so adept with the Bible as Graham had a tough time finding explicit biblical material that helps us think about elderhood—people didn't live very long in Bible times. There's also a theological reason for Scripture's relative lack of interest in aging: Israel and the church didn't place much stress on different ages and stages of life. Aging and dying were considered to be natural, expected, even providential processes that were ordained and guided by God rather than discrete chronological stages of human development.

It's possible that our negative and unrealistic attitudes about aging—as displayed in those pharmaceutical ads—are evidence of the North American church's cultural captivity, of Christians' capitulation to the mores and values of a culture that's not Christian. In a death-denial society, we the aging tell the young a tough truth even without intending to do so: we are everyone's future, whether they want to face it or not.

Graham notes that some Scripture passages look at longevity as God's reward for a life well lived. Proverbs 16:31 calls gray hair "a crown of glory" that "is found on the path of righteousness." The young have a duty to esteem their long-lived elders: "Honor your father and your mother so that your life will be long on the fertile land that the LORD your God is giving you" (Exod. 20:12).

Yet there is another side to old age. Graham calls Ecclesiastes 12:1–8 "one of the most poetic (and yet candid) descriptions in all literature of old-age."³ I less charitably characterize this passage as beautiful but brutal.

Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no pleasure in them"; before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return with the rain; in the day when the guards of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the women who grind cease working because they are few, and those who look through the windows see dimly; when the doors on the street are shut, and the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low; when one is afraid of heights, and terrors are in the road; the

almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails; because all must go to their eternal home, and the mourners will go about the streets; before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher; all is vanity. (NRSV)

“Remember your creator in the days of your youth” sounds like the advice of the old to the young. Attend the church youth group, study Scripture every day, and obey God’s statutes when you are young because your youthful commitments are determinative of your later faith. But then Ecclesiastes puts forth a more somber reason to be with God in youth: “Before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, ‘I have no pleasure in them’; before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return with the rain” (12:1–2 NRSV).

Though Graham doesn’t even note these verses, Ecclesiastes is not the cheeriest view of old age by a long shot. Ecclesiastes characterizes the supposedly golden years as “days of trouble” in which, when the sky turns dark and the light is dim, we are likely to look on the joys of earlier days and say, “I have no pleasure in them.” Kids, remember your creator when you are young because when you are old, you will despise God. What a thought to lay on the young!

Ecclesiastes also waxes grimly poetic in describing the aging body: “the guards of the house tremble” (that is, your hands palsy), “the strong men are bent” (your weak legs get crooked), “the women who grind cease working because they are few” (your teeth fall out), “those who look through the windows see dimly” (you are blind), “the doors on the street are shut” (you are lonely), “the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird” (you never get a good night’s rest), “all the daughters of song are brought low” (your voice is weak and trembling), “one is afraid of heights, and terrors are in the road” (you are timid and fearful), “the almond tree blossoms” (your hair is white), “the grasshopper drags itself along” (you creak and stumble around), “desire fails” (need I spell this one out?), “and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath

returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, all is vanity.”

I’m grateful that the canon kept the wisdom of Ecclesiastes, refusing to sugarcoat some of the realities of aging. Heap honor and gratitude on aging all you want, but you haven’t told the truth about aging until you have done business with Ecclesiastes 12 and the Teacher’s characterization of the troubled days.

Better think about God and the blessings of life when you are young because when the “days of trouble come” you may not want to be around God. These melancholy words from Ecclesiastes imply that more preparation is required for the rigors of aging than the accumulation of a hefty 401(k).

Aging in the New Testament

This negative side to the ambiguity of aging in the Old Testament seems less pronounced in the New Testament. While older adults are few in the Gospels or the letters of Paul, the elderly are major actors in the opening of Luke’s Gospel. Luke believes that we can’t get to the babe of Bethlehem without being led there by old people such as the priest Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, a childless older couple who are “very old” (Luke 1:7). The angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah and promises that Elizabeth will bear a son named John, bumping her from the geriatric ward to the maternity ward. Even in her old age, God calls this woman into faithful service. Zechariah finds this promise incredible due to their advanced age, but—wonder of wonders—embarrassed Elizabeth gives birth. Even though Elizabeth is old, she is the very first character in Luke’s story to be “filled with the Holy Spirit” (v. 41). Elders become God’s inspired instruments, commissioned interpreters to the Virgin Mary.

Next Luke introduces us to old Simeon and Anna, who welcome Jesus to the temple (2:25–38). Simeon hopes for the deliverance of Israel from oppression and, upon seeing the infant Jesus, proclaims Jesus as the chosen one who is the Deliverer. Throughout Luke, people have difficulty understanding who Jesus is and what he is up to. Is Simeon’s astute perception of Jesus and Jesus’s identity a function

of the wisdom he has accrued over the years? Does Simeon see the child as God's rebuke to those who have given up hope for deliverance? Are older folks the first to get the astounding news of Jesus's birth because after many decades of living they are now unsurprised by the stunts of God?

Both Zechariah and Elizabeth and Simeon and Anna embody wisdom and insight—some gained through past experience, some as gift of the Holy Spirit. They are presented by Luke as prophets who point younger folks toward the future with expectation and hope. By the grace of God, they publicly, hopefully testify about tomorrow. Might Luke be suggesting that rather than being stuck in the past and unable to adjust to change, older adults who have been well-formed in the faith have a radical openness to the future and wise discernment of the times?

While many of us elders value continuity, tradition, and stability, it is striking that Luke connects older people to the possibility of unanticipated divine intervention. They have many years on them, but they point toward God's radical new future, as in, "Your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams" (Acts 2:17 NRSV). In the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the elderly are called to be dreamers. The Holy Spirit is a gift that keeps pointing the elderly toward visions of tomorrow rather than leaving them to wallow in memories of yesterday.

The Pastoral Epistles depict the early church as a place of respect for and honor of elders. First Timothy 5:1 says, "Do not rebuke an older man but exhort him as you would a father" (RSV). There are also specific directives to the community to provide assistance to widows. While the church owes elders honor and respect, it is noteworthy that responsible discipleship is expected from the elders. Older men like me, when necessary, can be exhorted. Widows are directed to devote themselves to prayer, hospitality, and service of the afflicted (vv. 3–16)—not only to be served but also to serve. Elders are called to be paradigms of faith and role models (Titus 2:2–5), teaching, counseling, and offering what guidance they can. Clearly, the New Testament authors consider elders to be worthy of special care yet still under Christ's vocational mandate to follow him as responsible agents.

After looking over the New Testament material on aging, Duke's Richard and Judith Hays note what is *not* said about older people in the New Testament: "Nowhere in the biblical canon are they pitied, patronized, or treated with condescension. Nowhere is growing old itself described as a problem. Nowhere are the eldest described as pitiable, irrelevant, or behind the curve, as inactive or unproductive. Nowhere are they, as in so many Western dramas and narratives, lampooned as comic figures."⁴

Even more remarkable, the New Testament, while calling death "the last enemy" (1 Cor. 15:26), does not consider death the worst thing that can happen to old people. The Hayses say that Jesus's death at an early age (he was no more than thirty-six) stands as a permanent reminder that fidelity is more important than longevity and that there is something worse than not living to a ripe old age.⁵ Infidelity is a sin; mortality is not.

While long years are a blessing (Prov. 16:31; 20:29), a long life is not an inherent right, nor can it be the supreme goal of life. God, the giver of life, may call us to surrender our lives. The way of discipleship in the name of Jesus may not lead to a fruitful retirement but to the cross (Mark 8:34–38; Luke 14:25–27). I know a pastor who, on the verge of retirement, has been appointed to serve the most divided, difficult congregation of his entire ministry. Though his plan was to retire next year, he has committed to the bishop to stay at his post (in his words) "until this church gets healed of its craziness or I drop dead." I have many friends who, having enjoyed good health for most of their lives, are straining to offer a positive witness to the world even while under the burden of pain and sickness at the end of their lives. Discipleship, the way of the cross, is not for the faint of heart of any age.

Aging as Vocation

Researchers into successful aging stress the importance of seeing our last third of life as a time of continuing change and development. Some of these developments are necessitated by changing bodies and economic circumstances; others are precipitated by shifting social and familial relationships. Yet it's important for Christians to note

that some of the change and development that's required in our last years is instigated by a living God who keeps calling us to witness, to testify, and to continue to walk the narrow way of discipleship. In John 3, we meet a man named Nicodemus who comes to Jesus by night. Though John doesn't tell us Nicodemus's specific age, when Nicodemus questions how a man can be born when he is old, Jesus responds that the Holy Spirit is able to provide new birth even among the aging. One is never too old to be rebirthed, made young again, sent on outrageous errands, or discombobulated by the Holy Spirit.

Because God isn't "the God of the dead but of the living" (Mark 12:27), our lives are subject not only to chronology and the possibility of mental and physical incapacity but also to a God who thinks nothing of constantly calling ordinary people—of any age—to follow him. A key question for each Christian is, "What is God doing in my life now?" Or more to the point of vocation, "What does God expect from me and to what tasks am I now being assigned?"

The God of the Bible who called people late in life—Elizabeth and Zechariah, Abraham and Sarah—keeps calling. Simeon blesses the young holy family and yet speaks a hard truth to Mary concerning the future of her son (Luke 2:34–35). Simeon and Anna show a boldness that characterizes some older people who, after a lifetime of responsible caution—keeping a job, being an example to their children—are now free to use their remaining precious time telling the truth—that is, being God's prophets. Though Anna is a person of great age, she is a truth-telling prophet in her last years. Perhaps this is the blessed, fruitful old age promised by the psalmist: "In old age they still produce fruit" (Ps. 92:14 NRSV).

Stuck in jail, Paul calls himself an old man, but still he expressed hope that he would be released for the express purpose of continuing his missionary vocation (Phil. 1:19, 22). This lifetime quality of divine vocation may explain why the only explicit reference to retirement in the Bible concerns the members of the tribe of Levi, who assisted in Israel's worship and began their work at age twenty, "and from the age of fifty years they shall retire from the duty of the service and serve no more" (Num. 8:25 NRSV). Though my colleagues can encourage me to retire from active teaching, no one can excuse me from my vocation except the one who called me.

The psalmist prays not for long life but for life long enough to tell future generations the truth about God:

So even to old age and gray hairs,
 O God, do not forsake me,
 until I proclaim your might
 to all the generations to come. (Ps. 71:18 NRSV)

Billy Graham pointed me to an elder I'd never heard of: old Barzillai, who, at great risk to himself, provided food and shelter for King David and his men (2 Sam. 17:27–29). In gratitude for Barzillai's hospitality, David invited the old man to spend the rest of his days in the king's palace. Barzillai refused the king's hospitality, pleading, "How many years do I have left that I should go up with the king to Jerusalem? I am now 80 years old. Do I know what is good or bad anymore? Can your servant taste what I eat or drink? Can I even hear the voices of men or women singers? Why should your servant be a burden to my master and king?" (19:34–35). Barzillai was old enough to provide help to the king but too old (and too wise in his old age) to find much enjoyment in the king's palatial comforts.

Scripture is honest about the dependency that usually comes with old age, but I'm unsure if that dependency is viewed negatively or positively. As Jesus said to Peter, "Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go" (John 21:18 RSV). This is probably a prophecy of martyrdom for Peter as an old man, but it can more generally apply to the rest of us. Aging requires a person to "stretch out your hands" and ask for help from others as well as to submit to be carried "where you do not wish to go." Dependency on the kindness of others is a curse only in a world that worships self-sufficiency.

Martha Nussbaum, one of our greatest living philosophers, says that in a culture that adulates youth, bodily perfection, potency, and independence, is it a wonder that the aged are the subject of "widespread, indeed, virtually universal, social stigma"?⁶ *The Cambridge Handbook of Age and Ageing* criticizes our culture's bleak stereotypes of aging as a mere social construction "reflecting negative

beliefs and attitudes about old age rather than any valid objective evidence concerning the quality of life of older people or their ability to make a positive contribution to society. . . . Ageism, then, refers to a process of collective stereotyping which emphasizes the negative features of ageing which are ultimately traced back to biomedical ‘decline,’ rather than backed up by empirical research.”⁷

A negative view of elderhood does not come from Christian Scripture but is among the many cultural accommodations that the North American church has made to American culture. Ageism, like sexism or racism, is not only a social construction; it’s a sin to be confessed.

John Calvin famously spoke of Scripture as the lens through which Christians look at ourselves and the world.⁸ The ambiguity, the truthfulness, and the peculiarity of biblical views on aging speak to us of the distinctiveness of the church’s witness on elderhood. The church ought to articulate and underscore the disparity between how Christians talk about the last years of life and how the world characterizes aging. We must demonstrate, in our congregational life, the difference that Christ makes in the way we age and in how we relate to and engage in ministry to and with the aging.

I have an acquaintance, a distinguished biologist who retired after a lifetime of teaching and research. I was surprised when he called me and said, “I need a suggestion of a good, readable biblical commentary. I was quite an enthusiastic young Christian, active in campus religious groups during college. But then there was graduate school, followed by my first teaching position. My wife never cared much for church. I drifted away, became focused on other matters. Now that I’m retired, I’ve got time to think more deeply about things. I want to read systematically through the Bible, paying closer attention and spending more time with some parts of it. Can you suggest a commentary that would help me?”

It’s wrong to focus too much on the losses of aging without also noting the gains, such as the gift of “time to think more deeply about things.” When we Christians go to Scripture, it’s not usually to find answers to specific questions like, “How can I endure the last decades of my life?” Rather, we live with Scripture, regularly spending time with the stories of God with us, not primarily as a rule book or a set of answers but rather as an old friend, a companion on life’s journey.

As with any old friend, we are patient with the friend's retelling of stories they have told us before. Sometimes there is joy in hearing familiar words that are beloved all the more for their familiarity. We delight to find passages that spoke to us during one stage of our lives speak differently now. Or we are surprised by biblical characters we failed to notice in previous trips through Scripture. (Have you noted either Simeon's or Anna's age on your previous encounters with the story of the nativity?)

We speak of a biblical "passage." Through Scripture, we travel from one place to another, guided, enticed, and urged on by the text. As we make our passage into and through elderhood, the Bible, once spoken of quaintly as "the Book of the Ages," can be a trustworthy guide and companion.