



**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School**

1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

(920)261-2570

A Stephen Ministry Congregation

[www.goodshepherdwi.org](http://www.goodshepherdwi.org)

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**Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost      November 12, 2017**

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**“The Winter of Our Years”**

*(Eccl.12:1-7)*

Rev. David K. Groth

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...  
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

**Collect:** Lord God, heavenly Father, send forth Your Son to lead home His bride, the Church, that with all the company of the redeemed we may finally enter into His eternal wedding feast; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

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Just about every Wednesday around 4:45 pm, if you were to stand outside my confirmation class, you would hear a chorus of 17 eighth graders groan. These are the ritual groans of protest as I assign their memory work for the eighth-grade confirmation class, usually three passages from the Bible. Something similar happens in all the classrooms of Good Shepherd Lutheran School which has a memory curriculum for all grades. We want the kids to have a treasure trove of passages they own for themselves, passages that will stay with them to one degree or another and shape their faith.

David Lehmann, editor of “The Oxford Book of American Poetry”, and professor at New York University, requires his students to memorize one poem each week. They complain about it, he says, but “they will almost certainly learn more about a Shakespearean sonnet . . . by committing it to memory than by writing a paper analyzing its structure. . . . “There is no surer way to possess a poem” he says, “than to learn it by heart” (Wall Street Journal, April 7, 2006). Similarly, when you commit biblical passages to memory, there is a sense in which you own that passage. It’s yours. It belongs to you. No one can take it away. “Impress them on your children” says Deuteronomy 6. “Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (v.7).

Our Old Testament passage today exhorts the same: “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth.” Remember the one on whom you are totally dependant for health and life. Remember him, even when you’re young and feeling invincible, because you’re not invincible, and days are coming when that will be readily obvious.

That's the point of our Old Testament lesson from Ecclesiastes chapter 12. We'll take it verse by verse, so it may be helpful to have it open in front of you. What we have before us is a striking poem about old age. It stirs up some vivid aspects of aging, and it teases us as well, with allusions we can scarcely understand. The trick here is not to parse every phrase and force every detail. Don't treat it as a cryptogram, something written in code language. Treat it as a graceful poem.

Verse one: "Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, 'I find no pleasure in them.'"

I like to watch the evening news while preparing dinner, and of course it is broken up by plenty of commercials targeting older adults. Lots of pharmaceutical companies peddling their products while beautifully fit older people happily ride bikes on leaf strewn paths, or swim laps or just sit in outdoor bathtubs watching the sun set.

Question: when's the last time you ever pulled two bathtubs out into the back yard? The subliminal message is, "Just take these pills and life will be so pleasant for you in your elderly years." It's hardly a wonder that we have a drug problem in this country!

Every age has its blessings, and so does old age. The Bible recognizes these. Proverbs 17 says "Grandchildren are the crown of the aged." But the Bible also holds no punches about old age and death. "Dust you are" declares the Lord, "and to dust you shall return." There's no avoiding it, and that process of decay begins while we're still living as things wear out and break down. It hurts and it slows us down and erodes our interests and enthusiasm.

Remember your creator . . . verse 2, "before the sun and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain." As we age our physical and mental faculties usually fade. Many lights grow dim, including our reason and all our senses. Besides these, one by one, old friends are taken, and family members. Cherished customs, traditions and hobbies become too difficult. "The stars grow dim." All

this takes place when we no longer have the resilience of youth, when we no longer bounce back from an illness like we used to. And so, poignantly, our text says, “the clouds return after the rain.” There comes a time in our lives where more things are taken away than given.

It goes on. Old age “makes strong men stoop” which is when we go to orthopedic doctors and chiropractors. In old age “the grinders cease because they are few”, which is why we go to dentists and wear dentures. In old age, “Those looking through the windows grow dim,” which is when optometrists become important.

Verse 4, “men rise up at the sound of the birds, but all their songs grow faint” which seems almost cruel. We often become light sleepers in old age, and though we experience hearing loss, even the muted singing of birds will wake us.

As the senses fail to interact with the world, one begins to feel no longer part of the world. Diminishing eye sight separates us from things, bad knees separate us from experiences, hearing loss separates us from people. It all takes a toll.

Verse 5 adds a new dimension to old age, describing it as the time “when men are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets.” Real fears because when you’re unsteady on your feet, it’s much easier to fall or to be jostled in a crowd, or victimized.

And then comes a cluster of metaphors: Remember him before “the almond tree blossoms.” When the almond tree blossoms it’s covered by pale, white flowers, suggestive of the white hair of age. Remember him before the grasshopper drags himself along.” In the heat of summer, grasshoppers are so lively and alert. There’s no sneaking up on them. But the cold air of late fall slows them down; you can nudge one with the toe of your shoe and it will only take a step or two and then quit.

The end of verse 5 says “remember him before desire fails. What the Hebrew actually says, which is, “before the caper-berry fails” which was their little blue pill.

At the end of this verse, the flow of metaphors is interrupted by some plain, unvarnished truth. “Then man goes to his eternal home and mourners go to the streets.”

Verse 6: “Remember him, before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken.” At the time, lamps were in the shape of bowls with a wick drawing from the oil within. The most precious of lamps were gilded with gold and suspended by a silver chain. But if just one of those links fails, the whole thing falls and shatters. The human body, as beautiful as it can be, is also fragile and vulnerable. One little malady can cause the dominos to start falling.

Remember him “before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well.” That is, remember him before everything starts breaking down. Don’t assume you’ll have the time to do your spiritual preparations shortly before death. That never works out very well, because when you’re really sick, you don’t want to do anything. So, remember him before that time, when you’re still young.

A number of Thanksgivings ago, the family converged on the home of Uncle Dave and Aunt Betty. My brother Paul was there, and by far he’s the naughtiest one of the litter. Paul got his hands on Uncle Dave’s smart phone. He opened Uncle Dave’s calendar, and started filling it up with medical appointments, one after another. Never did a guy have more appointments in short order with a proctologist than poor, old Uncle Dave. Then, in customary fashion, Paul saved the changes, returned the phone from whence he found it, and quietly went about the day. Days later, he got a call from Uncle Dave who was still laughing, and said, “At my age, there are enough of those appointments as it is without you adding half a dozen more!”

And he’s right, isn’t he? There comes a time when our calendars fill up more with medical appointments than anything else. Remember your Creator before those days come, so that you’ll be ready for them. You’ll know what you believe and why. You’ll know who you are and whose you are. Don’t wait. Remember him while yet young, because what we learn as children will be what we remember

as adults. [Hear that children?] What we learn as children will be what we remember as adults. Therefore, remember him in the days of your youth. Or as Jesus told the adults around him, “Let the little children come to me, and do not forbid them.”

Now, who of us can say we did a sufficient job of remembering our creator in the days of our youth? I know I can't. I was distracted and busy, pursuing other interests. How good to be reminded that though we forget him, he remembers us. In Isaiah he promises the same. “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion for the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will never forget you. See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands” (Is. 49). One of the passages I always have my confirmation class memorize is from Psalm 103: “As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.” That is, he knows and remembers how vulnerable and fragile life really is for us. He remembers how we were formed and what we're made of . . . stuff that will eventually break down into dust. And all this memory of his stirs up his compassion. He does not, in fact, deal with us according to our sin, but according to his compassion and love.

And so, his memory prompts action. He didn't just sit there and say, “How sad!” No, he got moving, but not in ways anyone expected. Though invincible, he became vulnerable and fragile for us. Though almighty he became as delicate as a new born infant for us. Though immortal, he became mortal. He knows first-hand the days of trouble. He knows first-hand the discomforts that annoy.

And those last hours in Jerusalem, he wasn't just play-acting. Heaving the cross towards Calvary, he is the strong man who “stoops” under the crushing weight of our sin. He is the grasshopper who drags himself along. Because we have failed to impress his words on our children, the crown of thorns was impressed on him, and his body onto the cross. On the cross, he is a relic of former glory, and all alone.

Even the Father has forsaken him. On the cross, the only thing given him is gall on a sponge, and our sin on his back. Everything else is taken away. His clothing, his dignity, his strength, the Father's love. Our God knows what it is to experience your organs shutting down, one after another. The sun, moon and stars grew dark. There on the cross, the silver chain broke and the gilded bowl shattered. The pitcher lay crushed at the spring, the wheel lay broken at the well, and mourners went about the streets.

Our Lord remembered how vulnerable we were to sin, death and the devil, and that memory of his compelled him to die on a cross for us. Any God who does that is not going to ignore us in our youth or forget about us in our old age.

So, in the winter of your years, don't despair. Trust . . . trust in the promise of Spring. Trust that at his command and by his grace . . . up and out of the dust . . . this time imperishable. Amen.

