

## **MY WHOLE LIFE LONG**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

*When I get older, losing my hair,  
Many years from now.  
Will you still be sending me a valentine,  
Birthday greetings, bottle of wine?  
If I'd been out till quarter to three,  
Would you lock the door?  
Will you still need me, will you still feed me,  
When I'm sixty-four?*

That Beatles' song was the first song recorded for the 1967 album Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. The original plan was to release "When I'm 64" as the B-side to "Strawberry Fields Forever" or "Penny Lane." Eventually those two songs were released as a double A-side single and "When I'm 64" was included on Sgt. Pepper's.

Did you know that Paul McCartney wrote "When I'm 64" when he was 16 years old in 1958? When the Beatles were still known as The Quarrymen, they would sometimes play "When I'm 64" when their amps overheated after a long playlist. They would gather around a piano and sing this song. Some people think Paul McCartney was inspired to include the song on Sgt. Pepper's because his father, Jim McCartney, had turned sixty-four a few months before the album was recorded. [It's interesting to note that Sir Paul will be **74** in June!]

"When I get older, losing my hair, many years from now . . . Will you still need me, will you still feed me when I'm sixty-four?" In those bouncy lyrics in which a young man asks his girlfriend if she'll stick with him through the years, I heard echoes of the psalmist's cry to the Lord: "Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength is spent. . . O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds. 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." (Psalm 71:9, 17-18)

If the psalmist were to channel Paul McCartney and ask the Lord, "Will you still need me, will you still feed me when I'm sixty-four?" he answers his own question throughout his psalm:

- \* For you are my rock and my fortress
- \* For you, O Lord, are my hope
- \* For you are my trust, O Lord, from my youth

- \* O God, from my youth you have taught me
- \* You will increase my honor and comfort me once again
- \* I will praise you for your faithfulness
- \* My lips will shout for joy when I sing praises to you; my soul also, which you have rescued.

Thursday morning I sat down in my study to write this sermon. I turned on Pandora Radio on my computer and put it on a station I had created called “Communion Song Radio.” As I got ready to write the sermon, I bowed my head and prayed to God to help me as I worked. As I prayed, there was some music playing in the background, but I can’t tell you what song was playing. However, as I repeated that simple prayer two or three times, all of a sudden I realized the words to the song on Pandora were crystal clear. Here is the song by Steven Curtis Chapman that was playing:

*As I look back on the road I've traveled,  
I see so many times He carried me through;  
And if there's one thing that I've learned in my life,  
My Redeemer is faithful and true.  
My Redeemer is faithful and true.*

*My Redeemer is faithful and true.  
Everything He has said He will do,  
And every morning His mercies are new.  
My Redeemer is faithful and true.*

*My heart rejoices when I read the promise  
'There is a place I am preparing for you.'  
I know someday I'll see my Lord face to face,  
'Cause my Redeemer is faithful and true.  
My Redeemer is faithful and true.*

*And in every situation He has proved His love to me;  
When I lack the understanding, He gives more grace to me.*

I picked our final hymn to serve as something of an answer to the psalmist’s plea to the Lord, “Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength is spent . . . So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me.”

“I Was There to Hear Your Burning Cry” has been described as “a love song to humanity” which “gives us a sense of the timelessness of God . . . The spirit of ‘Burning Cry’ is one of a God who loved us from the beginning of time and continues to love us throughout the seasons of our life.”<sup>1</sup> The song was written to accompany a video series about baptism in the Lutheran Church. The note at the bottom of Hymn #488 in our

hymnbook says, “this hymn speaks in the imagined conversational voice of God, assuring the person being baptized of God’s presence throughout the changing stages of life.”

*I was there to hear your burning cry;  
I'll be there when you are old.  
I rejoiced the day you were baptized to see your life unfold.  
I was there when you were but a child  
with a faith to suit you well;  
in a blaze of light you wandered off to find where demons dwell.*

*When you heard the wonder of the Word,  
I was there to cheer you on.  
You were raised to praise the living Lord to whom you now belong.  
If you find someone to share your time and you join your hearts as one,  
I'll be there to make your verses rhyme from dusk to rising sun.*

*In the middle ages of your life, not too old, no longer young,  
I'll be there to guide you through the night, complete what I've begun.  
When the evening gently closes in and you shut your weary eyes,  
I'll be there as I have always been with just one more surprise.*

*I was there to hear your burning cry;  
I'll be there when you are old.  
I rejoiced the day you were baptized to see your life unfold.*

On Tuesday, I sat down with my Bible and a blank legal pad. I decided to do a slow reading of Psalm 71 and jot down the words and phrases that spoke to me. I didn’t really intend to outline the psalm, but that’s what I ended up doing, in a sense. As I looked back over what I had written down, I noticed two things.

First, the psalmist is very honest in his talk with God. There is absolutely no sense that just because he believes in and trusts in God, he is somehow spared the problems of life. He prays,

- \* Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress to save me.
- \* In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me.
- \* Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel.
- \* My enemies speak concerning me, [because they think you have forsaken me].
- \* Let my accusers be put to shame . . . let those who seek to hurt me be covered with scorn and disgrace.

\* You who have made me see many troubles and calamities will  
    revive me again; from the depths of the earth you will bring me  
    up again.

Second, again and again the psalmist returns to praise the Lord.

\* My praise is continually for you.

\* My mouth is filled with your praise, and with your glory all day  
    long.

\* But I will hope continually, and will praise you yet more and more.

\* I will come praising the mighty deeds of the Lord God, I will praise  
    your righteousness, yours alone.

\* I will also praise you with the harp for your faithfulness, O God;  
    I will sing praises to you with the lyre, O Holy One of Israel.

\* My lips will shout for joy when I sing praises to you.

\* All day long my tongue will talk of your righteous help.

The framework of the psalm is Praise to the Lord. That framework of praise and trust is what sees the psalmist through the long-haul of life. And we all know that in the long-haul of life, we will cry out to God many times, “Rescue me, O my God, save me, do not be far from me, help me!” No matter how old you are, you may find yourself crying to God, “Do not cast me off, do not forsake me.”

Each time the psalmist asks the Lord for help, the psalmist also makes a sturdy statement of hope and trust in what the Lord has done and can do. As someone has said, “Praise becomes an ongoing, continual action of living a sacrificial life of worship. Whatever we do in word, action, thought, or deed is to reflect the goodness of the God in whom we place our hope and trust.”

There is a story about William Preston Few, the first president of Duke University, who oversaw the school’s transition from Trinity College. President Few was walking to church one Sunday in the pouring rain. A group of students passed by him in a car, recognized who he was, and offered him a ride, which he accepted. When President Few got in the car, the students asked him why he had decided to go to church on such a miserable day. He replied, “I did not decide to go to church THIS MORNING. I decided more than fifty years ago, and I have not had to ask myself the question since then.” It was a regular part of his life. It was what he did.<sup>2</sup>

That story about President Few walking through the rain to praise the Lord seems to be a good parable about trusting and praising the Lord my whole life long. There will be miserable, rainy days in our lives — literally and figuratively. When you get soaked to the skin, when you feel like you’re going under for the third time, when you cry out to God, “Rescue me!” you can remember that God has always been there for you — from your burning cry — and that God has promised to be there for you always — whether you’re 4 or 64 or 94!

Sometimes older folks say to me, “I wonder why I’m still here. What purpose do I have?” That is a heartfelt question, the same question the psalmist seems to be asking. But that question doesn’t come just from gray headed people looking back over their

long lives. Every stage of life has its challenges. At any stage along the way, you can feel like your strength is spent. You might wonder “What purpose do I have?”

One thing you can say about the psalms — they are quite honest and open about the way life is. Our psalm today deals with that very question — “What purpose do I have?” — and the fear that comes along with it, the fear that somehow God has forgotten about us. But the psalmist is like President Few walking to church through the rain. He decided long ago to hope and trust in the Lord — not because his life never has any challenges or rain, but because he knows he can depend on the Lord even when life is soaking him through to the skin.

Here’s a version of Psalm 71 written by Silvia Purdie. As I read it, listen for the alternating voices, old and young, in each line. It begins with an older person.

All my life long you have been with me.

When I was born and took my first breath, you held me.

All through the years I have leaned on you.

Through all the years ahead I will lean on you.

When I was young you taught me.

When I grow old you will bless me.

I remember all you have done for me.

I will tell everyone how great you are!

It hasn’t always been easy. People have attacked me.

It isn’t always easy. Some problems seem really big.

But I hope continually. I trust and keep on trusting.

I sing and keep on singing.

My lips will shout for joy, my soul also, for you have rescued me.

I will play the guitar and the drums, to praise you loudly!

I will put your love into words for anyone who will listen.

Your power and glory reaches from high above to deep below.

Your saving grace reaches from before we were born to our very last breath, and beyond.

Holy One, wonderful God, we praise you!

Holy One, marvelous Lord, we praise you!

***Let us pray: Great is your faithfulness! Great is your faithfulness! Morning by morning, new mercies we see. All we have needed your hand has provided. Great is your faithfulness, Lord unto us! Amen.***

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>C. Michael Hawn, “History of Hymns: ‘I Was There to Hear Your Burning Cry,’” Discipleship Ministries, The United Methodist Church at [www.umcdiscipleship.org](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org).

<sup>2</sup>This illustration is taken from a sermon by Rev. Alex Evans, Second Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA, “Reckless, Faithful, Cheerful Generosity,” October 25, 2015.