Sunday, October 24, 1999
UNIMPAIRED VISION
Deuteronomy 34:1-12

There are many disorders that seem to affect human beings, especially as we grow older. One disorder that Moses did not have was “vision deficit disorder,” whether physical or mental. Here’s how the Bible describes him at the end of his life: “Moses was 120 years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired, and his vigor had not abated.” (Deuteronomy 34:7)

A modern translation would be: “Moses didn’t need glasses, contact lenses, or Viagra.” But, as we shall discuss later in this sermon, the language of the Bible is often metaphorical. This description of Moses suggests that even though he was very old in years, his vision for the future was still optimistic, and his energy for life remained strong. He continued to be open to learning new things. He was old in years but not in spirit.

As I grow older, one thing I appreciate more and more about the Bible is that its stories do not carry a prejudice toward longer-living people but rather the opposite. Abraham and Sarah were an old couple when they had their first child and then their second. Then, when they were much older than most of us, God asked them to pull up stakes and move to a new country, and they were not afraid to do so. The heroes and heroines in the Bible accomplish the most in the later years of their lives. That’s good news for all of us.

Moses is an excellent example. According to tradition, during his youth, he lived as an Egyptian prince, pampered and privileged in Pharaoh’s house. In midlife, Moses worked hard tending sheep, raising a family, and being a member of a busy community. Not until he had appropriately aged and matured did God call Moses into his most active service. In his third stage of life, Moses became a servant of God, unlike few others ever known.

I can remember not too many years ago when there was a popular saying in our country: “Never trust anyone over thirty.” I don’t hear that declaration as much as I used to. Maybe that’s because the fastest-growing segment of our population is made up of people over 65. People are living longer. In less than one century, there has been an astonishing 50 percent-plus increase in longevity. I’m told that centenarians are the fastest-growing segment of the population percentage-wise. By some accounts, the life expectancy of a child born today is expected to be well over 90.

We’re discovering that we need new institutions for the longer-living. “Assisted-living” apartments, senior centers, adult day-care facilities, and other new institutions that are meeting the needs of longer-living people were not heard of too many years ago.

There are also negative dimensions to longer-living. Physically and mentally, we are concerned about high blood pressure, heart failure, cancer, memory loss, and the decline of physical stamina.

As we learn more about taking care of our physical and mental health, there is also some positive news. In a new book, The Myth of the First Three Years, with the subtitle, A New Understanding of Early Brain Development and Lifelong Learning, by John T. Bruer, the author claims that some of the most exciting discoveries in neuroscience are that the brain develops throughout life and that brain structure is continually affected by experience. According to this author, neuroscientists once believed that lost neurons could not regenerate, but now it turns

out that sometimes they can. “The brain is not ‘cooked’ by age 3 or 10,” according to this new book. “Our brains remain remarkably plastic, and we retain the ability to learn throughout our lives.” In other words, you can teach an old dog new tricks.

That was certainly true of Moses, according to the stories in the Bible. His life, his positive vision of the future, his leadership, and his growing faith and understanding of God all tell us that, like Moses, there are a lot of good gifts that can be ours as we grow older. This is especially true if we have an abiding and open faith in the living God.

In his book The Gifts of the Jews, author Thomas Cahill maintains that one of the most unique and precious gifts from the Jews to all of us is their belief that, with the help and guidance of God, life can be made better. As Cahill traces the history and developing faith in God of the Hebrews, as seen in the examples of Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Miriam, Amos, Isaiah, Naomi, and Ruth, the growing concept of an unknown future that can be better takes hold, and western civilization is born.

From this insight, the Jews evolved a new vision of men and women with unique destinies — a vision that thousands of years later inspired the Declaration of Independence, our hopeful belief in progress, and the sense that tomorrow can be better than today. Our whole educational system and all scientific research is built on this principle.

This was the unimpaired vision of the future that inspired Jesus and still is the foundation of the church today. It’s what inspired leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. in his “I Have A Dream” speech.

Here’s part of what he said: “Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair.”

“In spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal.’ I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

Five years later, in another speech in 1968, not long before Martin Luther King Jr. was killed, he recalled the story from Deuteronomy where Moses is allowed to see the promised land but will never enter it. Dr. King spoke of being on a mountain and seeing the promised land of the future as he envisioned it.

Prior to Abraham, Sarah, Moses, and later Jesus of Nazareth, human beings saw life primarily as being part of an endless cycle of birth and death. Time was perceived as a wheel, spinning ceaselessly, never altering its course. Tomorrow could never be better than today. Cyclical religion goes nowhere because within its comprehension, there is no future as we have come to understand it, only the next revolution of the wheel. Human beings are destined to remain in the same rut forever. It’s the philosophical basis of the caste system and other forms of slavery.

Unimpaired vision — no matter what our age, we can have the gift of the unimpaired vision of Moses and Jesus, where we see the future with hope. No matter what our age, we need to

begin by replacing the picture that wants to portray life only as a wheel that circles endlessly with no progress possible.

As we grow older, we need to replace another picture of life, especially our personal life, which sees it as a graph that goes up and up to some imaginary point and then goes down and down to the bitter end. Life need not be that way.

Read the bestselling book Tuesdays with Morrie. If you've already read it, read it again. In spite of having "Lou Gehrig's disease," Morrie contributes, teaches, and has a positive vision of the future. He can see the promised land but will never enter it in this life, and his love of life, like that of Moses, is unabated until the moment he dies.

It is the testimony of our faith that life can be filled with creative power and adventure until our last breath. That's what this story of the third period of Moses' life describes. During the last period of his life, he had struggled and worked to lead his people into the promised land. As his life was nearing its end, God led Moses to the top of Mount Nebo and showed him the promised land but also told him that he would not live long enough to enter it. All he could do was see it. For Moses, that was enough. He now knew that all his work was not in vain, and he could die in peace.

That can be true for all of us. We can never live in all the promised lands of the future because none of us is immortal. But if we keep our spiritual and mental life growing and expanding, if our vision remains unimpaired and our love of life is not abated, we will be able to see many of the promised lands, and we will know that our struggles have not been in vain.

The story of Moses tells us that life need not reach a peak and then for many years decline. It underscores the fact that even though our physical stamina may decrease, there is no limit to our continued mental and spiritual growth. In fact, I believe that we are more conducive to this kind of growth as we grow older. The choice, however, is up to us. This kind of growing is not automatic.

A friend of mine who is in her late 60s was attending a conference for her own benefit when a younger woman in her 30s asked her, "What are you doing in this seminar? You're so much older than the rest of us." Periodically during the conference, the younger woman continued to ask the same question. My friend's reply was always the same: "I want to keep learning and growing."

This younger person had not considered the fact that one could keep learning and growing at any age. Later in the meeting, the young woman asked, "Do people of your age have fun anymore?" It became apparent that the young woman was afraid of growing older, a fear she continued to reveal during the seminar with her questions.

A fear of aging is present in our culture. I experience it personally at times. Society often looks upon older age as a kind of shameful secret. But what is old age? Who can precisely define it?

Whether or not we act as if our life has reached its peak and is now going downhill depends on how we act or react to what happens to us as we grow older.

Here is an individual who realizes that he has taken the wrong road in life. Gifted artistically, under the pressure of family and for security, this person chose a safe career. Now he is

bored, feels guilty and limited, and yet feels it is too late to make a change. He acts as if his life is almost over. But it need not be.

Here is another person who realizes that she may not attain a goal she always had. She is on a plateau in her life, and from where she is, it looks as if the rest of her life is all downhill. She feels old and acts that way. But it need not be.

You can feel old prematurely if you do not know how to accept and learn from failure. If you live so that your whole life's value is absolutely tied to attaining one particular goal or event, and if that fails, you judge your life as a failure. But it need not be.

On the other hand, there are those to whom prosperity or success brings on a kind of old age — premature and false. I see people who cave in the moment they achieve the goal they had set for themselves and then act as if life is finished.

When an individual stops thinking, stops growing, stops searching for new interests, and becomes inflexible, then he or she is already old, no matter what the chronological age.

According to the Bible, the way to overcome these temptations is to affirm the advantages of living longer. One advantage is perspective. You cannot have much perspective at age 20 simply because you haven't lived long enough. Perspective comes from learning from life's experiences, the good and the bad. It is a matter of choice. Some choose to learn from experience, and others do not.

What is perspective? It is knowing that nothing is as simple as it seems. It means no longer being completely surprised when someone lets you down. It is knowing that good times will not last forever and that bad times will not last forever. Perspective is knowing that things in life do not have to be perfect to be good. It is knowing that the future is not always as good as our highest hopes and never as bad as our worst fears.

There's an old saying that is only partially true — nothing succeeds like success. Perspective tells us that the opposite is also true: nothing succeeds like failure. No one wants to fail, yet no one is likely to escape that experience. Losing a job, a broken marriage, a low grade in school, a wayward child — the list goes on and on. But as painful and difficult as failures can be, they have a peculiar power. Failure can liberate us to take risks we might not otherwise have taken or seen.

Perspective can be an advantage of longer living, but it's not automatic. Some people, as they live longer, lose perspective. They become stingy and complaining. They see nothing good in the present or the future. They are not like Moses, who, up to the moment of his death, had hope and a love of life.

So no matter what your age — live like Moses with a positive vision for the future. You may not realize all your dreams in your lifetime, but keep on dreaming, and keep your vision unimpaired, for God has promised there will be others to carry them on. Amen.