

READING

Numbers 8:5-26

SERMON

**God's Retirement Plan? – Promise of Ministry for a Lifetime of Service**

Retirement. Many, many people look forward to retirement. It seems as if their whole working life has just been one prelude to retirement.

In church however when talking of those who are of a more mature age, we talk about Moses who did not get his call to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt until he was eighty years of age. We talk of Abraham who did not have Isaac until he was one hundred years old and we know that Sarah too was old because it says as a comment on them in Genesis

**“Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing.”** (Genesis 18:11 NIV)

And Sarah herself knew she was old because we read in the next verse

**“So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?"”** (Genesis 18:12 NIV)

Or do we come into the New Testament and talk of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist. Remember that when Zechariah was told by an angel that he was going to be the father of a baby who would **be filled with the Holy Spirit from birth** (Luke 1:15) and **make ready a people prepared for the Lord** (Luke 1:17), he replied

**“... "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years.”**

**The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time.”**

**Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realised he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.”** (Luke 1:18-22 NIV)

But we have to realise that for Moses we are told that he did not die until he was one hundred and twenty years old. This would mean that at eighty he was in the prime of his life. It would be equivalent to fifty-three if he was to die at eighty, or fifty-six if he was to die at seventy. So taking the average it would make him equivalent to around fifty five. Some might say that he was in his prime, not too old but with enough age to have enough experience – but then some of us might be a little bias!

Or take Abraham. He was a father at one hundred, but he carried on living until he was one hundred and seventy-five when he died and so one hundred would be like he was in his early forties. If Abraham and Sarah were of similar ages then it could have been that Sarah had gone through menopause even though it was later in years that most women now.

So I do not feel that thinking about such people is a very productive affair because of their relatively long life span that is recorded. As for Zechariah and Elizabeth their ages on conception of John the Baptist and on their deaths are not recorded.

So what can we say about old age, or more exact for today's sermon title, 'retirement'. What is God's retirement plan? Is there a certain age when we are told in the Bible that we can retirement from God's work – the work he has given us to do?

If you do a work search on then word *retir*\* which means that you get all the words beginning with the letters *retir*, in the NIV, the church Bibles it throws up just one verse. Numbers 8:25, but let us go back to verse 24, page 145

**“This applies to the Levites: Men twenty-five years old or more shall come to take part in the work at the Tent of Meeting, but at the age of fifty, they must retire from their regular service and work no longer. They may assist their brothers in performing their duties at the Tent of Meeting, but they themselves must not do the work. This, then, is how you are to assign the responsibilities of the Levites.”**  
(Numbers 8:24-26 NIV)

So they are to begin work at the age of twenty-five and retire at the age of fifty. Does that mean that I am already five years into my retirement? We have set retirement age differently now. One commentator on this passage put it like this

**Once the Levites reached fifty years of age, they could assist their brothers (26), though they were not permitted to perform the main tasks themselves. Women and men who have accepted early retirement or have reached the normal retirement age may undertake important tasks in the church at home and overseas. Missionary societies are grateful for volunteers willing to undertake short-term assignments to undergird the service of overworked partners who are serving Christ in other countries. In our home countries, the work of Christ could forge ahead if churches could count on teams of retired people undertaking vital tasks in ministry to the local community. Such men and women have a unique opportunity to assist their brothers in bringing their best to the work of Christ.** (Rev Dr Ray Brown from The Message of Numbers)

Those are words from Ray Brown, the one time Principal of Spurgeon's College and still, well past retiring age he is not the minister of the church, he is not the principal of a college, but he writes commentaries and give lectures all round the world. Sue and I had the joy of meeting with him and his wife, Christine as they settled in Cambridgeshire and have now moved into Cambridge, so that Ray can be nearer to his beloved University Library, but Christian becomes more and more a library widow!

As you can see both, in his writing and in his life he did not see retirement from God's work as an option. Nowhere in the Bible except here does the work retirement come in. Even here in Numbers the retired Levite can still assist, he does not stop work. What is it that it says?

Of course it was for the younger men to serve, but even they had to reach a certain age, reach a certain level of maturity. And then he had to retire at fifty which sounds harsh, but equally we should not just wait to retire and then begin working for God.

I can remember one of the first people I baptised was a lady who had just recently retired and I asked her, “Why have you come to be baptised now when you have been in the church for many years?”

Her reply to me was that as she had now retired that she could give herself to the church. But what about all the years that he could have given to the church?

Serving each other is for all and not just the domain of the retired, nor is it the domain of the young. It is for everyone.

This does not mean that we do the same all the way through. For the Levites between the age of twenty-five and fifty they were to assist the priests in their tasks in the Temple, or in the Tabernacle as it was in the days when Numbers is talking about. What were their duties

- Serve the LORD Deuteronomy 10:8
- Serve the priesthood Numbers 3:5–9
- Attend to sanctuary duties Numbers 18:3
- Distribute the tithe 2 Chronicles 31:11–19
- Prepare sacrifices for priests 2 Chronicles 35:10–14
- Teach the people 2 Chronicles 17:8–11
- Declare verdicts of Law Deuteronomy 17:9–11
- Protect the king 2 Chronicles 23:2–10
- Perform music 1 Chronicles 25:1–7
- Precede the army 2 Chronicles 20:19–21, 28

Some list for the Levites to do. It also included erecting the Tabernacles and guarding it. So it was no wonder that they retired at fifty-five, but notice what they could do then

**“They may assist their brothers in performing their duties at the Tent of Meeting, but they themselves must not do the work. This, then, is how you are to assign the responsibilities of the Levites.”** (Numbers 8:26 NIV)

There obviously some problems over the translation of verse 26 because there are different thoughts in different translations. The NIV as we have seen says that they may **assist their brothers** but that **they themselves must not do the work**. We are not told how that actually worked. So, sometimes, in these situations it is good to other version of the Bible, other translations and see what they say.

The New Living Translation says

**“After retirement they may assist their fellow Levites by servicing as guards at the Tabernacle, but they may not officiate in the service. This is how you must assign duties to the Levites.”** (Numbers 8:26 NLT)

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century King James version has

**“but shall minister with their brethren in the tabernacle of the congregation to keep the charge, and shall do no service. Thus shalt thou do unto the Levites concerning their charge.”** (Numbers 8:26 KJ21)

While the Revised Standard Version says

**“but minister to their brethren in the tent of meeting, to keep the charge, and they shall do no service. Thus shall you do to the Levites in assigning their duties.”** (Numbers 8:26 RSV)

When I read these, I had this picture of the retired Levites being bouncers at the door of the Tabernacle, on guard, keeping the crowd in control. But the point is that retirement was not a reason for lack of work, but the work, the service may change.

One of the books I felt privileged to read was *The Hiding Place* by Corrie Ten Boom. Corrie and her family were Dutch and lived during the Second World War. The Hiding Place in the title was the place that was accessed through Corrie's Bedroom to the hidden room where they would hide Jews. They did make a film of Corrie's, and her sister's, time in concentration camps.

To me though the film misses out a great part of the book which is before going to the concentration camp, before and at the beginning of the war the family is introduced. One of the family members is mother. Mother is always baking things for people and when it is an anniversary or birthday or special day for someone in the neighbourhood, Mrs Ten Boom would be there with the cake.

Well one day Corrie's mum had a stroke leaving her bedridden, unable to talk or write. Corrie had the task of feeding her and taking care of her. Then one day Corrie noticed that her mother could blink her eyes and with one blink for yes and two for no they began to communicate. It was slow as Corrie had to ask a series of questions involving yes or no answers.

Then one day mother became very agitated and Corrie could not understand why.

“Are you too hot?”	“No”
“Are you hungry?”	“No”
“Are you thirsty?”	“No”

Corrie ascertained that it was nothing to do with her mother herself and that it was to do with someone else. So using her eyes, Corrie asked her mum to blink the number of times for the first letter of the first name, then the second and so on, until Corrie got the right first name and the right last name. Then the problem, so what? Then Corrie remembered that her mum used to bake a cake for the special occasions and so she went through whether it was the person's birthday, anniversary, until she hit the right one. Then Corrie went downstairs, baked the cake and took it round to the person or people in question.

This happened for quite some time until Mrs Ten Boom died. Her life changed dramatically, but she was still serving God and others.

It may be that as we get older we cannot run around as much, so we have to develop services of prayer, or encouragement, of helping others, even evangelism, to name just a few. However the good news I think, is that God has only one way of retiring us, and that is at death when we go to be with him.

God retirement plan – that only takes place when we go to heaven to be with him, until then, as Ephesians 2 says

**“For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”** (Ephesians 2:10 NIV)

And that does have an age limit on it.