Ecclesiastes 12:1-8. 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; on 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.

Psalm 71:17-23.
17 O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds. 18 So even to old age and grey hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to all the generations to come. Your power 19 and your righteousness, O God, reach the high heavens. You who have done great things, O God, who is like you?
20 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. 21 You will increase my honour, and comfort me once again. 22 I will also praise you with the harp for your faithfulness, O my God; I will sing praises to you with the lyre, O Holy One of Israel. 23 My lips will shout for joy when I sing praises to you; my soul also, which you have rescued.
In the nineties Christianity in America found a new thing to panic over: the “Graying of the Church.” People began to notice that at Sunday morning worship, more and more of the heads in worship on Sunday morning were silver-haired – a lot more than in the 1950s, when the church was bursting with children and their young parents. Well, you see why that would be a concern, don’t you? If you don’t have young adults now, who’s going to take those elders’ place when they’re gone? Add to that the financial anxiety: those silver-haired members from the World War II generation are remarkably faithful and generous in their giving. It looked bad. So the American church threw itself into trying to attract young families again. We did surveys to find out what they wanted from their church. We incorporated new, hip technology – video screens, power point, websites, blogs – and we brought in drums and electric guitars and new songs with a rock beat, performed by young musicians. A few churches also began some creative, dynamic programing for young families and children, but only a few. Mostly we went for style, rather than substance. Sometimes all this worked – especially in new churches. That is, churches founded specifically for young adults and who planned their whole program for that target demographic were often able to reach them. But when these hip stylistic changes were imposed on established churches, what they mostly accomplished was to irritate the people who were already there. Those painfully contemporary rock bands didn’t attract younger people; all they did was ruin worship for older people. These efforts felt like what they were: desperate attempts to attract young families at any cost, even if the cost was alienating older Christians.

I used to be a part of that effort, but not anymore. As many of you know, I came first to this church as a half-time “Minister of Pastoral Care,” in which capacity I worked primarily with senior adults, mentored in that role by Mary Ann Dykes. Here’s what I learned. I learned that a gray head in a church is not a liability, not a cause for alarm, not a problem to be dealt with. I learned that a church without seniors is a church to be pitied, because it will surely be sadly deficient in both wisdom and stability. It will be a church doomed to make silly mistakes because there is no one who can tell them what happened the last time that idea was tried. And it will be a church with a smaller heart, because it is by caring for each other that our hearts grow. Now I’m not saying I want a church made up entirely of senior adults. That would be sad. It would be a tragic waste of wisdom if those seniors were not surrounded by younger people who could learn from them.

So, as we think this month about sanctuary, about making our church “a house of prayer for all kinds of people,” I want to think today about how we can become a place of refuge, strength, and encouragement to seniors. First of all, we stop acting as if the “Graying of the Church” is a bad thing. We value our seniors, and encourage them to value themselves. And this isn’t always easy for seniors, in our youth-obsessed culture. We read two passages of scripture today. The first, from Ecclesiastes, is a lament over old age. In it, the author bemoans the loss of strength (and teeth), the dimming of vision, the loss of balance and confidence and sexual desire. It’s a depressing passage, but that is one way to look at the aging process, isn’t it? And I have talked to many who felt that way. Do not give in to that temptation. Instead, turn to another witness to aging, Psalm 71. First let me read some verses that we did not read earlier:

For you, O Lord, are my hope; my trust, O Lord, from my youth. Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother’s womb. My praise is continually of you . . . My mouth is filled with your praise, and with your glory all day long. Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength is spent. (vv. 5-6, 8-9).

Like the teaching in Ecclesiastes, the psalmist calls on the memory of his youth, but instead of bemoaning all that he has lost, he recognizes that God has been his hope from the beginning and along every step of the way, and in that hope prays for God’s continued help. And why? Verse 18: Even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to all the generations to come. There is no voice more clear, no witness more powerful, that that of the wise woman or man, teaching the next generation. The first way that we create a safe place for seniors is to recognize and value that gift that you are to the rest of us.
When we have done that, we then begin thinking about how we as a sanctuary can set out to meet the needs of seniors. And yes, seniors have very specific needs. Perhaps foremost today is loneliness. The day of living in multigenerational households is gone. More often than not, our older adults live alone. You’ve done your job and raised your children to become independent adults – and now they’re doing it, one in California, one in St. Louis, one in Italy. Your friends just aren’t around any more. They’re in Florida or have moved to St. Louis to be near that daughter, or are in a nursing home, or have died. A church can be a refuge for the lonely, a new community for those who have lost the community they used to know. By the way, Savvy Seniors is meeting at Noodles & Company for lunch tomorrow. 11:30 so as to avoid the crowd. And the Wednesday night meal this week is Swiss Steak, starting at 5:15, and yes we will be increasing our order this week, given that we almost ran out of food last Wednesday.

There are other ways a church can meet the needs of our seniors – from transportation to visits to simple home maintenance. But there is one particular need I want to talk about, based on the great fear of today’s seniors: dementia. Whether it is actually Alzheimer’s or something else, this prospect can evoke nothing less than terror. It is a fear of losing everything that matters to you – afraid of losing your very self. So, if I might pause for a second, let me say this: you do not lose yourself. Whatever happens, you are still there. This is what I have seen. I think of the people I have visited over years. I think of Lucille, who could no longer recognize people, but who had taught English and speech and who sat tall and proud when we read poetry together. Oh, yes. Lucille was still there. I think of Mary, of Dedy, of Evelyn, of Jean. Whatever else they lost, they remained themselves. I tell you today the person you are will never be lost, not in this world or the next. I say that both to reassure those of us who carry that fear and as a challenge. Do not forget those have begun to forget. They are there. Visit them still. Love them still. And love their caregivers too. Your visits are a gift to them as well.

And we can be a sanctuary to both. A week ago, a group of us went down to Appleton to visit a program that has been started there. It’s called a “Memory Café.” It is a gathering time for those with dementia and their caregivers, a time to talk, a simple program (that day it was a barbershop quartet), coffee and refreshments, community. We can do this. We will do this. Our Parlor, with its fireplace on one side, its courtyard on the other, its new handicap-accessible restroom just down the hall, could have been designed for this purpose, to be a sanctuary.

American culture has often been described as a “cult of youth.” Our ideal of beauty is the underfed 23-year-old air-brushed supermodel. God help us. A sane definition of beauty ought to involve being interesting enough to talk to for an hour. Our public ideal of vitality is all those laughing young people in the Mountain Dew commercials, zip-lining over a volcano or whatever. That’s not vitality. That’s deficiency in key areas of judgment. I have different ideals. I have Virginia Day, making her rounds of the nursing homes. I have Wib Johnson, serving as grandfather for twenty minutes at a time to teenagers on their way to juvey court. I have Bob and Grace Wylie, celebrating their 70th wedding anniversary. And I have an ideal for our church, too. I imagine a place filled with gray heads, where children are being raised in the shadow of those silver giants, and where seniors are loved and supported and valued by the community of faith.

One more thing. Remember where I started? With all those churches worried that they needed to focus on young people or see the church dwindle away? Well, guess what demographic is projected to grow most steadily in our city and county over the next decade. Right. Seniors. And we are a sanctuary.