



A sermon by Stephen Atkinson, Minister

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LIFE BEGINS AT 40

At regular intervals in the life of some animals, say a snake, the only way for it to survive is to shed its skin. Its outermost layers of cells have become dried up, creaky and constricting; the only option is for the snake to undertake the hard work of cracking open that skin and slithering its way out to leave it behind forever. Then moist, soft, vulnerable skin allows the snake a period of real growth before the skin has to toughen up again to protect it anew from the hot, gritty environment around it and the cycle starts all over again.

We human animals sometimes shed our 'skin' too, not the physical organ, which is the largest in the whole body, but our dried up, creaky character. Sometimes we do it to adapt to a joy, such as giving birth to a lovely baby with an easy temperament; sometimes it's the result of woe, such as seeing that easy baby turn thirteen and turn into an alien life form. And for any youth among us it happens also from your point of view: a loving and supportive parent suddenly joins the police and puts a tail on you everywhere you go.

Innumerable books have been written about these 'passages', as Gail Sheehy called them back in the 1970's; times of crisis in adult life through which many, even most of us pass. For decades now, my Baby Boom generation has stared ahead in horror at the idea of turning 30, then 40 – which suddenly became the 'new 30'; then 50 – which suddenly became the new 40; and now it's 60, which is now the new 50 ...or, with a nip and a tuck, the new 35.

Sheehy among so many subsequent self-help writers set out for us a way to understand these passages of middle age. At 40 as with other round number ages, there's a tendency to stop abruptly; take stock of life; find what's wonderfully present and abundant; discern what's missing, forgotten or *too* present and stifling. Problems are analyzed and many solutions for each one are examined, and even tried out. Changes are made sometimes successfully and impressively. A new sense of identity, direction and purpose are discovered. A feeling of having survived hardship develops. Life begins again.

I don't know about you but this all sounds vaguely familiar to me. Here this community is at 40; we're in the middle of a long stock-taking process, but have made changes already. We look back with nostalgia at our communal youth. And I tell you over the last few days have I heard some tales about back then!

They say that it's hard to get men to come to church, but *this* church has found some very novel ways to do that. One time, two male newcomers showed up at church on a cold New Year's Day Sunday. Imagine that! They must have come to church before going home after New Year's Eve because their car was painted garishly in black and white, and they still had a sound and light contraption stuck on its roof, a red light flashing on and off, and a siren thingy wailing. They were still in costume, yet!

And then there's the time when a whole raft of men rushed excitedly to attend one of our youth events. This time they came in a big truck, but, oddly, also in costume with a sound and light thingy. We must be attracting members of a cult or something.

For those who haven't heard these stories, the first was the time when Rod Stewart, one of our most significant church leaders, climbed through a back window to open up Neighbourhood House because the door was locked on New Year's Day. Who gets up on New Year's Day to go to Neighbourhood House? Apparently we do!

The other event was an October youth overnight including a dark walk in Hugo Ray cemetery; somehow, names will not be named to protect the guilty, a lit sparkler ended up stuck way up in the branches and dead leaves of a big maple tree. Just imagine how many men we'd have gotten to church if we'd actually succeeded in starting a forest fire! So, one other time, we tried burning a whole roast to a crisp in the oven, smoke billowing out... but like most good ideas, they don't work all the time, and that mess we cleaned up by ourselves. Talk about the fire of commitment!

But really, we should write these up and publish them in the national newsletter! Some churches would kill for ideas like these.

But to wrench our attention back to the present, we have survived crises, grown in wisdom and experience, and mellowed from having looked hard at ourselves to see what is within us that needs to mature and heal. Now we've turned 40 and made the momentous decision to take a leap of faith and make new history.

There is another level, however, in which we might look at the significance of 40. In Ancient Near Eastern culture, certain numbers had symbolic meaning and 40 was one of them. We know this from a few sources, but particularly from the finely preserved archaeological text called the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible.

The number 40 appears in several significant stories. The Great Flood is said to have been caused by 40 days and 40 nights of rain. A scholarly tradition says that Moses spent 40 days on Mt. Sinai talking with God and receiving the Commandments. The Hebrew people wandered in the desert for 40 years. In the Gospels, Jesus went into retreat for 40 days meditating and praying alone in the desert; during that time Satan tempted Him.

So, why the repetition of 40? Well, in those ancient and difficult times, 40 years of life were like what we now might think of as 100 – a venerable old age rarely achieved; 40 was the conceptual equivalent of a century; a whole generation; a time as long as one individual can really imagine.

Further, in other non-Biblical ancient texts, 40 frequently appears as the length of time that it takes a hero to overcome a huge struggle or test. Put these two ideas together and we have a sense of taking a whole lifetime to get past our largest obstacle. Finally, especially in the Bible, 40 years of struggle is then followed by a revitalization or renewal that the long hardship *prepared* one for.

After 40 days and nights of rain, creation began all over again. After 40 days on Sinai, Moses brought down a renewed Covenant to guide the Jewish people for thousands of years. After 40 years of wandering, they then made it to the Promised Land and began a whole new history. (You'll allow me today not to go into the horrors that happened *in* that Promised Land: genocidal war, for instance. That's for another day but I must at least mention it.) And then Jesus, after 40 days of temptation, succeeds in defeating the Devil and is prepared to deliver the Good News of salvation through love.

Now, I'm not saying that our first 40 years fits this Biblical model; that would be the sin of pride, seeing ourselves in terms that are too lofty for us to claim. I mention this because it points toward the deeper level on which we must focus. We *have* survived as a community through crises, and we *have* lasted 40 years. It's important for us together and for each of us individually to continue deepening in spirit, to be sure we *are* prepared to be re-created, to make a new Covenant together, to find a new groundedness, and to deliver our good news that there is salvation without dogma, faith without superstition.

May *our* life renew at 40.

May it be so.