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Our title today is “You are never too old to blow it”. I am not sure if the elders had this small detail in mind when I was selected to preach on this subject, but they did pick the oldest of the preaching elders to tackle it.... The message is both topical and yet strangely ignored. Let me explain what I mean. It is ignored because popular culture shies away from the idea of people “blowing it”. My evidence for this is based on extensive research on Google, which consisted of typing in our sermon title “You are never too old to blow it”. The first thing I learned is that the words “You are” apparently do not exist anymore; if I wanted to search I had to search on “You’re never too old to blow it”. So I did that, and still no success; instead all I could find were links to topics such as “You’re never too old to blow bubbles in your drink!” and “You’re Never Too Old For A Party”. I have to admit that some of the links were quite good; I liked the link that included

**Slide**

You’re Never Too Old...

- to lick a lollipop
- to take an afternoon nap
- to celebrate your birthday
- to tell ghost stories around the campfire
- to read the comics
- to flag down the ice-cream truck

But this still did not help my search, so I changed the search to “You’re never too old to mess up”, but this was no help, only leading to links such as “You’re never too old to set another goal or to dream a new dream.” “You’re Never Too Old To Have Fun Stuff” “You’re Never Too Old for a Great Smile” (this one sounded like a dental advertisement). So in desperation I tried “You’re never too old to do something stupid”, and the only link that was remotely relevant was to this picture of an old guy jumping into what looks like very cold water!

**Slide**

So it appears as if popular culture, at least as shown by what gets posted in the internet, does not embrace the idea of people messing up. But of course people, including old people, do blow it, and that is what makes this message so topical. Yesterday’s newspapers carried stories about two men who had messed up their lives with adulteries: CIA Director David Petraeus

**Slide**

And incoming Lockheed CEO Christopher Kubasik

This reminds us of the truth of the saying

“Behind every successful man is his woman. Behind the fall of a successful man is usually another woman.”

So sadly old people do mess up. And in case you are sitting there saying to yourself “This is one sermon I don’t have to listen to because I am not old” let me make the obvious point that if old people can mess up than clearly young people can too. So this message is for all of us; for the teenagers, for young men and women, and for old geezers like me.

So let us turn with relief from the flaws and failings of men and women to the timeless truths of God’s word.

**Slide**

Num 20:1-13

In the first month the whole Israelite community arrived at the Desert of Zin, and they stayed at Kadesh. There Miriam died and was buried.

Now there was no water for the community, and the people gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron. They quarreled with Moses and said, "If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the LORD! Why did you bring the LORD's community into this desert, that we and our livestock should die here? Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place? It has no grain or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink!"

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Moses and Aaron went from the assembly to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting and fell facedown, and the glory of the LORD appeared to them. The LORD said to Moses, "Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community so they and their livestock can drink."

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So Moses took the staff from the LORD's presence, just as he commanded him. He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock and Moses said to them, "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank.

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But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them."

These were the waters of Meribah, where the Israelites quarreled with the LORD and where he showed himself holy among them.

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Prayer

It has now been 40 years since the events of Numbers 13 and 14 that Chris Faith spoke of last week. In that sad passage the children of Israel had turned back in fear from entering the promised land, and as a result God had told them that they would have to wait 40 years before they could go in. We know that it was 40 years, by the way, because Aaron's death is recorded at the end of Numbers chapter 20, and in Numbers 33 we are told that Aaron died in the fortieth year after the Israelites left Egypt:

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Num 20:22-26

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Aaron will be gathered to his people. He will not enter the land I give the Israelites, because both of you rebelled against my command at the waters of Meribah. Get Aaron and his son Eleazar and take them up Mount Hor...for Aaron will be gathered to his people; he will die there."

Num 33:38

At the LORD's command Aaron the priest went up Mount Hor, where he died on the first day of the fifth month of the fortieth year after the Israelites came out of Egypt.

And so now the Israelites are back more or less where they messed up the last time; in the desert of Zin

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So we have here three sad stories; the death of Miriam, Moses' disobedience and punishment, and the death of Aaron. Let us look briefly at just the first two.

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### **1. The death of Miriam**

The event is recorded very briefly:

Num 20:1-13

In the first month the whole Israelite community arrived at the Desert of Zin, and they stayed at Kadesh. There Miriam died and was buried.

Miriam was Moses' older sister; it was she who had watched over him as he lay in a basket in the Nile river, and it was she who arranged for Moses' mother to be his nursemaid during his first crucial years of life. She had sung the song of triumph at the crossing of the Red Sea, but she and her brother Aaron had also been critical of Moses:

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Num 12:1-2

Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite. "Has the LORD spoken only through Moses?" they asked. "Hasn't he also spoken through us?" And the LORD heard this.

The Lord judged Miriam for this rebellion against Moses, and she had leprosy for a week as a result. But even with this in her past, her death must have been a blow to Moses; she and Aaron were his only siblings, as far as we know, and they had been with him during the whole 40 years in the desert, and she was described by Micah as one of the leaders of Israel:

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Mic 6:4

I brought you up out of Egypt           and redeemed you from the land of slavery.  
I sent Moses to lead you,           also Aaron and Miriam.

**2. The sin of Moses**

So Moses was probably still feeling the loss of his sister when the second problem came up. It was another case of the Israelites lacking water and complaining to Moses, as we just read

Sadly this was nothing new for the Israelites; they were constantly complaining over the lack of food and lack of water and whatever else bothered them. In fact they had complained 40 years ago in a very similar situation:

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Ex 17:1-3

The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. So they quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink."

Moses replied, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the LORD to the test?"

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Ex 17:4-6

But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?" Then Moses cried out to the LORD, "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me." The LORD answered Moses, "Walk on ahead of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink." So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel.

So 40 years later the children of the men and women who had complained about Moses' leadership and lack of water were doing the same thing their parents had done! Now at one level this is perfectly understandable; we all need food and water to survive. So it was not the actual request for water that was wrong, but rather the way they made it, blaming Moses for something that was not his fault and ultimately blaming God.

God however in His mercy heard their complaints and even in their rebellion He was willing to provide "His" water for them.

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Num 20:7-8

The LORD said to Moses, "Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community so they and their livestock can drink."

Sadly however Moses was angry, and instead of speaking to the rock he struck it with his rod:

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Num 20:9-11

So Moses took the staff from the LORD's presence, just as he commanded him. He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock and Moses said to them, "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank.

As a result of Moses' disobedience God judged him and punished him by telling him he would never enter the promised Land:

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Num 20:12

But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them."

On reading this we might be tempted to say "Whoa!" that's a pretty severe punishment for one mistake! After all, he had been told to strike the rock the last time around, so why not this time? He had served God faithfully for over 40 years, and now he does not get to see the results of all his leadership. Isn't that a bit severe?

So what was Moses' sin?

We can see three aspects of this sin:

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*1. He was angry.*

This comes through very clearly in his words and actions, as translated in the Message

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Num 20:9-11

Moses took the staff away from GOD's presence, as commanded. He and Aaron rounded up the whole congregation in front of the rock. Moses spoke: "Listen, rebels! Do we have to bring water out of this rock for you?"

With that Moses raised his arm and slammed his staff against the rock — once, twice. Water poured out. Congregation and cattle drank.

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*2. Because he was angry he disobeyed God.*

God had instructed Moses clearly to speak to the rock: "Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water.". But in his anger Moses chose to strike the rock.

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*3. In his anger and disobedience he misrepresented God.*

Moses was the God-appointed leader of the people; he was thus God's representative to the people. So when he angrily struck the rock, he was saying, in effect, "this is what God is like; He is an angry God who has lost his temper with you miserable people." This is why God said to Moses: "Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them."

**Application**

So what can we in 2012 learn from these events that took place over 3000 years ago? I believe that there are several lessons that we need to pay careful attention to:

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1. The devil is a powerful enemy.

If a man as close to God and as humble as Moses could blow it, can fall to a temptation of the devil, then the devil must be very powerful indeed. And of course he is. Peter warns us of his power, likening it to that of a roaring lion.

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1 Peter 5:8-9

Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

So we need to listen to Peter's warning, and be alert.

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2. The devil will take advantage of our down times.

I find it significant that Numbers 20 records Miriam's death immediately before the story of the water from the rock. The Bible does not specifically state this, but I suspect that Moses was still grieving for Miriam when the grumbling started. He may even have said to himself "if it wasn't for your parents fear 40 years ago, we would all be in the promised land by now, and Miriam would have been able to enjoy it. Now she is dead and will never get to see it. And the devil took advantage of those thoughts and turned them into anger against the Israelites. Now whether or not my interpretation is correct, it is definitely true that the devil does not play cricket. For those of you not brought up with this mysterious game, that means he does not play by the rules. As our Lord describes him

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John 8:44

You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

So we need to be especially alert to temptation when we are going through difficult personal circumstances, whether the death of a loved one, a disappointment at work, an F in chemistry, etc. The devil loves to take advantage of this sort of discouragement to cause us to sin.

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3. You are never too old to blow it.

Moses was about 120 years old when he lost his cool, so age and spiritual maturity is no defense against stupidity. If you doubt this, just ask ex CIA Director David Petraeus or ex Lockheed CEO Christopher Kubasik. Satan is an equal-opportunity deceiver, and is just as happy to ensnare a 70 year old as a 20 year old. So we all need to be on our guard against sin, whether it is sexual sin, pride, anger, or any other sin. And we need to be especially careful if we are sure of ourselves. Paul wrote to the Corinthians about the failures of the Israelites, and concludes:

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1 Cor 10:12 "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" But he then goes on to say

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1 Cor 10:13 "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."

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4. This story is one more testimony to the reliability of the Bible

I don't know about you, but if I had been writing the life of Moses to help start a new religion, I would have left out all the bad stuff about him messing up, such as killing an Egyptian and not wanting to lead the people when God talked to him at the burning bush, and definitely not him losing his temper with the people at the end of their wanderings in the desert. So the fact that these stories (and many other similar stories) are in the Bible tell us that the Bible is not man's invention, and must therefore be God's inspired word.

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5. This story is a warning of the serious consequences of misplaced anger.

I say misplaced anger because there is such a thing as righteous anger, and the world needs that, Jesus showed righteous anger when he drove the moneychangers out of the temple, and men and women today can show righteous anger when confronted with sexual trafficking or slavery or many of the other evils that abound in our sad and fallen world. But anger is misplaced when it is a response to some real or perceived hurt to our own pride or position.

So let's get specific here. When was the last time you were angry in the wrong way? For those of you who are married, when was the last time you were angry with your spouse? John Piper said "In marriage, anger rivals lust as a killer. My guess is that anger is a worse enemy than lust."

Husbands, are you treating your wives with gentleness and love? Wives, are you respecting your husbands? If you are not married, how are you treating your roommate or your co-workers or your classmates? Parents, do

your children know you as someone to be afraid of, who flies off the handle at the slightest excuse? Because your children learn from you!

Scripture is full of warnings against anger:

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Eph 4:30-32

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

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Matt 5:21-22

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

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6. The higher the position, the greater the responsibility.

Moses was a leader of God's people, so when he sinned in his anger his punishment was correspondingly more severe. And the same principle is true in the church; church leaders, and particularly pastors and elders, are held to a higher standard:

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James 3:1

Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

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7. God is gracious and longsuffering.

The story does not end with God's judgment on Moses. Although he was not permitted to enter the promised land, he was allowed to see it.

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Deut 34:1-4

Then Moses climbed Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab to the top of Pisgah, across from Jericho. There the LORD showed him the whole land--from Gilead to Dan, all of Naphtali, the territory of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the western sea, the Negev and the whole region from the Valley of Jericho, the City of Palms, as far as Zoar. Then the LORD said to him, "This is the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob when I said, 'I will give it to your descendants.' I have let you see it with your eyes, but you will not cross over into it.

So yes, Moses was judged and did pay a price for his sin of anger and misrepresentation of God, but God in his mercy did allow him to see the land before he died. And then he did actually get to visit the land many years later, as he appeared to Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration:

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Matt 17:1-3

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. So Moses did get to visit the promised land, and one day all those who love our Lord will enjoy fellowship with Moses and all the saints who have gone before us.

In conclusion, we have seen how even a great and godly man like Moses could fail. Since that is the case, how about us? How can we guard against the anger shown by Moses? Well, there is no guarantee against sin, but the best way is to remain close to God through prayer and reading His word. Dwight L. Moody, an American evangelist of the late 1800's, wrote "The Bible will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from the Bible," and that is still true today. Cathy Fussell wrote these words in Today's Christian Woman

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I have found if I don't have my quiet time each morning, I tend to lose my temper over insignificant things. Recently, my son, Andrew, reminded me of the need for daily prayer. He had accidentally spilled his drink and I went into a tirade. Andrew ended my harsh words when he quietly asked, "Mom, did you forget to ask Jesus to help you be nice today?"

So let me challenge all of you to make a point of spending time each day with the Lord in prayer and reading His word – and then trusting Him to guard us from the wiles of the devil, so that we do not blow it. As Paul reminds us in that great passage in Ephesians 6

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Eph 6:10-18

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.