I went on vacation a few weeks ago. It wasn’t anything terribly exciting, but it was just what I needed – a time of relaxing and renewing and remembering. In thinking about the times of my life, I recalled when my family – myself, my husband and our two sons – first came to this church. We worshipped, became part of a Sunday School class and got involved in things right away. One of the things that I particularly enjoyed was the United Methodist Women’s circle that I joined. It was a conglomerate of women of different ages, personalities and walks of life. Here I met and befriended ladies, maybe twice my age, who I might not have ever known had it not been for this circle gathering – warm, beautiful ladies like Jenny Payton, Ruby McCall, Lorena King and Lois Johnson.

One day at home, I made some comment in which I referred to this group as the little old ladies of the church. My youngest son, Kevin, immediately said, “Mom, you shouldn’t talk about them like that because you are one.” “Thanks, Son.” He always had a knack for making you feel good about yourself. He gets that from his dad, who once told me, “Well, you’re not the ugliest girl I ever dated.” But I digress.

Many, many moons have come and gone since then, and I am proud to say that now I am one of the little old ladies of the church. In fact that is one of the reasons that I am in the pulpit today. Since I have been around here for a while and have had the opportunity to watch those graduating grow up, Gary asked me if I would like to preach on Senior Sunday.

In thinking about what I was going to talk about today, I remembered a banner that I had in a plastic bag out in our garage. I have no clue why I have kept it all these years. I guess for such a time as this. I’ve hung it here on the pulpit. You probably can’t see this very well. But these are the outlined hands and names of the 3 & 4 years old Sunday School class I taught in the summer of 1997. Some of these kiddos are no longer here, and some are ones that graduated last year – Katie Lewis, Brandon Young and my granddaughter Alex. But there are a couple here from today’s group – Max & Trey.

And now you precious little cherubs have grown up to be handsome and beautiful young men and women. It brings me great joy when I think of how much you have come into your own, how musically talented some of you are, how accomplished you are academically, what interesting and fun people you are becoming.

Gary also suggested that I might share some words of wisdom that might assist you as you ventured out into the world.

This is what came to my mind: Television is not reality. Be nice to nerds; chances are you’ll end up working for one. And, never slap a man who’s chewing tobacco. Needless to say, I felt I needed to give you more. So I found a brief video that shares quotes from renowned historical figures. It is particularly for graduating seniors. But if you are a Senior citizen, it can work for you too. And if you fall in age between those two groups of seniors, then just pretend for the moment that you belong to one of those groups, for I believe that these words of wisdom apply to all of us – no matter what our age. (Show video)
There really is no better place to find words of wisdom and guidance for life than the Bible. Our Old Testament verse for today is Isaiah 41:10. “Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God!” The promise of God, “I am (or will be) with you,” is repeated more often in Scripture than any other. If you read through the stories of almost every major biblical figure – Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Gideon and the like, you will find that promise repeated to them at one point or another in their lives. And that promise is frequently accompanied by the command: “Fear not!”

Fear can cripple our resolve and keep us from acting as we ought to act, thereby preventing us from accomplishing everything that God wants us to accomplish. God has great plans for your lives in this world, even as He has great plans for your eternal futures. Put your trust in Him, for He is worthy of that trust and has promised to be with you always. (Matthew 28:20)

Let us consider three examples – all from the Old Testament – of persons about the same age as the graduates. First Daniel. He was separated from his family and taken into captivity hundreds of miles away from his home and everything that was familiar. He was then placed in a school where he was to learn to be a civil servant. It was without doubt a frightening situation, especially for someone so young.

Yet, Daniel and his three friends – Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego trusted in their God and knew that He would be with them… and He was! They refused to compromise their belief system and the result was that when their training was completed, they were found by the king to be “ten times better than all” the other students and civil servants in the land (Daniel 1:20).

As you go on to school or in the work place or wherever life takes you, you too may well find yourself separated from your families and all that is spiritually familiar. Your belief system will also be challenged. Do not be afraid when those challenges come. Your God promises to be with you, too! But be prepared – continue to grow in your faith and understanding of the Scriptures by studying them regularly.

Our second example is David. David was involved in one of the most famous battle recorded in Scripture – his battle against Goliath. If you read through the account of that battle in 1 Samuel 17, you will find no mention of David being afraid. Why was that the case? The answer is found in David’s words to King Saul when he first suggested that he engage Goliath in battle. David pointed out that the Lord God had been with Him throughout his life. He had helped him overcome lions and bears, which had threatened his father’s sheep, and he was confident that God would be with him on the battle field as he confronted Goliath. David’s faith proved true! You will meet grave challenges in your future lives – giants of all sorts, but you need not fear! Trust that the Lord God, who was with David, will also be with you!

Thirdly, there is Joseph. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers. What a frightening situation – to be bound and dragged through the sands to Egypt, to be put up for auction and purchased by a complete stranger, who then had life or death control over you. But the Lord proved Himself faithful. In Genesis 39:2, we are told very simply, “The Lord was with Joseph, and he was a successful man.”

My friends, your Christian faith will not prevent tragedy from entering your lives from time to time. This world is filled with sin and its consequences, and they at times touch our lives. But your Christian faith assures you of God’s promise to be with you, and that promise can and should calm unnecessary fears and assure you that in the end all will work together for your good. (Romans8:28)
Life is a journey. You graduating Seniors are about to start off on a new part of that journey. You are excited and yet anxious, for along with freedom comes responsibility. You will be making choices. And at some time, I can almost guarantee that you will be saying “OMG, what have I got myself into?”

Throughout life each of us will be starting out again, and again and again. And there will be many ups and downs. But you need not go through these alone. For your God promises to be with you! God is with you in the happy times and in the sad times. He is with you when there is new birth and when there is death. He is with you when you are healthy and when you are sick.

God is with you when you are liked and when you are despised or misunderstood. He is with you when you are gainfully employed or when you are unemployed. He is with you when you are young and when you are old. God is present with you at all times and in all situations. He is with you without any intermission or lapse. God cares about you and your everyday life – your trials, your needs, your joys. He hears and answers your prayers. He will never leave you or forsake you.

When I was researching for this sermon, I came across a story. At first I thought it was a joke, but supposedly it is true. In some versions of the Bible, Matthew 28:20 reads “Lo, I am with you always.” When a new Chinese believer named Lo read this, he took it personally. People of God, I want you to take this scripture personally. Believe it, trust it, and rely on it.

I would like us now to say this verse, this promise from God, together but separately. Instead of “Lo, I am with you always,” substitute your name in place of Lo. For instance I would say, “Beverly, I am with you always” at the same time that Tom, Susie and Betty would say it with their name. Got it? OK. All together –“Beverly, I am with you always.” Again with confidence –“Beverly, I am with you always.”

Thank God for his powerful, abiding presence on our journeys.

I would like to close with a song “You Will Never Walk Alone.” by Christian musical group, Point of Grace. This is on a CD that I keep in my car and I play this at least twice each day. It lifts me up for it reminds me that I can always, always count on God. The music is nice, but what I really want you to hear are the words, the message, the promise.

(Play CD)

**Go forward with commitment and confidence, for God is with you. Amen.**