

First Sunday after Christmas     January 1, 2012     Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:22-40

On Christmas Eve I talked about the new Nativity set that I had ordered from a pottery in PA. And the fact that, when the package arrived and I unwrapped the figures, there were no angels and no shepherds. I brought it with me tonight so you can see Mary and Joseph and the baby, the cows and sheep, and even the mysterious large ducks that were in the box. Of course we have the Magi waiting still in the wings until their appearance next week on Epiphany.

For some reason, my attention has been drawn to the figures that were not in the box – like the angels and the shepherds – and what part they played in Luke's telling of the story of the birth of Jesus. That was the Christmas Eve sermon. But tonight we meet two new characters, who were also not in the box: Simeon and Anna. And just like we did with the angels and shepherds, we have to wonder: if Luke isn't describing a factual, historical event, then what is he wanting to convey to his readers about Jesus through this story?

In some ways, this story, these figures make it easier to get to Luke's answer to that question. Even though today is the 8<sup>th</sup> Day of Christmas, for all intents and purposes, Christmas is over – well, the secular Christmas holiday anyway. Valentine's Day decorations are now appearing in the stores.

But for us, it's not over. Now, as we follow Mary and Joseph and Jesus into the temple, we see two people who appear to be expecting them. Who are they; what is Luke trying to tell us? The first interesting thing about these two is that they're old and they are devout. In the story, these two faithful, elders meet up with this young family, themselves devout, coming to the temple to perform the traditional rituals. Another interesting thing is that they are a man and a woman. This is a common Luke thing; in his gospel we often see a pairing of stories, one about a man, and another about a woman. And finally, what's noteworthy is that the responses of both Anna and Simeon to Jesus were both religious and political. So all in all, what we have in this scenario is a message of fulfillment to the whole fabric of life: all people, all things.

What Luke proclaims to the people of his day is that Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel's deepest yearning. It was a message specific to that time. But it is also a message that is just as relevant today: in this Jesus we can find fulfillment of deepest yearnings, our hopes and dreams for a different kind of life, a different kind of world, for light in the darkness, for the presence of God with us. As Anna and Simeon did long ago, we too can recognize with our hearts "the one who reveals God's dream for this world."<sup>1</sup>

This passage, which at first feels like an addendum to the Christmas Eve reading, is now revealed as a little gift that was half-hidden behind the tree that was just waiting to be discovered today. On New Year's Day no less. A day when we traditionally take stock of our lives and give voice to some of the hopes we have for the coming year. And we have come here tonight, to this temple, people of faith: young and old, women and men, gay and straight, Democrat and Republican – all of us hoping for the fulfillment of our hopes and dreams for a different kind of life, a different kind of world, for light in the darkness, for the presence of God with us.

But on this New Years Day, we must recognize another characteristic of Simeon and Anna: they were ready. They had prepared a lifetime for this vision of holiness, and they saw it when it appeared. They weren't surprised by the appearance of the fulfillment of their hopes. They lived in expectation of the day and were able to see the Messiah in a little child because they'd trained their spiritual eyes to see.

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan Crossan, *The First Christmas*, Harper & Row. 2007.

And that's what we must do as well. New Year's Day calls for a commitment to visionary living, to expectant living – which is not only hope of light in the darkness, but certainty that it will appear. But this kind of certainty takes practice. For Simeon and Anna, it was worship and prayer and fasting. But there are many practices, even many kinds of prayer that can help us strengthen the muscles of our spiritual eyes: breath prayer, centering prayer, walking meditation, devotional reading – many ways to open our senses to the in-breaking of the presence of God in our lives and in our world.

One practice that I talked about last year (and in this week's *Keeping in Touch*) is that of asking for a word. It comes from the time of the Desert Mothers and Fathers, when people would go out to them and ask to be given a word that would guide them in their search for meaning and fulfillment in their spiritual lives. It's a practice that I've discovered to be both simple and challenging. On one hand, how difficult could it be? Think of a word. Use that word throughout the year as a touchstone on my spiritual path, a word I can wrestle with and grow into.

The first challenge is: stop thinking. It's not up to me to think of a word. The word will be given to me; I just have to allow myself to be open to receiving it. On the *Abbey of the Arts* website (where I first learned this practice), there are suggestions for how to go about discerning your word, such as: What word, phrase, or image is shimmering before you right now inviting you to dwell with it? And I like that imagery of 'shimmering' which helps me turn off the left brain a bit and allow a more imaginative space to open up. Maybe that's helpful for you too.

Once you have received your word, you still have to allow it to nourish you and challenge you, to give you hope for the fulfillment of your dreams. Last year, my word was 'light,' actually 'live in the light,' and it has been my touchstone, especially as I took on the responsibility of the Interfaith Center. But it does take intentionality. You have to let it work in you and on you. In the midst of every situation, good and bad. In the opinions and attitudes you hold about everything, even when you're watching disheartening and disagreeable news reports, when you're interacting with difficult people, when you're getting down on yourself - and all the other times that it's easy to lose the touchstone.

It is a practice. And the first step is to ask, to ask for a word, an image or a phrase. Some of you may remember when we did this last year and I invited you to ask for your word. Some of you got one right away and told it to me on your way out of here that night. Maybe others discovered theirs later.

As I thought about it this year, I decided to try something different. You should have received a sheet of paper and an envelope. We'll take just a moment of quiet and give you some time to at least begin to ask for your word. If you find a word shimmering, write it down. If you don't receive your word, don't worry. You can write down whatever word, phrase or image comes to mind. Or even whatever you happen to think of. It might be a clue or a first step in your discernment. At any time during the next few minutes of quiet, you can write down your word and/or your thoughts. At the end of the time, I'll ring the chime.

Now, I'd like you to address the envelope to yourself. Fold your paper and enclose it in the envelope, and seal the envelope. No one will see what you've written. Except for you. You will receive your envelope in the mail at the end of the Epiphany season, and you can see how you've been doing. Did you have the right word? Has your word been helpful to you as you live and work and play and grow in wisdom and stature? Or did you simply need a reminder of what the Spirit was telling you tonight? Go ahead and address your envelopes.

I'll close with words from theologian and author Bruce Epperly: “While celebration is in order at New Year's, the turning of the year is also an opportunity for *reflection*, *gratitude*, and *transformation*. With Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, we can breathe in the New Year, opening to the totality of our feelings and experiences. As we breathe in, we can accept the fullness of our experience, including a divine peace that passes all understanding. We can listen for a quiet voice of possibility amid the welter of experience; a still small voice, whispering in sighs too deep for words, calling us to adventure and transformation.”

Happy New Year! God is with us!

Amen

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

*Clearly Isaiah imagines salvation as social and national as well as individual. The healing of persons is interconnected with the healing of nations. In the wake of the last few years' economic, budget, and debt crises, this ought to be patently obvious. There is no rugged individualism here – no privilege for the “job creators” or the “1%” – but the emergence, albeit still a dream, of justice rolling down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

*It is written . . .*

I will joyfully exult in YHWH, who is the joy of my soul!  
My God clothed me with a robe of deliverance  
and wrapped me in a *mantle of justice*,  
the way a bridegroom puts on a turban,  
and a bride bedecks herself with jewels.  
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,  
and a garden brings its seed to blossom,  
so Exalted YHWH makes justice sprout,  
and praise spring up before all nations.  
For Zion's sake I will not be silent,  
nor for the sake of Jerusalem, I will not rest -  
not until her integrity shines like the dawn,  
her deliverance like a flaming torch.  
The nations will see your vindication, and the rulers your splendor;  
you will have a new name that YHWH's mouth will bestow.  
You will be a garland of beauty in YHWH's hands,  
a solemn crown worn by your God.

Galatians 4:4-7

*Galatians describes us as God's children in whom God's Spirit cries out, “Abba!” There is a deep movement of grace and inspiration in our lives. There is always a point of contact – a place of revelation – in every life.*

*It is written . . .*

When the designated time had come, God sent forth the Christ - born of a woman, born under the Law – to deliver from the Law those who were subject to it, so that we might receive our status as adopted heirs. The proof that you are children of God is the fact that God has sent forth into our hearts the Spirit of the Child who calls out, "Abba!" You are no longer slaves, but daughters and sons! And if you are daughters and sons, you are also heirs, by God's design.

Luke 2:22-40

*Two elders have been waiting for their spiritual fulfillment. They have prepared for an epiphany, for a sense of God's revealing, by prayer and presence. They alone recognize this nondescript family as holy; they alone see the hopes of humanity in this little child. They have prepared a lifetime for this vision of holiness, and see it when it appears. Yet, their vision is not private or restricted to this child – God's salvation is prepared for all peoples, friends and strangers alike, all nations shall experience divine revelation and glory.*

*It is written . . .*

When the day came for them to be purified, as laid down by the Law of Moses, Mary and Joseph took Jesus up to Jerusalem and presented him to God. For it is written in the Law of God, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to God." They likewise came to offer in sacrifice "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons," in accord with the dictate of the Law of our God.

Now there lived in Jerusalem a man named Simeon. He was devout and just, anticipating the consolation of Israel, and he was filled with the Holy Spirit. She had revealed to Simeon that he would not see death until he had seen the Messiah of God. Prompted by the Spirit, Simeon came to the temple; and when the parents brought in the child to perform the customary rituals of the Law, Simeon took the child in his arms and praised God, saying,

"Now, O God, you can dismiss your servant in peace,  
just as you promised;

because my eyes have seen the salvation,  
which you have prepared for all the peoples to see,  
a light of revelation to the Gentiles  
and the glory of your people Israel."

As the child's mother and father stood there marveling at the things that were being said, Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, "This child is destined to be the downfall and the rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that is rejected, so that the secret thoughts of many may be laid bare. And a sword will pierce your heart as well."

There was a woman named Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher, who was also a prophet. She had lived a long life, seven years with her husband, and then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the Temple, worshiping night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up at that moment, she gave thanks to God and talked about the child to all who anticipated the deliverance of Jerusalem.

When the couple had fulfilled all the prescriptions of the Law of God, they returned to Galilee and their own town of Nazareth. The child grew in size and strength. He was filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was with him.

