

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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Presentation/Transfiguration
Luke 2:22-38

Wisdom in the Light, Wisdom in the Shadows

First, let me say that growing older does not always mean growing wiser. We all know that foolishness is a human trait that can persist for decades. Some of us recognize our own foolishness; some only recognize it in others. What's really funny is when we recognize ourselves in the foolishness of others. If you follow the comic strip "Pickles," you probably know what I mean. Earl and Opal make us laugh because we can be as foolish as they are.

But I also want to say that one of the gifts of growing older can be the gift of growing wiser. Today's story of Simeon and Anna meeting the infant Jesus and his parents in the Temple is a story which exhibits the wisdom of the elderly. Simeon and Anna's wisdom enables them to see God in the ordinary. They have spent their long lives listening to the scriptures and discerning God's message. The Holy Spirit has guided them as they have devoted their days and years to being close to God. They have patiently waited for the day when they would see God's light, God's glory, revealed in the Messiah. It wasn't a coincidence that they were at the Temple that day when Mary and Joseph brought their firstborn child to be dedicated to the Lord. They were there every day, because of their faithfulness and devotion and wise understanding of God's promise.

I know some people like Simeon and Anna. One of the gifts of the church is the opportunity for those who are younger to receive the wisdom of those who are older, just as Mary and Joseph received the insights and blessings of Simeon and Anna. "What are we getting into?" they must have wondered. Simeon and Anna were there to tell them. "Who is this child?" they probably asked one another. Simeon and Anna could see that this was the long-promised anointed one. And if they hadn't yet asked "What lies ahead for us, and for our son?" the prophecy of these two elders in faith began to pull aside the veil from their vision.

He would be the consolation of Israel and light for the Gentiles. He would be the revelation of God for all peoples. But his light would also be accompanied by shadows. His truth would require a time of decision, a price to be paid by him and by those who loved him. The wisdom voiced by Simeon is the wisdom of those who have lived a long time: that all life contains suffering and grief, especially when lived in the pursuit of truth and righteousness.

Preacher and scholar Fred Craddock writes, "As much as we might wish to join the name of Jesus only to the positive, satisfying, and blessed in life, the inescapable fact is that anyone who turns on light creates shadows. This is what is meant literally by 'making a difference.'" (*Luke*, 1990, John Knox Press, Louisville, p. 39) And Jesus would make all the difference in the world.

So Simeon's blessing and prophecy, his light and the shadows of what lies ahead, tell two dimensions of the one story of Jesus. This child, of whom angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest heavens, and peace to all those with whom God is pleased," will bring conflict to the earth, the conflict of a new age breaking forth. He will bring grief to his mother, who will outlive him. And for all the centuries of history between then and now, he will bring the crisis of decision. Will you choose his way? Or someone else's?

I love this story, yet in all my years of preaching, I've never preached on it before. It's not in the lectionary of Sunday scriptures. The Catholics and the Episcopalians and the Orthodox read it at the Feast of the Presentation, but we less-liturgical Protestants don't even know when that is. I just learned about it a couple of weeks ago. It's on February 2, yes, Groundhog's Day, every year! (Talk about foolishness!)

In fact, much to my surprise, Groundhog's Day is distantly related to the Feast of the Presentation. All these traditions of the murky past took form in different cultures. February 2 is also known as Candlemas, a day for blessing all the candles used in the church over the course of a year. It is always 40 days after Christmas, since that is the time prescribed in Leviticus between the birth of a son and the purification ceremony for his mother, at which time a firstborn son would be dedicated to serving God. In Britain, that holy day was credited with meteorological significance: "*If Candlemas Day is clear and bright, / winter will have another bite. / If Candlemas Day brings cloud and rain, / winter is gone and will not come again.*" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presentation_of_Jesus_at_the_Temple) Can't you hear that idea echo in the Pennsylvania Dutch tradition around the groundhog?

But back to Candlemas, the Feast of the Presentation. If it is 40 days after Christmas, and Lent begins 40 days before Easter, and both happen in early February, Candlemas becomes a pivot point in the church's year. At Christmas we celebrate the amazing gift of Christ born in the world, and the light he shines in the world. But during Lent we pay attention to the shadows cast by his light, the reality of sin and Christ's confrontation with evil and death. We contemplate the cross in Christ's story. Lent calls us to take an honest look at the cross, so we may gain a wise understanding of the resurrection to come.

We are at that juncture, that pivot point, where Simeon's double-edged oracle of blessing and warning remind us that the baby in the manger and the suffering servant on the cross are one and the same. Will we walk toward that wisdom ourselves? Will we walk toward the light, through the shadows?

We rarely choose the shadows of our lives. Writer Flora Slosson Wuellner names five major categories of human suffering. The first she calls "the thorn in the flesh," caused by the human condition of limitation and mortality. The second is "the hunger," that which arises out of deprivation, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual. The third she calls "the catapult," when evil and injustice inflict themselves on us. None of these three are willed by God. God allows these to happen, but does not cause them.

She names a fourth category of suffering "the cross." This is "God's invitation to us to enter, share, and lift the burden of suffering for others." Jesus accepted that invitation on behalf of the world. He invites us to join him in the redemption of the world by taking up our cross. Finally, she calls the fifth form of suffering "the birth." This is suffering caused by the pain of endings and new beginnings, creative transition in which pain, anxiety, joy, and growth mingle within us. Both the cross and the birth are initiated by God. Both the cross and the birth are accompanied by deepening love and growth toward God. (1989, "When Prayer Encounters Pain," *Weavings* vol iv, no. 3, pp. 34-36) These last two are the forms of suffering Simeon saw in Jesus' future, and Mary's. Shadows amid the light, struggle on the way to salvation.

My friends, in this dark winter, we do well to contemplate both the blessing and the warning of Simeon, the light and the shadows. Christ is here for us, the blessing. His way includes what Simeon called "the rise and fall of many," a confrontation with truth and judgment, righteousness and justice. AND his way includes light which reveals God, in all God's glory, to all peoples, all nations, all colors and cultures and ages and stages of life.

And the wise ones among us point us to this joy. It's hard to measure the relative suffering various people have endured over the past eleven months, but I'd put the suffering of the elderly at the top of the list. They have experienced both the suffering of the thorn in the flesh and the suffering of deprivation much more so than most of the rest of us. Yet so often when I have talked with these valued elders of our congregation, I have been uplifted by their vision that God is with them, that Christ awaits them in eternity, and that the Holy Spirit is sustaining them. They may lament, but they don't whine. In so many words, they express what Simeon and Anna expressed: "My eyes have seen God's salvation!"

These “most vulnerable” are the most valuable members of our faith community. They are not disposable because they are old. They are the treasures of our church, the ones who have faithfully worshiped and prayed night and day like Anna, who show us what it means to be righteous and devout like Simeon. They may still have their foolish moments, like the rest of us. But they are the wise ones, the prophets, the faithful ones who lead us to see God’s salvation.

On this day of our congregation’s annual meeting, we will remember the wise ones who joined the church triumphant in 2020. We will give thanks to God for their witness, and for the legacy of faith we have received from them. We will rejoice that God has been faithful to us in all the years past, and place our trust that God’s faithfulness will continue for years to come. We will praise God for the creativity and faithfulness given to us by the Holy Spirit. And we will look to God’s future, for in Jesus Christ, our eyes have seen God’s salvation of the earth.

May we have the loyalty of Joseph, the willingness of Mary, the vision of Simeon, the joy of Anna, and the promise of Jesus Christ in our lives. And may we share these gifts with all who are seeking the redemption of the world.