

December 24, 2018 (Christmas Eve, 11:00 pm)

TEXT: Luke 2:22–32

TITLE: Seeing a Newborn with Old Eyes

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Here's an interesting bit of bible trivia. There are very few old people mentioned in the New Testament. The Old Testament has lots of them: Methusaleh, Noah, Father Abraham and Mother Sarah. But in the New Testament, only a few old people are mentioned and they seem to be clustered in the beginning of Luke's gospel. There's Zechariah and Elizabeth, both advanced in age when they become parents to John the Baptist, and in the passage I just read we're introduced to dear old Simeon—a person of advanced age, content to stay most days in the Jerusalem temple waiting for the promises of the Lord to be fulfilled in God's good time.

As providence would have it, Simeon was there when Mary and Joseph came to the temple to offer their humble sacrifices and present their infant son for the priest's blessing. We're given this wonderful image of an old man of faith, holding in his wrinkled hands the long-awaited child of promise, the Messiah and Prince of Peace. In that moment Simeon praised God and said, *“Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared for all people.”* The old man finally saw what he'd been waiting for and joy filled his heart.

Judith Viorst wrote a book called *Necessary Losses*, and in it she has an entire chapter on growing old. One gerontologist suggested this: *Put cotton in your ears and pebbles in your shoes. Pull on rubber gloves. Smear Vaseline on your glasses, and there you have it: instant aging.* Viorst suggests that being elderly means living in that time of life when your bones ache, when you hesitate before walking down a flight of stairs, when you spend more time looking for things you've misplaced than you do using them, when everything—bathing, shaving, dressing, undressing—takes longer to do, but when time for you passes quickly, as if you're gathering speed while coasting downhill.

There's no getting around it: Old age is what you're stuck with if you wish for a long life. Far too often, it is not an easy time of life. But it can and should be a time of learning and growth, of reviewing our past and integrating it so that we see our life as a unified whole—as a story that makes sense in the end. There's a lovely anecdote about an elderly woman who, near the end of her life, had the following dream. She imagined sitting at a table, dining with friends and eating with pleasure. But before she had finished her dinner, a waiter started clearing the dishes away. She raised her hand in protest. She wanted to stop him, but then she reconsidered, slowly dropped her hand, and let him clear. Her meal isn't finished; the food still tastes good and she'd like to have more. But she's had enough, and she's ready to let the rest go. It was a dream of a woman knowing that life can be gracefully set aside when it has been lived with integrity.

Simeon, the old man waiting in the temple for the fulfillment of God's promises, was in the final stage of his life. When he saw the infant Jesus, he knew that it was time to let

go—that God had kept God’s promises and that a Redeemer, a Messiah had been born to restore what sin and rebellion had broken. A child had been born that would fully live into the names prophesied from old: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Simeon breathed a sigh of relief and with joy and peace said “Let your servant depart in peace; my eyes have seen your salvation.”

We don’t often hear about Simeon on Christmas Eve. He’s part of the Christmas story, but not exactly. He wasn’t there in Bethlehem. He wasn’t a shepherd or magi. But he has much in common with all the characters from the Christmas story whom we know so well. Think about it. Jesus did not begin his formal ministry until he was about 30 years old. By that time, most of the characters in the Christmas drama were deceased; they would have died before Jesus began to preach in Galilee. Simeon was dead by then, as were likely the magi and most of the shepherds; and according to tradition, Joseph, Jesus’ earthly father, had also died before Christ began preaching about the Kingdom of God. Almost everyone who saw the Christ-child baby, who knelt at the stable or laid their tributes before him would not know what became of him. They only knew what they had heard and felt and seen back then—at that first Christmas long ago.¹

We are not so different from Simeon or all the rest. We have the scriptures; we have church worship and sacraments and stories of our faith, which like a rich banquet, feed and nurture us all the days of our life. We have our own sacred memories—moments when we’ve felt especially close to God; moments when we felt touched by God’s saving grace—and they sustain us during the dry patches and hard chapters of life when God feels distant and hope is hard to hang onto. Tonight ask yourself: What are those sacred moments for you?

I remember sitting beside my parents in the small Kansas church where I grew up or saying unison prayers while I studied the familiar patterns of the stained glass windows. What are your sacred memories? Are they from long ago? Are they from being in church or from being out under God’s blue sky? Are perhaps some of them from candlelit Christmas Eve services just like tonight?

Most of the people at the first Christmas weren’t around when the promises of that night came true. But that wasn’t necessary. They had seen enough—felt enough—been held and embraced and reassured deeply enough to know that, yes, God has kept God’s promise. Unto us is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. After those words sank in, the shepherds got up and returned to their fields. The magi re-mounted their camels and glided off toward the eastern horizon. And Simeon, dear old Simeon with his arthritic joints and cataracts was able to lovingly hold the baby boy and see clearly enough, that he could offer his words of faith, hand back the child to its parents with a song in his heart, and close out his life’s final chapter.

There is no denying that there is much that troubles us when we consider the world around us. Nations are beginning to question whether old alliances and treaties will be honored as presidents and dictators pull away from accepted international agreements.

Families feel more vulnerable now than they did even a year ago, with falling stock markets and uncertain health care options and jobs paying a living wage being harder and harder to find. There's the political tsunami of uncertainty coming out of Washington, the literal tsunamis of water crashing on Indonesian shores, and the human tsunamis crashing on borders as people flee violence and poverty and war. When we consider all these things, we see them as being big, oppressive, insurmountable—and when we look for answers, we tell ourselves we need something even bigger, even more powerful and imposing to turn the tide and overcome evil with goodness.

Which is why we need Christmas and Simeon and small candles lit against the darkness. The truth is that good vs. evil has never been about who has the most weapons, the biggest fortress or empire. The nature of God's salvation is that every little part is sufficient to accomplish what must be done—what is right and true and just. It's the yeast that leavens the whole loaf. It's the mustard seed that grows into the sprawling bush. It's the light that chases shadows away from an entire room. It's the newborn child held in an old man's hands that announces a new chapter in human history has begun. God's grace is sufficient. And God's "Yes" is always stronger than the "No" the world tries to impose on us.

Whatever your age—young or old—tonight you are God's child again. Whatever you've been told or have come to believe about this world, trust that the promises of the Lord are secure and true. However you've felt moments of grace, no matter how small or fleeting, hold onto to them. The old has passed away; the new has come. This day in the city of David is born to us a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

AMEN

¹ Cf. John Stendahl, "Holding Promises," sermon on Luke 2:22-40, *The Christian Century*, December 4-17, 2002, p. 17.