

When Past and Future Meet – December 31, 2017

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As we gather on this New Year's Eve morning, there are two ways of looking back on 2017. We can experience a feeling of relief that it is finally over, or with a sense of thankfulness that it was such a good year for us and our family. As we look toward 2018 we might have feelings of expectation and wonder. We don't know what is going to happen this year.

Each year the closing of one year and the dawn of the new year is a time of renewal – that maybe this year things are going to change. Events will occur in 2018 to give it a place in the history books. But right now 2018 is a blank page. No one knows what will happen. No one knows the events that will unfold these next 365 days. And we all await the future – some with dread, others with hopeful expectation.

When I read the Luke passage for today about how the elderly Simeon and Anna are introduced to the baby Jesus, I can't but think of the old kid's holiday show "Rudolph's Shiny New Year." In the story, Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer was recruited by Father Time to locate the Baby New Year, named Happy. Happy is not a very happy baby, and has run away (well, crawled away), because people always laughed at him because he had these amazingly large ears. He now wears a hat so no one can see his ears and laugh at him.

The problem is, the New Year cannot arrive if the baby doesn't show up at Midnight on New Year's Eve, and it will remain December 31st forever. Rudolph takes off after him with the help of some retired former New Years. The twist comes when a large ugly buzzard named Aeon enters the picture. His time is growing short, because his aeon is coming to an end on January 1, and at that time he will turn into ice and snow. Of course Aeon doesn't want this to happen, so he kidnaps baby Happy and hides him from Rudolph and his friends. He doesn't care that the rest of the world will be locked into December 31st forever. He only cares about himself.

Rudolph's search party eventually finds Happy, and just about convinces Happy to come back, but the rescue party sees his large ears and begins to laugh. The baby sadly starts to crawl away, but Rudolph stops him and explains to him his own story, that folks used to laugh at him because of his red nose. Rudolph tells Happy that he is not laughing at him, but that his ears make people happy. They are laughing, not to be mean, but out of joy. Happy agrees to come back with them.

At this point, the buzzard Aeon wakes up and sees what his happening. He attempts to keep them from escaping, and Rudolph tells Happy to take off his hat. Reluctantly he does, and when Aeon sees the large ears, he begins to laugh. He laughs and laughs and is filled with such joy that his heart is melted, and he changes. He is no longer dark, and cold, and self-serving. His

aeon is done, and now he has become a new creature. One that is not subject to an ice-cold eternal death. And then in the knick of time, with Santa's help, they transport Happy back to Father Time's castle, and the New Year begins.

I love that little bit of theology that's buried in the story. The arrival of a baby brings about the end of an era, the end of an aeon. And in that tiny baby comes redemption for all of creation, even a cold-hearted selfish old buzzard. Jesus brings to the world joy, and light, and new beginnings.

And in Luke's gospel, we hear another story of how the old meets the new and the arrival of a new era. The old man Simeon had been waiting a very long time to behold God's Messiah with his very own eyes. When he was a younger man, God had made a promise to Simeon. God had chosen Simeon to be a witness to the Christ. Simeon was a devout Jew and the Spirit of God had revealed to him many years ago that he would not see death until his eyes took in the Messiah. It was a promise that he never forgot and that he always trusted.

On the eighth day following his birth, the parents of Jesus brought him to the Temple in Jerusalem to be circumcised. The Spirit of God led Simeon to the Temple that day, and I can only imagine his great anticipation and joy. When Mary and Joseph entered the Court of Women, they brought the baby up to Simeon. He took the child into his arms, and praised God, saying, "Master, you can release your servant; release me in peace as you promised. With my own eyes I have seen your salvation; it's now out in the open for everyone to see; A God-revealing light to the Gentiles, and of glory for your people Israel." (The Message, adapted)

Then Simeon then began to bless them. He felt again God's power within him and he spoke prophetically. He looked directly at Mary - "This child marks both the failure and the recovery of many in Israel, a figure misunderstood and contradicted – the pain of a sword-thrust through you – But the rejection will force honesty, as God reveals who they really are."

As he spoke these words, Simeon could feel the division that the man Jesus would bring. This Messiah of God would inspire some to new life and others to hatred. The consolation of Israel that Simeon had longed for would include the salvation of the Gentiles, and would all come at great cost. According to New Testament scholar Fred Craddock, "Jesus will bring truth to light and in so doing throw all who come into contact with him into a crisis of decision. In that decision, rising and falling, life and death, result. Jesus precipitates the centrally important movement of one's life, toward or away from God. As much as we may 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." (Luke, p. 39)

For all who come into contact with Jesus, the choice presents itself – light or shadow. Do we follow the light that he brings, and live in service to him? Or do we instead lurk in shadow, fulfilling our own wants and desires, allowing the world to have its way?

Besides Simeon and the young family, there is another important figure in the story, and that is of the prophetess Anna. A United Methodist minister, Robert Martin Walker, has written a short vignette of her experience of this particular scene. It comes from a book called, "The Jesus I Knew." (p. 35-37, slightly adapted) In his words, here is Anna's story:

I am praying when the words of Simeon drift into my ears as if carried by the wind. The urgency of the words stops my prayers. I listen carefully but can't make them out. My hearing is fading like the rest of me. *The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord endures forever.*

What I can hear is the tenor of his voice. I hear excitement-wonder, awe-joy. The words lift me off my aching knees as if they have a power of their own.

In the distance I can make out three hazy figures. My eyesight is not so good anymore, either. I stumble toward them as if drunk. I can't walk as steady as I used to, but I am being drawn by the words. Now the forms are clearer. Simeon is at the altar with a man and a woman. He is holding something in his arms, but I need to get closer to make it out.

Now I am close enough to see and hear. Simeon's face is glowing with joy, and he is holding a baby! I tilt my better ear toward him and hear what he tells the mother. I stop walking and clutch at my heart to calm its drumming. Simeon is prophesying about the Messiah! How many years have I been in this temple, hoping, longing, waiting to see the Redeemer? I think it has been eighty-four, but my memory is fading too since Hasshub died. We had only seven years together, and the memory of him is so distant that I can no longer imagine his face. Here I fast and pray and wait. I could have remarried, but I chose to be God's bride instead.

As I squint to see the child more clearly, I am struck with a knowing that comes from beyond sense and sight and sound. This child is the Messiah! I feel tears wet my wrinkled-dried cheeks as Simeon holds the child high above him like a priest offering a sacrifice. He spoke of a sword piercing the mother's soul, and I feel my own heart rent by this Child.

How can this be happening to me? I am old and forgotten, having outlived even the memories of my life. I am of the tribe of Asher, the least of the twelve. I am a widow, dependent on the generosity of names I cannot remember. I am the least of God's servants, even though some call me a prophetess. But the Child drives these thoughts away like a healer exorcising demons.

As I behold the Child, there is only praise and wonder that the Lord would allow me to see him before my death, which can't be far away. I open my mouth to speak, and words of praise beyond my eloquence are released. I am a pouring pitcher, a gushing well. The praises flow through me and echo in the temple's silence. A song is woven from the word-notes, and the music is beautiful. I am swaying with the melody like a timbrel dancer, and a crowd has gathered. I sing:

This is the Messiah, the Long-awaited One. The Lord has given him to us for Judgment and Redemption, Consolation and Salvation. Praise the Lord for his great mercy and everlasting love!

I sing until the praises have dried up. I have spent my life-energy playing this music as God's instrument of praise. I feel myself falling, falling. Before I float down to the stone-cold floor and close my eyes in long-desired sleep, I catch a final glimpse of the Messiah, and that is enough to sustain my eternal dream. *The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord endures forever.*

Luke introduces us to these two figures, a man and a woman, both advanced in years. Both devout and righteous. Both longing for God's redemption of Israel. These two, elderly people represent everything that is good and righteous about Israel. Within their frail bodies is contained the hope of generations, going all the way back to the promise given to Abraham, that he and his wife Sarah would give birth to a great nation, through whom would eventually come a blessing to all nations on earth. The recollection of past promises lived on in these two people. Their love for and ultimate devotion to God found its reward in the revelation to them of the Messiah. They beheld in their sight this tiny boy, in whom rested the hope of Israel and the salvation of the world.

It's a beautiful image, that of an old man and woman, gazing with adoration into the face of an infant. Seeing their hopes finally realized. A new day was dawning for Israel. A new day was dawning for the world. The Messiah had arrived and with him he brought change.

Tomorrow we face a fresh year, full of possibilities. Despite what has gone before, we can approach this new day with hope for a better future. Once again we have been brought into the presence of the baby Jesus and are faced with a choice. Do we follow his light, the light that leads us toward the fulfillment of God's promised kingdom, leading a life like Simeon, of devotion and service to God? Will we stand up like Anna and sing his praises and serve as a witness to all who are seeking redemption? Or do we remain locked in the shadows, held prisoner to a world full of despair, trapped in a constant cycle of darkness? The child is here. He awaits our choice.