

“Prophets, Elderly and Wise People”  
Sermon on Sunday, December 29, 2023

Dear church,

Wise men in the Christmas story, that’s nothing new. Our minds leap to Matthew 1, the arrival of the magi in Bethlehem, oriental men bringing treasures to the Holy Family: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. It’s a catchy story. The colorful characters are often illustrated with camels and exotic wardrobes, and even their names are purportedly known. They are called Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. And they’re part of every Nativity Scene.

But now, in these quieter days after the birth of Christ, in the appendix of the Christmas narrative, we encounter a single wise man without any extraordinary flair, someone who had been living in the neighborhood for a long time, attending worship services, carrying out the boring duties of life and being faithful. Simeon! His name could have been Dave, Bill, John, or Mike. I know a few men with those names who have years of faithful service to the church under their belt. Now this man Simeon had a special spiritual gift. Luke writes, “It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.” Simeon was quite old and certain that he would not close his eyes before he had seen the promised child. He reminds us that prophets, seers, and mystics are not as far removed from us ordinary folks as we often think; they can be hidden in plain sight. Sometimes we just need to pay attention.

Luke is quick to mention another person from another gender in this passage, a woman named Anna who had lost her husband early in life and was now 84 years old, which is probably comparable to someone being 104 in our time. She too had lived in the local community and was gifted with prophetic insight. Like Simeon, she is not shown in our Nativity scenes. But I wouldn’t mind seeing those two elderly people added to the traditional lineup of Christmas characters even if they weren’t present in Bethlehem. For us, a local church without marble and fancy artwork, Anna and Simeon are our kind of people. Down to earth, faithful, receptive to the Holy Spirit, servants of God, patient and with some wrinkles - yes, that too. But they were people of integrity and spiritual energy despite their age.

Luke allows Simeon to put his faith in words that have been used in Christian liturgy since ancient times. The liturgical piece is called by the Latin term “Nunc Dimittis,” the beginning of Simeon’s famous prayer, “Now you may dismiss your servant in peace.” I love this expression. For people who have reached a certain age - octogenarians, nonagenarians, centennials, people who have seen the world change in their own lifetime, people who have watched history, they often find it very important to see the people they love in good hands before they close their eyes and depart from us... The church they attended for many years, the organizations they served, the causes they cared for, the people they loved and prayed for... they would like to see

them do well as they prepare for the great transition to the world beyond. When I visit the elderly people in our church (Florence Ulrich will turn 100 on January 25!), guess what they often ask me? "Pastor, how is the church doing?" And then they ask me again five minutes later, because their minds aren't as sharp as they used to be. "How is the church? Is it still doing well?"

It's a huge blessing when an old person can say, "Now I am departing in peace." It adds great comfort to everyone. "She died peacefully," people say and by that they mean more than just the circumstances of death...their state of mind, their soul. With the birth of Christ, Simeon and Anna had seen what their hearts and souls desired. They could now depart in peace.

Simeon's words describe the gospel in broader strokes. He saw a future many of his contemporaries could not imagine. Don't we appreciate it when people are ahead of their times? I think the answer is: often it's not appreciated until much later because people don't get it. I think of the wonderful Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a Catholic theologian, philosopher, mystic and scientist of the 20th century. His fusion of evolution and faith, his ability to speak the faith in terms of science were almost unheard of in the middle of the 20th century. His own church often enough refused to publish the works of this pious, if unusual Roman Catholic. He was not accepted. Just now, seventy years later, the world seems to be catching up with him.

In Simeon's words of praise, we read the future of the church. It was to be... "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel." That sounds familiar to our ears. But that Christ would be a light to the Gentiles, people not raised in religious homes, devoted to other gods and other interests, people from the outside looking in, that was not a given at the time. Yet, that is precisely the story Luke tells in the Book of Acts, people coming together. The church reached the souls of so-called Gentiles, people who were uninitiated to the Scripture and tradition Jesus grew up with. Jewish and Gentile people, slaves and free citizens, men and women, broke bread together in those early churches, not always without tension, but still... And guess what? Even now, the future that Simeon praises is still before us... a light for revelation! We are asked to tap into the untapped potential of the people in our community, finding and nurturing their hidden vocations. As we enter a new calendar year, 2024, we are hopeful, filled with visions of a better future. Because we are anchored not in trends and what's popular just now but in Christ, at once eternal and very much part of our time. He is the Word made flesh, the light that shines in the darkness, the peace that rules our lives. Anna and Simeon saw it. Can we see it? Can we see HIM among us? Peace comes with him. Amen.