

2020: What Are You Looking For?

Theodore Parker Church

January 5, 2020

Opening Words

A little girl was standing with her grandfather by an old-fashioned open well. They had just lowered a bucket to draw some water to drink. "Grandfather," asked the little girl, "where does the Spirit of Love live?"

The old man picked up the little girl and held her over the open well. "Look down into the water," he said, "and tell me what you see." "I see myself," said the little girl. "That's where Love lives," said the old man. "It lives in you."

(Mark Link in *Challenge* – from *Spiritual Literacy*, p. 38)

Come, let us worship together, inviting Love to help.

Reading

Luke 2:25-32 – New American Bible (Revised Edition) (NABRE)

Let's remember that Luke is one of two Gospels that tell the birth story of Jesus – the other being Matthew. The Christmas reading that we are most familiar with is from Luke – and this reading takes place shortly after the birth story, and talks about the time when Mary and Joseph took their new baby to Jerusalem, where the temple was, to be purified, as was the law.

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, awaiting the consolation of Israel, and the holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Messiah of the Lord. ²⁷ He came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to perform the custom of the law in regard to him, ²⁸ he took him into his arms and blessed God, saying:

²⁹ "Now, Master, you may let your servant go

in peace, according to your word,

³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹ which you prepared in sight of all the peoples,

³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and glory for your people Israel."

Reading

from *Meditations*, by Thomas Merton

A pilgrim was walking a long road when one day he passed what seemed to be monk sitting in a field. Nearby, men were working on a stone building.

"You look like a monk," the pilgrim said.

"I am that," said the monk.
"Who is that working on the abbey?"
"My monks," said the man. "I'm the abbot."
"It's good to see a monastery going up," said the pilgrim.
"They're tearing it down," said the abbot.
"Whatever for?" asked the pilgrim.
"So we can see the sun rise at dawn," said the abbot.

Sermon

What Are You Looking For?

the Rev. Anne Bancroft

Good morning – and welcome to 2020 Sunday mornings. I confess I come to you more than a little concerned this morning. I think we are facing the possibility of unprecedented world disorder. My hope and prayer (as always) is first that the situation will settle down; and then, that these thoughts and words might be useful to you and your spirits as we navigate the days ahead.

New Year's is always a curious invitation to imagine ourselves forward, to think about what we want the year to be, or what plans we may have in front of us. I think maybe that's why I often remember our friend, Simeon, who we heard about this morning in the reading from the Gospel of Luke. His story is tucked in between Jesus' birth and his adolescence. I want to suggest that for us, this little vignette may have more to offer about Simeon's experience than what it says about Jesus.

On the Sunday before Christmas just past, I shared a children's book called *Mira and the Big Story* that asked us to consider how a story makes us feel, how a story can make our hearts feel either bigger or smaller. The issue is not so much about how a story is true as it is about how it touches us. And I asked us to consider both the Hanukkah story and the birth story of Jesus in that context. So I would invite you to the same kind of reflection about our friend Simeon's story today.

Simeon was an old man. In Eastern Christian traditions, his age is set a bit north of 200, so clearly, he had been serving at the temple a long time. According to Jewish custom, new babies were to be welcomed at the temple after their mothers had completed their times of separation, so Mary and Joseph took him to the temple in Jerusalem to be blessed 40 days after his birth. And Simeon meets them there, having been – according to the Gospel - touched by the holy spirit. "The holy spirit was upon him," it says. In my mind, I imagine a staff of blessers at the temple – the way they have a staff of shoe people at Bloomingdale's, for example – and

on this particular day, Simeon gets the word that he should be present for this particular child. So he greets the family, takes the baby in his arms, and somehow recognizes this is no ordinary child. This child is a sign for him of something better to come.

And then he says a curious thing: “Now, Master, you may let your servant go.”

What comes to be known as Simeon’s song is referenced in Latin “nunc dimittis” – now thou dost dismiss – which is to say, Holy One, You gave me what I needed. I can die in peace. I’ve seen what I was waiting for, what I was hoping to see for so long, what I was assured I would see before I died. There is hope for the world, Simeon discovered. Your presence is among us. I’m good to go.

Can we even imagine the sense of peace that Simeon must have felt, having the assurance in his heart that all was not lost? That what he had been waiting for, what he had been looking for, was arrived? A sign, a presence of great Love, a gift.

I used this text for the sermon that the Search Committee heard in the Wellesley church six years ago, before I had been called here. Now, as then, I want to suggest that we set aside any worry about whether the story is historically accurate or true, or verifiable – we can’t know, of course, though it is powerful mythology. Remember – I mentioned – that myths are those things that don’t happen once and are done with, but those truths that happen again and again such that we create stories about them. Think of Sisyphus, rolling his ball over and over up the hill.

We have likely all felt that sense of frustration and futility, even though it is likely not a ball we were literally rolling up, watching fall, rolling up, watching fall. But it is a relatable story about the task we just can’t quite get done. And, surely, in our religious imagination, we might sense how it could feel to experience an event like Simeon’s that meant you could die happy and at peace.

We know that for our Christian friends, this story is likely about Simeon bearing witness to God’s presence in the world in the body of this small child, confirming Jesus as the Christ.

What I am asking YOU to consider is what event, what discovery, what awareness might inspire in you a response that means you could let go, you could die happy in the knowledge that . . . what? When we look for personal meaning in a universal story, we often find it in the particular. Six years ago, asked the same question, you might have had a different answer about what might allow you to pass this life in peace. So, I am wondering what the experience of peace

might be for you now, in 2020. What are you, or will you spend your time looking for this year such that finding it would allow you to rest?

I could imagine any number of meta-inspirations: A solution to climate change would be great, for one thing. We are despairing, even as we speak, over the unimaginable fires being experienced right now in Australia, in an area hotter and drier than ever in its history. I know I would rest more easily if I thought we had a better way to manage our impact on the earth.

Or, we might look for a 2020 election outcome that we could feel good about. Would that help? Or in the shorter term, at the very least, a resolution to the escalating hostilities in the Middle East provoked by the recent killing, by Americans, of an Iranian military general.

It's possible our list would be a bit closer to home: We might look for miraculous health recovery for ourselves or someone we love.

There are so many things to long for in this world. The scale, in a way, feels both different from – and strangely similar to – our friend Simeon's. We tend to exist in the realm of day-to-day. Consider a typical list of our to-do's:

Wake up and start the morning.
Brush our teeth.
Take the dog for a walk.
Make the bed.
Have a banana, and check e-mails.
Watch some news – check the paper.
Get the kids to school, maybe?
Get to work . . .
Check on family at some point.
Get home, walk the dog.
Etc., etc.

Contrast it to what we might imagine Simeon's day offered:

Wake up.
Find evidence of God's love in the world.
Write a song about it.

Which is harder, do you think? Finding the evidence, or writing the song?

Find evidence of love in the world.
Write a song about it.

Our friend, Thomas Merton, who we also heard from this morning, spent quite a bit of his time looking for meaning in the world. He was a Trappist monk, ordained at the age of 34, a writer, theologian, mystic, poet, social activist, and scholar. He may have had more in common with Simeon than most of us, at least in terms of how he spent his day.

The story we read this morning felt especially relevant this year. “It’s good to see the monastery going up,” the pilgrim said. “They’re tearing it down,” replied the abbot.

It feels like many things are being torn down just now, though – unfortunately – not always with the sense of opportunity that Merton shared, nor even with a clear sense of intention, let alone impact.

Systems are being dismantled: regulatory means of protecting us from ourselves, political means of assuring our democracy, social means of respectful engagement. These are worrisome challenges to our cultural fabric, to our safety and sense of well-being.

But other systems are being dismantled and torn down, for good reason, though not as fast perhaps: power structures that have favored some over others for far too many years, systems of supremacy that need to be eradicated if we are ALL to see the dawn.

Our task, of course, is to discern which tearing down serves the better good. I would offer that in this work, we cannot afford to lose sight of what Simeon was looking for – the presence of a greater love in the world. At the end of the day, or the beginning or the middle, we must be about serving each other from a place of greater love.

The theme for this month is Integrity – the state of being whole, unified, sound in construction, having moral uprightness. In a conversation with colleagues about how they were integrating this theme into their worship services, someone mentioned our moments of frustration with each other, using our over-filled morning commutes as an example of our interaction and how annoying it is until they remembered that traffic is not something out there . . . WE ARE THE TRAFFIC. We are the traffic.

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“Where does the Spirit of Love live, grandfather?”

“Love lives in you,” little girl. “Love lives in you.”

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Well, if that's true then we better get busy. This year, 2020, is not the year to demur. As a means of offering us a way to work collectively on behalf of each other (like feeding the person across the table), the UUA is offering a way for us to participate this year called UU the Vote.

Our overall goal is to create a decentralized, large-scale campaign that moves our faith communities into new or deeper action, making electoral engagement a strategic facet of any of the justice work we do, and strengthening our relationships to build direct democracies in beloved communities for the long haul.

Participating in our democracy is not only about our fifth principle. **As Unitarian Universalists, our deepest beliefs are a life-giving, life-saving, life-sustaining alternative to the narratives and policies of domination, supremacy, exceptionalism, and exploitation that are on the rise.**

Friends, as much as I can imagine Simeon's joy at finding the expression of love in one face, we must continue our search for the saving grace in each other every day, in every moment, now more than ever. Unlike Simeon, we are not dismissed. For us, this is not a one-and-done event. We see love, and we see its absence; we see it again, and then it's gone. It is ours to give, and ours to receive so we have to keep looking, over and over again, and writing songs and singing them over and over again – deed on deed, thought on thought, as DuBois reminds us – with the hope that someday, when the way is clear and the walls are no longer, we will all see the sunrise at dawn together. But it's not yet, friends, so in 2020 – this new year, this new decade – we have to keep looking for love and working together, all at the same time. There's too much at stake to stop.

Let's greet this new day with hope that together, we will find our way.

Closing Hymn

Morning Has Come

Benediction

Strength and love and light go with you as we walk the road ahead.
And if you pray, pray for peace, friends. The world so needs it.