

The Last Song
Luke 2:22-32
January 7, 2018

I was contemplating these senior citizens Simeon and Anna, this week, when I learned of a book, “Happiness Is Choice You Make”: Lessons from a Year Among the Oldest Old”. A New York Times journalist John Leland has over the past three years published stories based on ongoing interviews with six New Yorkers aged 85 and over. The “oldest old”. In addition to this journalism, he’s also written a book describing his personal journey with those folks and how they’ve impacted his own middle-aged life.

One of the interviewees was a Fred Jones who lives (in Leland’s judgment) in a “cluttered wreck of an apartment that was up two flights of stairs he could barely climb.” In the course of a conversation one day as Mr. Leland was sharing some of his middle-aged woes, Fred asked him to define happiness. Fred didn’t wait for the journalist’s answer but instead offered up his own definition: *“Happiness to me is what’s happening now. If you aren’t happy at the present time then you’re not happy. Some people say, ‘if I get that new fur coat for the winter or get myself a new automobile I’ll be happy then’. But you don’t know what’s going to happen by that time. Right now, are you happy?”* When Leland followed up by asking him to describe the happiest time of his life he said without hesitation, “right now”.

I wonder about Simeon and Anna, these two oldest old characters Luke places at the end of Jesus’ nativity story. Simeon, who had been anticipating the arrival of the Messiah all his life, had been assured by the Spirit that he would not die until that day arrived. Was he happy? Anna, an elderly widow (84 or 91 depending on how you read the Hebrews) and a prophetess, lived on the grounds of the temple. What did she live for? Was she just biding time until she died, or did she find a quiet solitary joy in a simple life of prayer? Together Simeon and Anna represent the faithful Jews who never doubted that God’s Messiah would come. On Simeon’s bucket list was one thing: seeing

the Messiah. His life purpose: Waiting. Watching. Hoping for Salvation, the Savior, to appear as a child. Then, only then, could he relax into his death. Quite an item for their bucket list

I wonder if Simeon he had moments of doubt, depression, cynicism, wondering if he had heard the Spirit's promise accurately? Was his a foolish hope? He was getting wobbly in the knees, weak in the heart...could he live to see the Christ Child? Did he sometimes give up or was he as extraordinary as Fred Jones—content with present happiness? I think it's rare... Now I remember a few of the "very very old" group responding to the polite "How are you today" saying "Tip Top" and "I'm well. I don't have time to complain." I admire that optimism, that positive self-talk. But much more often this pastor hears, with varying degrees of resignation and depression, "I don't know why I'm still alive", "I can't do anything anymore".

Can you be happy (maybe content is a better word) while you wait for a promised event? A child coming home from college? Your wedding date? A new great grandchild? The end of your chemotherapy?

It has been said that Harriet Tubman was known to wait in train stations without the aid of train schedules or knowing when the train was coming. When asked why she would do that, she simply said because she knew the train was coming. That was enough. The train tracks were in place. She was at the depot. A train will come along. Seems odd to those of us dependent on our GPS with its estimated times of arrival.

Imagine Priest Simeon waiting... 50, 60, 70 years. How many babies' eyes had Simeon looked into over the decades? There must have been a near steady stream of couples and baby boys entering the temple. How many babies had they seen, smiled at, perhaps even blessed, and then turned away? Or did seeing, holding and blessing all the babies itself elevate his spirit and give his aging heart a fresh hope?

Finally, one fine day the Spirit leads Simeon into the temple as Mary and Joseph and Jesus are arriving. He took one look, and he knew!

It was over. Simeon's waiting, that is. His Bucket List—empty. He can die now. But first he sings. Simeon's Song, the Nunc Dimittis.

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,

according to thy word:

For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,

Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;

A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.

Luke has told Jesus' birth story in two chapters and four songs.

Mary's Song, the Magnificat, when Mary and Elizabeth and their in-utero children meet.

Zachariah's Song, Benedictus sung when Zachariah got his voice back after following the angel's instruction to name his son John instead of Zachary Jr.

And the Angel's Song, the Gloria sung by the angels after giving the birth announcement to the shepherds in the fields.

Now, Simeon's Song, The Nunc Dimittis. The paraphrase:

+God has kept God's word.

+Simeon has seen "salvation", seen, that is, the "Savior"

+The Savior who is for all people, whose presence will bring light all who walk in darkness.

Sounds like happiness! More: Joy. Comfort.

"Nunc Dimittis" (Dismiss me) has taken its place in the hymnology of the church just as the Magnificat of Mary, Benedictus of Zachariah, and the Gloria of the angels.

In Monastic communities, Nunc Dimittis is chanted during Compline, the last of the prayers said right before sleep. I recall the first time I heard this at compline at a monastery where I was on retreat. It seemed morbid... I'm going to sleep expecting to die? Well, some of us will. Imagine every evening peacefully giving the care of your body, mind and spirit, into God's hands. I'm ready to die because I recognize you as Savior of the World, Bringer of Peace. I need nothing else.

There's an echo of this prayer in the more famous

“Now I lay me down to sleep...
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake
I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

Fearful that this sounded too morbid to teach little children, it's been modified:

“Angels watch me through the night,
And wake me with the morning light.”

You decide at what age a child can handle the possibility of death.... Perhaps after a certain age the original language, like the oldest old Simeon's song, becomes both more palatable and more practical and comforting.

A second classical use of the Nunc Dimittis is at the very end of the funeral service. In “high” Presbyterian services and routinely in Roman Catholic or Episcopalian Funerals as the priest processes with the casket, a cantor or choir sings:

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant
in peace, according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,

Simeon's blessing becomes the blessing said over the one who has died, who has known Christ, seen "salvation" and has been a reflection of the Christ light. It's the last song. For Simeon, for Luke, and for the dead in Christ. This is enough. Died with nothing left on that bucket list.

So Simeon's Song, is heard at Compline and at "high church" Funerals.

There is another place the Nunc Dimittis is sometimes heard in Protestant Churches... John Calvin transposed his theology of the Lord's Supper into his reformation of the Catholic Mass in 1525. He inserts this liturgical song following the communion. After receiving the bread and the juice the entire congregation together sings "Dismiss us now, we have seen your salvation". Why there? Unlike the Roman Mass which understood juice and bread as Christ's body, Calvin's theology they elements are to be gazed "through" to see Christ, much as the orthodox look "through" icons as a window into heaven. Christ our Savior has been present in the communion. We say these words, but so singing them would solidify them in our hearts. We have been in the presence of the Christ, the Savior, the Light of the World. And we leave the service... In peace.

But... Simeon had a few more words to say following his song. This child illustrates the failure and recovery of people in Israel. He will be misunderstood, Mary will feel pain, like a knife in her heart. The light will show the world and its people the truth about who they are.

We need that balance in Simeon's message. It guards us from being Pollyannaish and trite receiving our experiences of suffering, rejection, despair as part of the human condition. We aren't all like the oldest old Fred Jones. We don't have to be happy all the time. In fact, only when we are honest enough to see our shadows, can we invite in the Light. The Light of the World.

