

Luke 2:22-40 *The Blessing of Age*
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama
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The Rev. Terry Hamilton-Poore

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, [Mary and Joseph] brought Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), ²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, who was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

My grandfather had a crack down the center of the nail of his left index finger. It had been there since he was a teenager, when he had tried to catch a squirrel and, unfortunately, had succeeded. The squirrel bit him right at the base of his nail, and the nail never grew back properly.

That happened decades before I was born, but it was still there—a memento on a wrinkled hand of the farm boy he had been. Grandpa told me the story as a cautionary tale, and it worked—I’ve always known to be careful around wild animals, no matter how little and cute they might be.

Our most important stories are borne to us on wrinkled hands. Today, in Luke, Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the temple, and they are greeted by two, ancient souls—Simeon, who’s been waiting for this moment for a lifetime; and Anna, the prophet, who lives in the temple, praying night and day. They’ve been yearning for the sign of God’s salvation, and their old eyes recognize that sign in this infant.

They also know that what lies ahead won’t be easy. “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel,” Simeon tells Mary, “and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

He’s not warning her off, by the way. He’s simply trying to prepare her. To offer the perspective of age—because old folks know what young folks don’t: that hard things happen, but they aren’t the end of the world--we can get through them. We may suffer, but even that’s not the end of the world—because the other thing that old folks know that

young folks don't, is that it isn't all about us. There's a bigger story that we're a part of. That's the wisdom that they pass on to us.

I love that this story takes place in the temple. It makes me think of all the times in church when I've seen babies being passed down the pews through pair after pair of wrinkled hands. Church is one of the few places left in our culture where we develop truly intergenerational relationships. Studies have found that children and young adults who are close to their grandparents have better self-esteem, are more resilient, and are less prone to depression. In our transient culture, though, a lot of kids are far away from their grandparents—but through the church, you're likely to have many, many surrogate grandparents—making promises at your baptism, teaching you in Sunday School, watching you grow up, greeting you with joy when you come back home during college breaks.

And for the parents of those children, who tend to panic and imagine their child's future going up in smoke with every mediocre report card or mental health diagnosis, the older folks can pat them on the shoulder, remind them that these are good kids, and they'll get through it just fine.

But not without scars. And not without pain. And that's just normal.

As Simeon said to Mary, "A sword will pierce your own soul, too." Ouch. But when you hear that from someone with experience, someone who has lived to tell the story, you can be more prepared and less panicky when it happens.

In a Faith in Action webinar I attended a few months ago, the featured speaker was Ruby Sales, an elderly, African-American, Civil Rights activist. I encourage you to look up her video clips on YouTube, because she has some wisdom to offer, and so much compassion, in spite of—or because of—the things she’s been through. She said something in that webinar that really made me sit up. She said, “The role of the church is to give young people a future by guarding the efficacy and value of the elderly.”

I’d never thought of it that way before. Churches often get fixated on attracting young people and families—but if, at the same time, we don’t honor our old folks, then we are implicitly telling those young folks that their value is only going to diminish over time. What kind of a future is that? But in honoring our elderly, we give our kids something to aspire to, and we ease the fear of aging.

And the thing is, aging really isn’t something to fear, in spite of the physical challenges it brings. Several studies have found that old people are happier than middle-aged people, who are happier than young people. We get more settled in ourselves. We learn to focus on what we have, rather than what we don’t. And, as I heard Dr. Laura Carstensen, the Director of the Stanford Center on Longevity say in an interview, “older people are relieved of the burden of the future.”

That’s something, isn’t it? To be “relieved of the burden of the future”?

That’s what we hear in Simeon’s voice as he holds Jesus in his arms, proclaiming, “Now, O God, let me go in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation.”

That's what we hear in the prophet Anna's voice as she "began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem." They are both freed from the sense that they need to save the world, as they entrust the future to the tiny child they hold in their arms.

And that child, we're told, "grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him."

Now, even that child has the perspective of age. Yes, we celebrate his birth again and again, year after year; but that doesn't mean he goes back to stage one every time. This isn't Groundhog Day! The child to whom the future was entrusted grew up, and he continues to be embodied in the church—the church with a big "C," which has racked up a couple thousands of years of existence—years that have been filled both with reasons to celebrate and cause for repentance. And church with a little "c"—the individual congregations, like ours, with unique histories to draw from.

There is some hard-won wisdom in our past, if we choose to learn from it. There is a treasure trove of wisdom in our people, if we choose to honor it.

And there are small hands among us that need to receive that wisdom, if they're going to carry it into the future.

As this old year wanes none-too-soon, it's important that we not just cast it aside. There's too much that we need to learn from it—about the limitations of our own power, the

interconnectedness of our entire world, our responsibilities toward one another, the importance of patience and persistence and critical thinking and kindness and self-sacrifice.

What Simeon warned Mary about, this year has taught to be true: “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.” Some folks have fallen, and others have risen this year. And in this topsy-turvy time, where lies have been proclaimed as truth, and cruelty has been held up as a virtue, we’ve seen some inner thoughts revealed that we may wish could have just stayed hidden. Ugly realities that have pierced our souls.

We need to hold onto the lessons all of this has to teach us, so that we won’t be naïve in the days ahead.

Now, though, the future awaits. Our savior has come among us with hope made young, again.

May we honor what our weathered hearts have learned, giving us clear vision as we move with Christ into this new year; and may what we’ve learned give us lighter steps from knowing that we don’t carry the future—he does.

Our job is simply to follow him with faith and courage and persistent love, so that we, too, will grow and become strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God will be upon us.

