

Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:22-40
Christmas 1 B
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Though certainly not the first generation to come up with the notion, since the 1960's – perhaps a little earlier in the “Beat Generation” -- it became fashionable once again to be a “seeker.” Religious identities and authorities were thrown off on the basis of all sorts of individual warrants. The drill was always some sort of variation on how one needs to come to religious faith it individually. That means that getting a good fit with one's temperament, style, life choices. It means never having a God who fails to side with you.¹ And the buffet-style religious belief was invented.

It may not be any surprise to you that your pastor was a part of that as well. After school I would take the bus downtown and meet with my pastor for debate. We talked writer and philosophers. He gave me my first Søren Kierkegaard as a Christmas gift. By the time I was in ninth grade I had pretty much debated my way out of any religious faith. For a period of time a PK (pastor's kid) friend of mine and I were card carrying members of the Bertrand Russell Society. We were on our own. This is not an uncommon story. It seems now the norm. Everyone seems to live through some version of this.

I will save my trip back to faith for another time, but for today I want to re-affirm that faith, that is trust in God, has always in my life shared the field with questions and doubt. There are in this brave new world a variety of beliefs and life stances that are in competition with Christianity. Between what one might call the faith of Abraham and the nihilism of Nietzsche there is a vast middle ground where most of us live our lives. This is what Charles Taylor has called the “stabilized middle condition.”²

This is the position in which we may have found a way to “escape the forms of negation, exile, emptiness, without having reached fullness.” The relative stability of that spiritual routine “keeps at bay the exile, or the ennui, or captivity in the monstrous; and second, that we have some sense of continuing contact with the place of fullness; and of slow movement toward it over the years.”³ Even Jesus had to put up with this middle position.⁴ The father of the possessed boy shrieked out to Jesus, “I believe. Help my unbelief.” It's about all the trust any of us can muster.

¹Primitive Radio Gods, “Standing Outside A Broken Phone Booth With Money In My Hand,” *Rocket*, 1996.

²Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007), pp 6ff.

³*Ibid.*, p. 6, 7.

⁴Mark 9:19-29.

Faith narratives like this are common as “coming of age” stories. Paul Wallace, writing in his blog a few weeks ago, detailed his leaving and returning to faith in a piece entitled “Why I Came Back.”⁵ In high school, he writes,

We spent a lot of time sitting in clouds of yellow smoke and listening to Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention . . . [Christians] dressed like my mom wanted me to dress. Everything neat and tucked-in.

The faithful around him were “preposterous Christians. . . I figured I could keep my distance from anything that went by the name of God, and I could do it with integrity.” So, like everyone else, Wallace began a time of “finding himself.”⁶

Wallace “came back” over a long time. It was not at the receiving end of someone’s evangelism or argument. It was not a sudden revelation in a mountain setting or a sunset. His coming back happened slowly, while building a friendship with a woman, a woman he eventually married.

It is not the route of this searching that is reflected in the text this morning. It is the arrival at a stable faith that is celebrated. I daresay “arrival at a stable faith” is something that few of us can even aspire to in our lives. That gives us an uneven wistfulness about Simeon and his confession. That a look into the arms of a young woman at her infant brought to him everything he ever needed to know or believe about God, for that we envy him.

The tensions of faith we might read back into the time when Jesus was born. Many had given up on what is called “the consolation of Israel.” Willful unbelief had supplanted the sunny visions of Isaiah. The times were political and they were violent.

Luke, however, has found a very few in Israel who had found that middle ground between promise and fulfillment. There were just a few, Elizabeth, Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, and now Anna and Simeon. Luke identifies Simeon explicitly with those who were still looking for something, looking for the “consolation of Israel.” They lived faithfully in a time when few did so anymore.⁷

And so they brought their baby son to the Temple, according to the proper piety. Jesus’ parents

... are again performing their duty as pious Jews by returning to the Temple, this time in order to offer a sacrifice and to consecrate their child to the Lord. They must have been in a solemn mood that day, full of

⁵ Paul Wallace, “Why I Came Back,” at <http://psnt.net/blog/essays/why-i-came-back/> (Accessed December 28, 2011.)

⁶ All the above quotations from Wallace, *op cit*.

⁷ David L. Tiede, *Luke*, Augsburg Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 74-5.

reverence and expectancy, the way many young parents in our congregations when their first child is to be baptized. It's not hard to imagine, therefore, the quiet procession they must have made to the great Temple, their awe at entering its holy courts, their nervousness as they prepared to sacrifice according to the law. Nor is it difficult to imagine their reaction as an old man comes forward out of the shadows to scoop up their child into his arms and prophesy about him. Startled at first, perhaps, even a bit frightened by the old man's ecstatic face. ... Hearing Simeon's prophecy, they are reminded of the events of the previous weeks and months when angels and shepherds had intruded into their lives to foretell the greatness of their Son. How puzzled they must have been, though, at what we now call Simeon's "song": Lord now let your servant go in peace."⁸

It's an almost colloquial blessing, "Now I can die ... because I've seen everything." To catch the sense of relief in Simeon, consider what happened at the 1860 Republican National Convention in Chicago.

During the tense third ballot, Ohio switched four votes from Salmon P. Chase to Abraham Lincoln, thereby giving the lawyer from Illinois the nomination. At Ohio's announcement, one man started crying and another old man started quoting Scripture, at the top of his lungs: "Now Lord, lettest thou thy servant depart in peace for these eyes of mine..."⁹

There is something wistful about Simeon's faith, Simeon's song. Most of the time life in the middle ground is difficult enough that just for a moment to be able to see what Simeon saw would be wonderfully satisfying. Just to be able to sing that song with a sigh at some point in our lives would seem to settle everything. Just to be so spiritually satisfied.

We can say that it happens once in awhile. People get an opportunity to gaze into the future of God, and to be satisfied and whole. Lauren Winner writes, "I wish I had the eyes and faith that Simeon had, the eyes and faith to recognize God's redemption in unlikely bodies. I wish I had the eyes to see God's redeeming work in the world around me, and the faith to proclaim it."¹⁰

In the middle, where most of us live our lives, you and I keep nihilism at bay just long enough to be able to see trust in God just over *there*. We understandably bounce between

⁸ David Lose, "The Oddest Christmas Carol," at http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id=540 (Accessed December 31, 2011.)

⁹ Amherst W. Kellogg, "The Chicago Convention of 1860," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Sep., 1921), 99-104 cited by Lauren F. Winner at <http://thehardestquestion.org/yearb/christmas1gospel-2/>

¹⁰ Winner, *op. cit.*

the two in life. To hear of Simeon's now having seen it all, and now be fully ready to die because of it, is good news to a generation that rarely gets that close, that rarely seems that sure of themselves or of God. This scene is enacted for our encouragement, "a light for revelation to the gentiles."

*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.*

In times of normal human doubt and willful unfaith, may Simeon's words taunt and draw you, for early on in this child's life, trust was worked in Simeon. Now Simeon has seen everything. Now he'd seen it all. May you see just enough to trust this Christmas good news. Amen.