

Reflection for December 27, 2020

A Passion for the Possible

“God, now you are dismissing your servant in peace; for my eyes have seen your salvation.”

We find God made know in Jesus of Nazareth, and so we sing of God the Christ, the Holy One embodied.

We sing of Jesus, a Jew, born to a woman in poverty in a time of social upheaval and political oppression.

He knew human joy and sorrow.

So filled with the Holy Spirit was he that in him people experienced the presence of God among them.

We sing praise to God incarnate.

How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!

So God imparts to human hearts the blessed gift of heaven.

May the peace of the ‘Babe of Bethlehem’ be always with you.

Let us pray:

O God our Creator, our hope and our life, for all that you give us, for all that you are, we bring you our praise. A life of gratitude is our gift to you for coming to us as a human child, for pouring into the world your hope, your peace, your joy, and your love. As those who came to worship and adore the newborn babe in Mary’s arms, we now worship you—the light of the world! Come to us anew and fill our hearts with love.

Amen.

If only there had been a photographer that day! Imagine a close-up: Simeon's hands, gnarled with arthritis, age spots, bony fingers gently cradling Jesus' infant head; eyes meeting; smile unfolding across the wise elder's face—a beautiful exchange under any circumstances, made even more wondrous because of those involved and the Spirit's presence guiding them all. In this Sunday after Christmas, it is good to stop and savor Jesus' infancy, to ponder the new thing God is doing, to rest a bit in the sweetness of this temple scene. "We can picture this elderly man, with a white beard and eyes that do not see as well as they once did. Mary hands Simeon her baby, and the old man cradles new life. Simeon is thinking to himself, 'Yes, this child is what I have been waiting for. This child, and his parents, give me the comfort to know that when I die, my people will continue.' We do not know if Simeon had a wife or any children of his own. But now, this child becomes his child, and the one who will answer his prayers" (Amy-Jill Levine).

The remarkable thing about both Simeon and Anna, who appears a few verses later, is that in the daily crush of the temple, the comings and goings that made up the normal bustle of temple existence, they were able to notice the arrival of a tiny baby and to perceive who he was. These two symbolize the power of practiced, clear-sighted waiting; they alone of all these people in the temple discerned who the tiny baby before them really was and in their recognition broke out in songs of praise to God.

Miroslav Volf, a distinguished professor at Yale University, remembers fondly his teacher, the great German theologian Jurgen Moltmann. More than a half a century after his *Theology of Hope* in 1964, Jurgen Moltmann wrote an essay, *On Patience*, about two aspects of patience we find in the biblical traditions: forbearance and endurance. Writing as a 94-year-old, he begins: *In my youth, I learned to know “the God of hope” and loved the beginnings of a new life with new ideas. But in my old age I am learning to know “the God of patience” and stay in my place in life.* Youth and old age, Moltmann goes on to say, are not about chronology, but about experiences in life and stances toward life. Hope and patience belong to youth and to old age; they complement each other. He continues: *“Without endurance, hope turns superficial and evaporates when it meets first resistances. In hope we start something new, but only endurance helps us persevere. Only tenacious endurance makes hope sustainable. We learn endurance only with the help of hope. On the other hand, when hope gets lost, endurance turns into passivity. Hope turns endurance into active passivity. In hope we affirm the pain that comes with endurance, and learn to tolerate it.”*

Following the tragic death of his son, William Sloane Coffin, minister of Riverside Church in New York City and chaplain at Yale University, wrote: “In the meantime, if not optimistic, we can be hopeful, hope being a state of mind independent of the state of the world. If faith puts us on the road, hope is what keeps us there. It enables us to keep a steady eye on remote ends. It makes us persistent when we can’t be optimistic,

faithful when results elude us. For like nothing else in the world, hope arouses a passion for the possible, a determination that our children and grandchildren not be asked to shoulder burdens we let fall. Hopeful people are always critical of the present but only because they hold such a bright view of the future.”

Luke does not tell us what happens to Anna and Simeon. We can only use our imagination to determine how they would react to the events that will follow. Perhaps they received the assurance that Paul offered to the Galatians: “So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir through God.” But we remember them, their righteousness and their hope.

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