

“The Long Range Planning Committee”
Luke 2: 22-40
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“Now there was at that time in Jerusalem a man named Simeon who was upright and devout, living in expectation of the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was with him. He had been informed by the Holy Spirit he would not see death till he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.”

The 24-hour television run of the movie “A Christmas Story” made it nearly impossible to turn on TV without seeing some or all of it. I loved that movie when it was new, and so identified with its star because I too wanted the Daisy Red Ryder Automatic air rifle. (Please note that every kid who owned one called it an air rifle not a BB gun) and I too heard the universal warning to every child who ever asked for an air rifle, “You’ll shoot your eye out!” I believe that at age 63 almost 64, if I asked my ailing mother for a Daisy Red Ryder automatic air rifle, she would become very serious and parental and say “Now I’m not sure, those things are dangerous and I have been told that you’ll shoot your eye out.”

What really appeals to all of us in that movie is the return to life in simpler times. There was no threat of terrorism from Al Qaeda or Hesbellah. No one had heard of Viet Nam, Post World War II euphoria flooded the nation’s communication media, people were crowding the sidewalks at the windows of appliance dealers, standing in the snow, watching the film presentation of Dwight Eisenhower’s victory in Europe on a new invention called television. Personally, the clearer, more powerful image of Christmas past, is a gathering of a church family in our brethren community. Those memories are warm, inviting, and full of anticipation so dramatic that we ached for its coming. We were part of a caring functioning church community. Our little church family spent all of Christmas Eve together from six until midnight. Individual family rituals began Christmas morning. Living on a dairy farm enhanced the Christmas experience to an even more sensual level. It was impossible to walk the 300 yards from the House to the barn at 3 a.m. Christmas morning without looking up at the great winter sky and imagining the star in the East, then experiencing the 50° warmth inside the barn on the subzero night. Smelling the animal fragrances made it ever so easy to cross time and distance to the stable where Jesus lay in the manger. I can still recall clearly winter’s night when I opened the barn doors and was greeted by a family of seven whose car had broken down and wanted to sleep on the straw in a box stall.

Oh, how we long and for a simpler less threatening time that either

resembles good memories of the past, or anticipates a heartfelt hope of better times in the future. You heard the aching hope for rescue and restoration from the reading from Isaiah. It is a cry of hope from a people captive and exiled who do not know how to live in the present or find their way home. Memory and vision and blind faith in God are all they had. They wait and hope, and wait and hope.

I learned how memory is preserved and vision is introduced in Christian community during my years at Notre Dame. I met regularly with a group of Quaker students and attended Quaker meetings. Quakers believe that God will give them talents that they need to do the ministries that are necessary when the call is sounded or the need arises, God will provide leadership. That may sound wistful and idealistic to structure-dominated Presbyterians, but when Quakers begin to discuss significant, derisive matters, the skills needed for the church to survive emerge within the community. This was severely tested during the Vietnam era when some discussions were edgy or downright inflammatory. The day was always saved by a person respectfully known as the beloved heavy friend. The heavy friend was a person respected by everyone, was never the first to speak in any discussion, but the heavy friend was usually the last to speak and created consensus. This was the person of experience and wisdom respected by everyone whose word was considered golden. After listening to the arguments on all sides this friend would say . . . it seems to me. . . and everyone who had started loading their brain for the next attack, suddenly became very attentive.

In the gospel according to Saint Luke, Simeon's role is heavy friend in the Christmas narrative. He is one of those mysterious biblical people who appears in one place, delivers a message and vanishes into the mists of time. His words are born of the prophecy of Isaiah in a composite of Isaiah's words.

The Circumstance that brought Joseph, Mary the baby and Simeon together was the fulfillment of traditional Jewish religious practice which was the great presentation in the temple for naming, circumcision, purification, and dedication. And even there it is the action of God's giving love and a product of traditional practices to ensure their faith that God was with them in the present. And so faithful young parents and their baby crossed paths with an old Man and his hopeful and obedient longing and spiritually sure powers of discernment. He took one look at the child and in an instant knew with absolute certainty that the waiting time, the joining of God with his people was over. Simeon in his joy burst into song. In the spirit of Isaiah the words did flow.

Now O Lord let thou thy servant depart in peace, for I have seen that you have kept your promise which is for all people light to the Gentiles and power and life to your people Israel. Simeon boldly proclaimed this is true I know it to be so. Violence will come in truth will be shown in you his mother will suffer. But this baby is God's son and today is the fulfillment of an ancient promise. Simeon had seen it all. He was witness, preacher, prophet, and visionary

Simeon's testimony fits with Luke's purpose as he expressed that in Chapter I, Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning it seemed good also from me to write down an orderly account review most excellent Theophilus so that you may know the certainty of things you have been taught.

Now in closing I suppose I need to say something about sermon title. I chose the title to bring this whole sermon down to earth. We have a wonderful Long Range Planning Committee with Elder Rick Jones providing excellent leadership. I really want to hold up their work as a great example of the Simeon principal; do not sacrifice either the traditions in which you are rooted or the hope that comes from your dreams and visions.

They are bringing together the best of our traditions with a clear and prayerful search for God-given hope and vision the future. Personally, we live best when we do the same. The future is shaped by what blessings have come to us in the past and that memory is vital, The past tells where to look to find God if we are willing to remember.

I would like to close with a poem called the growing edge by Howard Thurman. All around us worlds are dying and new worlds of being born; all around this life is dying and life is being born: the fruit ripens on the tree; the roots are silently at work in the darkness of the earth against the time when there will be new leaves, fresh blossoms, green fruit. Such is the growing edge! It is the extra breath from the exhausted lung, and one more thing to try when all else has failed, the upward reach of life when closes upon all endeavor, this is the basis of hope in moments of despair, the incentive to carry on when times are out of joint and people have lost their reason; the source of confidence when worlds clash in dreams whiten into ash. The birth of a child – life's most dramatic answer to death - This is the growing edge incarnate, look well to the growing edge. Amen