

What Does Fulfillment Look Like?

Luke 2:22-40

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A morning breeze drifts through ancient Jerusalem and rustles in the old man's ears, stirring his slumber. Or is it a *voice* whispering from somewhere on the other side of waking and sleeping? "Sim-e-on, Sim-e-on, are you listening? Simeon! Simeon! Awake, arise, the time has finally come. Go to the Temple, and there you will find the one for whom you have waited for so long."

The old man struggles—is this a blessed dream from which he doesn't *want* to wake? Or should he waken as the voice bids him, splash water on his face, and scurry to the Temple? Long ago the Holy Spirit had promised that he would not depart this life before seeing God's Messiah. And now, whatever is calling to him, wherever it is coming from, it is saying that the time has come!

Meanwhile, here *we* are, you and I, gathered in *this* holy place on the last day of the calendar year. What whispered promptings may have brought us here today; what hopes and dreams have remained unrealized in this past year, awaiting fulfillment? Was Christmas not all it was built up to be—or was it, perhaps, a wonderful time when a seed was planted for something new?

And what changes might the next year bring that would afford you fulfillment? A few election victories and a more just economy? Reconciliation with that friend who seems to have drifted away? A rekindling of spiritual connection that would put you at peace with God and the world? And just as important, what would fulfillment look like? Would you know it when you see it?

Back in Jerusalem, this is the question Simeon faces. When he rises, makes his way through the streets and enters the Temple precincts, who or what is he looking for? What guides him to the child and his parents? And how does he *know* that this is the one? Is there a hand descending from heaven and pointing to the future Messiah, or is their little dedication ceremony the obvious place to look because there is nothing else going on in the Temple that morning?

In last year's *Presbyterian Outlook*, my friend and former colleague Jill Duffield offers another option for what might have guided the pious old soul to the Christ child. She suggests that Simeon recognizes, in the holy family, a devotion to the law of God and the ritual traditions that matched *his* devotion to the search for the Messiah.¹

Never mind that Joseph and Mary don't bring the requisite lamb for the offering; Simeon recognizes that in presenting a pair of turtle doves and two young pigeons, the couple are exercising the option for those who are too poor to afford the usual trappings. But most importantly, the young couple is dedicating their firstborn son to the service of the Lord. I would add that it may be an instance of what Cynthia Borgeault calls *recognition energy*—the holiness in one person being captured by the holy longing in the other.²

And so Simeon approaches the family, takes the child in his arms, and proclaims that now he can die in peace because the Lord has allowed him to see the promised Messiah. (And incidentally, if his words sounded familiar to you when we read this

passage a few minutes ago, it is because we often use them verbatim at the conclusion of a funeral or memorial service. It's called the *Nunc Dimmitus*, the opening words in the Latin version).

And no sooner does Simeon make his pronouncement than an elderly prophet named Anna appears on the scene and begins to proclaim that this is the child to whom all have looked for the redemption of Jerusalem. She is a devout widow who has practically *lived* in the Temple for many decades, fasting and praying for the day that has now come. Something in her has recognized holy fulfillment as well.

Yes, it's a lovely story — but beware the temptation to domesticate it. Here is where the aforementioned Jill Duffield chimes in with a word of caution: "The narrative this first Sunday after Christmas could not get any churchier. And, let's be honest, those gathered for worship the Sunday after Christmas are the Marys and Josephs, the Simeons and Annas of our congregations. The dutiful, faithful folks who show up every time the doors open and stay and clean up afterwards. So, admonishing everyone to do what God says—worship, tithe, etc.—well, that could be affirming or, alternately, could be less than revelatory, or even worse, self-congratulatory. Look at us, we're here, we get to see Jesus! I think maybe I've preached that sermon."³

In other words, whatever fulfillment looks like for you and me may be a reflection of a story that we are tempted to think we own. But Simeon did not *possess* the Holy Spirit; when it led him to the promised child, *it* possessed *him*. So what does it look like to hear this text with awareness of those who *aren't* here this morning—those who are more interested in tonight's revelry, or don't feel they belong here, or who are dreading the day-after-tomorrow's return to the same old same old? Or what about those who aren't so sure about this God-and-Jesus stuff, but find in the Foot Clinic or the Outreach and Advocacy Center something that feels more like fulfillment?

That's why it's important to realize that everything in this story that happens there in the Temple is for the sake of those who aren't even paying attention. The prayer and fasting of the elderly prophet has not been for her own sake; it is for what God promises to do in the world.⁴ And even though the old man gives thanks that now he can die in peace, he declares in the very next breath that this long-awaited child is intended as a light to the Gentiles and for the glory of Israel.

No, fulfillment is not about how good or even how conscientious we have been. And neither is it all sweetness and light. Simeon has lived and hoped long enough to know that goodness does not go unpunished in this world. Even as he holds Israel's deliverance in his arms, he tells Mary that a sword will pierce her soul. And even if Mary and Joseph don't yet know it, they will soon learn that they will not be able to restrain Jesus within the bounds of their care.

But what if you and I keep on coming here, looking forward to fulfillment in a new time frame? What if fulfillment means simply that God is doing a new thing, and that we most likely can find it and share in it through celebrating the presence of God. Then through greeting old friends, welcoming the stranger, and marking the rites of passage of those children entrusted to our care, we can declare that we have seen the redemption of the world.

So here we are, on the day of New Year's Eve, a faithful few while many more prepare to party or dream of changed fortunes and football championships. In popular cartoons the outgoing year is portrayed as an old man limping off stage right, exhausted and defeated—while there appears at stage left a healthy, confident baby, ready to

take on the world and set things right. But in this little story from Luke, the baby is held triumphantly by an old man and old woman, rejoicing that in a way, their lives are just beginning.

So listen as a current of air moves through this place. Is it just the HVAC system circulating physical comfort [in a sanctuary that always seems too hot or too cold], or is it a voice from somewhere beyond our singing and praying, calling to you and me: Kemie, ... Cal, ... Clayton, ... Keith, ... Gisella, ... Nan. Awake, arise, and claim the new thing that God is doing even now.

And have a happy New Year.

Notes

1 Jill Duffield, *Presbyterian Outlook*, 12/29/17.

2 Cynthia Borgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus*, 2011, 8.

3 Duffield.

4. Ibid.