

**“Much Is Taken; Much Abides”**  
**Text: Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Luke 2:22-40**  
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*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...Luke 2:27-28a*

I know, I know. It's only Sunday. Just this past Thursday we were here to celebrate Jesus' birth, and now here he is out and about, and about to be presented to the Lord at the Temple. It seems that the Christmas story allows little time for lingering at the manger. We move in fact, straight from the manger to the Temple, according to the Gospel of Luke. Now, it's time for the circumcision, the naming, and the presentation of the baby, according to the rules of Jewish ritual. Mary herself had to undergo a purification ritual after childbirth, which required a sacrifice. Poor people were allowed to sacrifice pigeons or turtledoves, rather than larger animals that cost more.

Much of what transpired that day at the Temple in Jerusalem is exactly what you would expect - routine sorts of things. But in amongst the ordinary, two extraordinary encounters take place. At the center of each is a person who is well advanced in years. The first is a man named Simeon, famous for his exemplary piety in Jerusalem. He serves in the story as a representative of traditional Israel and Israel's hope for a Messiah. It had been revealed to Simeon that he was not going to die before he saw the Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, he came to the Temple the very day the baby Jesus was brought to the Temple by his parents. Keep in mind now that the Temple itself encompassed 35 acres. A chance encounter in such a large space is slim indeed, but the old man and the young couple converge. The man takes the little baby in his arms and recognizes immediately that the one for whom his people have waited for oh so long has come at last. He is holding the Messiah in his arms. “Now I can die in peace”, he says, “for my eyes have seen salvation.”

Simeon goes on to ground the presence of the Messiah in the vision of the ancient prophet, who anticipated that the Messiah for whom the Jews waited was not going to be the Messiah for the Jews only, but also for the Gentiles.

Simeon rejoiced and for good reason, but he was also a realist. He saw in the child's future great conflict. He advised Mary to prepare her now glad heart for sadness in the future: “. . . a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Simeon, senior citizen, the indispensable bridge between his people's yesterday and the world's tomorrow. Simeon, an AARP gold card member, looking through his tri-focals and discerning immediately the momentousness of the child's presence in the world, and then finding voice to proclaim that Mary's baby will be the agent of salvation.

Think how many people must have been at the Temple that day, and yet only Simeon, and one other, could see the unique holiness of the baby. He might have had cataracts on both eyes, but his spiritual vision was perfect.

The other one who could see so very well was a woman named Anna. We are told that she herself was of great age. Unlike Simeon, she never left the Temple. Day and night she stayed and prayed. We are told whose daughter she is and what tribe she is from. Luke wanted us to know that though this is a woman whose ancestors were from the northern, not southern tribes of Israel, it doesn't matter whether you were from the north or the south or the east or the west. This baby embodies the redemption that all had been waiting for. She immediately recognized Jesus as the Messiah and began to praise God and to speak about the child to others.

Here we have them: two people I bet you would not have expected to show up in the Christmas story, which seems to be all about young people and having babies. I even think the shepherds were young. How else could they have run across all those fields and gotten to where they needed to be in time? This part of the Christmas story tells us that people who have a few years on them have an indispensable role to play in God's story of salvation. The implication is that there just might be something that only you, or only I have been put on this earth to do, and that our job is to pay attention, to stay alert, to keep looking out for what that might be.

I love the thought that with God's help we can grow stronger in faith, wiser in perspective, and more hopeful every day. Simeon and Anna had seen a lot, a lot that had not lasted, a lot that could have brought them down and made them miserable, but they never let those losses rob them of their capacity to recognize the good stuff when it came their way.

One of you sent me these words from *Ulysses*:

Though much is taken  
Much abides.  
And although we are not now  
that strength,  
which in old days moved  
Earth and Heaven;  
that which we are,  
one equal temper of heroic hearts,

made weak by time and fate  
But strong in will  
To strive...  
To seek...  
To Find...  
And not to yield.

Simeon and Anna were first-class senior citizens. They encourage me to say a word today about the matter of getting a few years under our belts. Whether it's happened to you or not, if you are fortunate, you will grow a little older and find yourself needing to go to the ophthalmologist more frequently. The current data concerning increasing longevity in developed countries such as the United States is astonishing. In 1929, life expectancy in America was less than 50 years. When Columbus discovered America, the average life span in Europe was 33.

I clearly remember, as a second-grader, looking at my teacher, Miss Collier, and thinking to myself - I believe Miss Collier must be very old. Miss Collier was likely not a day over 30. I love what George Burns once said: You can tell you're getting old if, when you bend over to tie your shoes, you find yourself wondering what else you can do while you're down there.

Joseph Sittler, a wonderful Lutheran theologian, describes his experience of the passing-ness of things. "There are times," the late Dr. Sittler wrote, "when I'm aware that this place where I am is a place that I might not see again. This friend with whom I'm speaking is a friend I might not greet again, this small company of loved ones around the table, this particular group may never around another table meet." The challenge of life is to come to terms with the way life actually is. Only the foolish would deny the loss and diminishment that come with growing older. But only the unimaginative settle for what has to be with resignation. Something else is needed – spunk, good humor, grace to accept what is, and to fight like you know what for every good day, every great experience you can.

I remember when Al and I went on a trip some years ago. Actually I was doing some studying at Oxford in England. There were a number of interesting people with whom we were enjoying our little sabbatical. One of them was a very attractive and appealing woman in her mid-80s. When we asked her what she was going to do after we were through with our studies at Oxford, she said that she would be off to fly in a hot air balloon. I think Anna and Simeon might have had similar plans, if such had been possible in their day.

The Psalmist wrote, *Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.* Age brings the potential for perspective, for the kind of creativity that can come only with experience. Eric Erickson calls it the final integration of character. Psychologists refer to the mature stage of life as that place where the last and best peak of human existence can be scaled. They call it "ego transcendence," the capacity to rejoice in something that does not necessarily affect you - to

invest in tomorrow, leaving a legacy for the next generation.

I think about *Time of Promise*, and how deeply meaningful it has been for all of us, not only because we're going to get to enjoy it, but because we know that 50 years from now, a hundred years from now, there will be a strong Morningside here. I think about those of you who give up coming to worship to teach the little kids in Sunday School – that's ego transcendence, isn't it? I think about how a number of you have gotten impassioned about the environment and our need to do something about it, so that generations that come after us will have air to breathe.

Anna and Simeon are great role models. As long as we have breath, we have the power to keep on growing in our understanding, in our capacity to love. Aging ought to open us up, and ought never ever close us down. Some of us have had the experience of caring for aging parents. Many of us are planning for our own older age, our retirement, and perhaps now more than in memory, are worrying about our resources. Others of us are worrying about what to do after breakfast, if we don't have a job to go to. It's never too early to learn to see life as a whole, to make peace with what is, to always be hopeful, and never be grim, never ever be grim.

They died a few years ago, but I loved those Delaney Sisters. Do you remember the Delaney Sisters, who at the ages respectively of 103 and 105, published their first book, jointly written, entitled *Having Our Way*? They reported that they began each day with yoga in front of the television. After yoga, each ate a clove of garlic, whole, not chewed, followed by a teaspoon of cod liver oil. Here is what Sadie Delaney had to say. "The first thing I do when I open my eyes is smile, and then I say 'thank you Lord for another day'. And I go to Bessie's room and I try to wake her up. Sometimes I have to knock on the headboard. Finally she will open her eyes, and sometimes she'll say 'Oh Lord, another day?'"

An interviewer asked them if they ever think about death. Sadie answered, "You don't know if you're going to wake up in the morning or not, but neither Bessie nor I worry about dying. We're at peace. You do kind of wonder when it's going to happen. And that's why we've learned to love each day, child."

There are ways to get it right, this business of living a human life fully and coming to its end in a state of grace. Simeon and Anna couldn't have it better than Sadie and Bessie. You learn to live and love each day, because you never know what might happen.

I read once of a daughter's memories of her parents. Her father was a physician; her mother was a nurse, and they practiced medicine together, delivering babies and health care for rural Minnesota during the Depression. On her father's deathbed, he turned to her mother, smiled and said, "Oh, Mama, haven't we had fun!" Clearly, they had had the time of their lives; they had had a job to do that only they could do, and they did it. Now he could die in peace, just as Simeon

had said.

I close with three pieces of counsel:

If you want to grow old well, do not decamp from where the action is.

Be a citizen of the future. Hold in your mind the picture of Nell Roberts cutting the ribbon last Sunday, 90 years old and still going strong.

Avoid giving an “organ recital” in your conversations with others. Count your blessings, not your pains.

I close with a favorite story about Winston Churchill. When he was 82, a professional photographer was hired to take a photograph of Churchill. After the photo shoot was done, the photographer said, “Sir, I hope to return and do this again when you are a hundred.”

Churchill answered, “Young man, I see no reason why you shouldn’t, if you take care of your health.”

Though much is taken, much abides. As we prepare to get another year under our belts, let us give thanks to God for every single second we live. It’s a gift. Every moment, a gift. Thanks be to God.

Prayer:

We praise and thank you, O God, for the wondrous peace and calm of this Christmas season, especially for those in-between days, when the new year has not quite begun and the old is not quite over. We rejoice that books can be read with few interruptions, walks taken, games played.

We pray traveling mercies for all who are on the road or in the air.

We pray for military personnel and their families, especially those whom duty calls during the holidays.

As our nation prepares for the inauguration of its 44<sup>th</sup> President, we ask that you would prepare our hearts and minds for this important occasion and for the challenges that will come on the heels of the occasion. Make clear your plan for peace for this and all the nations. Make wise our President and members of his cabinet. We long for guidance to know when a thing is right, and for those who lead us to know it, and when it is wrong, to know it and discard it from consideration.

We pray for our church on the cusp of a new year – how grateful we are that you have brought us to the moment of renovated space and new possibilities.

Make us wise stewards of what you have entrusted to us.

As we try, each in our own way, to keep standing in the strong currents of economic downturn, take our hand. Make us strong. Remind us that we do not live by bread alone but by the good word that comes from your mouth.

May our personal predicaments make us more generous, not less, more

mindful of the needs of our fellow men and women, less absorbed in selfish concerns. We ask these things in the name of Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Amen.