

Sermon for Sunday, February 2, 2025 Paula Papky for MacNeill Baptist Church

Malachi 3:1-4 Psalm 84 Hebrews 2:14-18 Luke 2:22-40

Crossing Over

Lately I've been wondering, at what age do we start thinking of ourselves as old? Last week I visited the audiology clinic for a hearing test. I ended up ordering some of what they call "accessories". Sadly, the accessories were not earrings and bracelets.

The week before, I was at the optometrist and ordered new glasses, including a pair of reading glasses, now that fonts in music and books are getting smaller and fainter. The week before that it was an hour and a half at the dentist for a very thorough check-up with x-rays and pictures and a reminder that I need to get a tooth capped. So I'm saving up.

It all reminded me of that speech in Shakespeare's play, "As You Like It." It's a speech known as The Seven Ages of Man. It begins with the infant "mewling and puking in the nurse's arms. And it ends, "Last of all...is second childishness and mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything."

I know one thing, though. I'm not as old as Simeon and Anna in today's gospel reading. Luke tells us Simeon had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah and Anna is "of a great age", 84 years old. I'm reminded of other old women in the Bible to whom extraordinary things happened. Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, is old when she gives birth to the son who became John the Baptizer. And there's Sarai, who laughs

when God tells her she will bear a son. And remember Hannah and her son Samuel? There's something here about the old being honoured by God.

Think back to those Sunday School pictures of Jesus in the company of his disciples. He always looks like a young man, hale and hearty. We know now that at age 30, Jesus was an old man by ancient reckoning. He would have had few, if any, teeth; thinning hair and beard; weak eyesight. He'd have had protein deficiency, internal parasites, all the effects of a poor person in their thirties.

Today's story, then, is about two aged people and an eight-day-old infant with his parents. These folk are performing an ancient ritual: the circumcision and naming of a child. What are we to make of a story of old people, especially in our culture that so reveres youthfulness?

The story takes place in Jerusalem, in the Temple. It features an old and very minor priest called Simeon. He's a man who has been waiting for many years to see the long-promised Messiah. We are told that he's a man on whom the Holy Spirit rests. Guided by the Holy Spirit, he comes to the Temple to perform an ages-old ritual, one he has performed many, many times. This time, something remarkable happens.

He sees with new eyes, you might say. He recognizes the divine in this child. In that moment of insight it's as if he crosses over from the day-to-day world, the familiar ritual of circumcision and sacrifice, into the world of the holy, the eternal. It's a moment of transcendence, of crossing to another realm. It's what the poet, William Blake, describes, a meeting of the everyday and the divine. He wrote these words:

To see a world in a grain of sand,

and a heaven in a wild flower.

To hold infinity in the palm of your hand

and Eternity in an hour.

This is what's meant by Epiphany, that Season after Christmas, when the stories are about revealing who Jesus is.

But, it's not all happy, this moment of transcendence, this epiphany. Simeon tells Mary her child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel. He will be opposed. He will expose the thoughts of many, of people's very soul. "And a sword will pierce your own soul, too, he tells Mary. This is a religious ritual charged with new meaning.

And then comes Anna, an old woman regarded as wise and virtuous. She too perceives a reality beyond the everyday. She seems to cross over from her ordinary life of prayer and fasting into a world of divine mystery; into a powerful experience of the holy.

You could say Simeon has been waiting for many years to cross that bridge between hope and the fulfillment of a promise from the Holy Spirit that he would not die before seeing the Lord's Messiah. In that charge moment he speaks about light: this infant will be a light not only for Israel but for Gentiles as well. Simeon is awestruck.

Anna's day-to-day life has been one of prayer and fasting; she is always in the Temple. As a widow, she has voice, no man to speak for her. But this moment of seeing the child, Jesus, it's as if she too crosses over into the sacred and her tongue is loosened. She begins to praise God, speaking to all the faithful, all who have been yearning for meaning in their lives.

Recently, the deacons of MacNeill had a discussion about worship. We each tried to describe what we are doing in a worship service, particularly in the opening. And someone said, "well, we're inviting people into an experience of transcendence." And I would say, for that to happen, we have familiar rituals to follow.

Sunday mornings at 11:00, we come here to enact a ritual. Our order of service is pretty much the same every week: musical introit, call to worship in the form of a dialogue, a hymn of praise, and a prayer. It's a time when we start to cross over from an ordinary place into a holy place and time.

Sometimes we're distracted and just not ready, when the service begins, to imagine crossing into the sacred dimension. We're still in getting-to-church mode: the rushing, parking, climbing snowdrifts, avoiding icy patches. But as we give ourselves to the rituals of Scripture reading, singing, and prayer, we may sense a transition in ourselves. We may have a sense of crossing over from our world to that ancient world; from a familiar experience to a sense of the holy. It may be only a word or a phrase that creeps in our ear. Sometimes, that is enough.

For me, singing that hymn "God of the sparrow, God of the whale" gives me goose bumps every time. It's as if I am transported into some holy place. I have a

sense of awe. I know it is like that for many in this congregation when music is played or sung. I have seen signs of it even in our youngest members. They want to get involved, to move, even dance. Familiar rituals performed in this beautiful and familiar space sometimes become extraordinary.

Those of us who plan worship try to bring imagination into rituals. We try to have some surprises that will reveal new meaning: a few sprigs of fragrant freesia on the communion table. The voice of a new Scripture reader. Chimes ringing. A flute solo. A violin duet. A trumpet accompanying a hymn. A surprising postlude, played by Monica.

And what awaits us on the crossing-over moment of communion? Perhaps in communion we perceive a stronger connection with one another; with that whole company of saints gone before us; with the Spirit of the Risen Christ inviting us to eat and drink and remember that we belong and are loved; that our faithfulness matters, our lives of service matter; our prayers matter. We may see the world in a bit of bread, even heaven in a sip of juice. We may sense the presence of the risen Christ at the table offering salvation, offering new life. And we give thanks. Amen.

The offering