

Simeon and Anna

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Scripture Reading: Luke 2:25-38



"My eyes have seen your salvation."

According to the Gospel of Luke, Simeon and Anna are the last ones to officially welcome the child of peace to the world. Their lives were filled with a deep messianic yearning to see the one promised to bring Shalom to this earth. Simeon longed for the consolation and Anna for the liberation of their people. The peace they expected was both deeply personal and radically political. How did they recognize Jesus as the bringer of the long expected peace? Mary and Joseph cannot afford the stipulated sheep for their firstborn. A pair of birds is the option for the poor. Nothing indicates messianic royalty. But the Spirit nudges Simeon and Anna, lending prophetic sight and insight. Holding the baby was all that was needed. God's promise became concrete, fully present and tangible.

During a recent Advent service at a retirement place I realized that the presence of a newborn would have made my sermon superfluous. It would have made the celebration of God's love so much more tangible and real, just as it was for Simeon and Anna. It would have also reminded us that the Christ child wants to be received by every generation anew and keeps coming to us through every child entrusted to our care. Rabbi Henry Glazer recalls the story of a pupil sharing his frustration with the school principal: "My teacher told me that God is everywhere. Well, I don't want a God who is everywhere; I want a God who is somewhere." Do we not all long for such concreteness? All too often our reflections on God's grace remain far too abstract and removed from daily life experiences. Meanwhile Christ's ministry of parables always managed to make the mundane and visible transparent for the Spirit of God hiding and dwelling in the material, i.e. the sowing of seeds, the baking of bread, and the herding of sheep. No wonder, Francis of Assisi wanted every tree to be decorated with lights to celebrate them as God's good gift to us. But also, can there be a better way to illustrate that Spirit keeps seeking to shine through matter, to being revealed through matter. The incarnation resists our thinking in polarities of human and divine or the spiritual and the material. To catch such oneness is to catch a Christmas moment.

This is in some ways also the sentiment of Francis on his return from the Holy Land. The fact that God had become flesh was interpreted as an affirmation of everything material, physical and human. Long before the cross and resurrection, Christ's coming signaled God's commitment to and love for the earth and everything created. Richard Rohr captures the profound insight of Francis with his usual poignancy: "[W]e didn't have to wait for Good Friday and Easter to 'solve the problem' of human sin; the problem was solved from the beginning." The new focus on the incarnation helped to popularize Christmas. At heart of it was a renewed "and it was good", reclaiming life on this earth as a gift from above.



Mbali (RUC's Holy Circus)

But there was more at stake for Francis. After all, he is credited with the first nativity scene on Christmas Eve of the year 1223. It was inspired by his pilgrimage to the Holy Land and the visit of the historical place of Christ's birth: A humble stable in a Bethlehem cave. This is what he told his friend, when his idea of a life nativity scene was queried: I want my fellow citizens in Grecio to see with their "bodily eyes the inconvenience of [Christ's] infancy, how he lay in the manger, and how the ox and ass stood by." He set up an empty feeding trough inside a cave. And it had to be a live ox and donkey standing beside the crib. He wanted to make the story as concrete and tangible as possible, employing strong visual effects. The idea was not driven by a desire for novelty or entertainment. His concern was the poverty and simplicity he witnessed when visiting the original cave. Such a stark contrast to the greed and materialism he experienced in his own Church. It was a form of street theater, which must have divided its audience and provoked serious debates.

"I thank, therefore I am."

The way both Simeon and Anna perceived their salvation as a pure gift, brought about by their encounter with the wholly other, resonates with a broader debate around gratitude as a key to identity. *I thank, therefore I am* is the title of Rabbi Henry Glazer's study on gratitude. It is a radically different approach from René Descartes's influential "I think, therefore I am." The latter fuels an egocentrism with a controlling and domineering I and is in parts responsible for the strong individualism in the West. There is no real otherness, no genuine counter-part and no honest engagement. The I rules and subsumes. The in-between space is crowded with a blatant narcissism. All that matters is: "How can you be of use to me?" The other is not given a chance to speak with its own voice. It is silenced and consumed. It is a lonely place for the I, the *homo incurvatus in se*, trapped in an endless mirroring. It

becomes the birth place for the madness of distorted self-perceptions: I work, therefore I am; I produce, therefore I am; I consume, therefore I am; I sacrifice, therefore I am; I do good, therefore I am. It is based on an illusion of self-sufficiency and autonomy which lies at the heart of the exploitation of our creation and all its creatures. It fosters a meritocracy, which shames and blames those who do not seem to contribute to the common good. This is what bad religion and our consumer culture have in common: They keep telling us that we are not good enough. The former makes us feel anxious and guilty. The latter makes us feel poor and needy. They both advance a mentality of scarcity.

Glazer's "I thank, therefore I am" proposes an unreserved de-centering of the I and assumes abundance and not scarcity as the appropriate attitude to life. His approach suggests that identity is not the result of what we do, but how we are with each other. The kind of relationship we have with the other determines who we are. It follows naturally from the Judeo-Christian understanding that all of life is a gift. Whatever we do is a response to God's invitation. This is beautifully illustrated in the creation account in Genesis 1, where God keeps sending out the invitation "Let there be ...". And creation's enthusiastic response is always marked with "And there was ...". At every step the creative process and its result is praised as "good" or "beautiful". The creation story becomes a liturgy of thanksgiving. To be human is to enter this divine abundance and discover gratitude as the password.

"To count our blessings might be the hardest arithmetic." (Eric Hoffer)

But such gratitude is not a given and certainly does not come naturally to us. There is what has been described as "an evolutionary bias". We tend to emphasize the negative rather than the positive. It is a safety mechanism to protect us from danger and became a critical survival skill. As a consequence people are more likely to choose things based on the need to avoid negative experiences, rather than being motivated by a desire to make positive experiences. Studies have also shown that a negative perspective is more contagious than a positive one. Our attitudes are more heavily influenced by bad news than by good news. This is due to a particular section in our brain which forms part of the limbic system and plays a key role in processing our emotions. It is the amygdala, an almond-shape set of neurons, located deep in the brain's medial temporal lobe. The amygdala uses about two thirds of its neurons to detect negative experiences. Those experiences are stored quickly into the long-term memory. Positive experiences, by contrast, have to be held in our awareness for more than twelve seconds in order to guarantee a transfer from short-term to long-term memory. It makes us prejudiced and biased: We tend to see people who say negative things as being smarter than those who are positive. And we are more likely to give greater weight to criticism than to praise.

Bottom line: Worrying is the brain's default position. We are hardwired to be negative. Is there a remedy? People who tend to worry a lot showed a paradoxical backfire effect in the brain when asked to decrease their negative emotions and think positively: It had the opposite effect and made things worse. So it is no good to say to someone else or to yourself: You have to change. You have to think more positively. What we need is not change, but an experience of transformation.

"Everything is waiting for you."

Such transformation is not something that we make happen, but something that needs to happen to us. It involves a radical shift of perception of self and world. It recognizes interdependence as fundamental to our understanding of being in the world. This is why we cannot enter the kingdom of God, unless we become children again: We are to trust an abundance of grace at the heart of the universe, inspiring awe and wonder. We are to discover the giftedness of all of life, inspiring respect and gratitude.



Think of how Jesus invites us to step outside and receive the gift of the lilies in the field and the birds in the sky. Is he just naive, or does he encourage us to move beyond our evolutionary bias and develop our emotions further, to let down our defenses and give positive emotions of gratitude a chance? He does not just say, think more positively. He does not make his audience feel guilty for being anxious and careful. Instead, he sends them out to discover a deeper order of mercy and grace.

It is an approach and perspective that resonates with a poem by David Whyte titled, "Everything is waiting for you". In an interview with Krista Tippett in *On Being* he invites us to not only stand in awe and wonder of nature, but to think of it as an ally: "We have so many allies in this world, including just the color blue in the sky, which we're not paying attention to, or the breeze or the ground beneath our feet. This is an invitation to come out of abstraction and back into the world again." Our mistake is to think that we are alone, without witnesses. We are invited to "[p]ut down the weight of [our] aloneness and ease into the conversation." The ability to be alert is praised as "the hidden discipline of familiarity." With such discipline stairs, window latches and doorways become our mentors and even a kettle sings for us. Indeed, everything is waiting for us.

In the same interview, Whyte reflects on the formation of his identity. At some point he came to the realization that "Who I am" does not depend upon any "inherited" or "manufactured beliefs". Our identity rather depends on the kind of attention we pay to things that are other than ourselves. And as we become more intentional and attentive we begin "to broaden and deepen [our] own sense of presence." It is said to resonate with John O'Donohue's conviction that what is necessary is a "radical letting alone of yourself in the world, letting the world speak in its own voice and letting this deeper sense of yourself speak out."

“[T]he hidden discipline of familiarity”

Each year we are invited back to Bethlehem to practice “the hidden discipline of familiarity.” As we enter the story, we become alert and attentive to things and people other than ourselves: A young couple from Nazareth, a choir of angels from above, shepherds from the hills, magi from the East, and finally Simeon and Anna in the temple. We become present to them, as they become present to the child. Do we accept the conversation they are offering? Do we allow them to be our sympathetic witnesses and mentors? Do we trust them to broaden and deepen our presence? Simeon looked at the child and saw salvation. It cannot get any more concrete. Now he was able to let go, to let alone, to receive Shalom. Anna, who lost her husband shortly after the marriage, by now eighty-four years old, is able to thank God. They knew about waiting and that everything was waiting for them.

The discipline of such familiarity calls for a new set of questions. Pádraig Ó Tuama, resident theologian at On Being, is known for being able to spin poetry of such fundamental questions: “Who are we to be with one another? And how are we to be with one another?” The richness of those two questions lies in their simplicity and seeming familiarity. They have sent me on a difficult journey of self-exploration, where I no longer take the gift of community for granted: Who am I to be with you? What was I thinking that you would want to be with me? What does this say about myself? And who am I really when I am with you? All those variations of the “who” question are the undercurrent to the “how” questions that shape our encounters and our understanding of community. For the Jesuit priest Greg Byle, whose concern is for those who are part of gang activities in Los Angeles, it is clear that ultimately the heart of community does not rest on what we do for each other, but how we are with one another. What if those who are seen to be on the receiving end of our gifts are the ones who are waiting for us to receive what they have to offer?

References:

Ray Williams, “Are We Hardwired to Be Negative or Positive” (30 June 2014).

Geseko von Lüpke, “Ich danke, also bin ich - Der Zauber der Dankbarkeit”, WDR Lebenszeichen (30 June 2019).

Rabbi Henry Glazer, *I Thank Therefore I Am*.