The Presentation of our Lord

Luke 2:22-38

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church Feb. 2, 2025

Last Sunday afternoon I participated in a service at Reversing Falls Sanctuary called “Earth Lament”… a service of music, poetry, and conversation inviting participants to express both their desolations and their consolations in this particular moment in the history of our nation and our world.

As part of the service I was asked to read a poem entitled “Grief Astronomer,” written by a young poet/performer/queer activist named Andrea Gibson. And while I would love to read the poem in its entirety this morning, I can’t because of copyright issues that come into play whenever sermons are zoomed or live-streamed.

But I can say that in Andrea’s poem Andrea speaks of how the world needs people who can hold what’s nearly impossible to hold… As well as people who can find a tunnel that has no light at the end of it, and who can hold up that tunnel like a telescope “to know,” as Andrea writes, “to know the darkness also contains truths that could bring the light to its knees…”

Quoting those few lines from the poem so we hear again the strange wisdom Andrea offers…

“This world needs those

Who could find a tunnel

That has no light at the end of it,

And hold it up like a telescope

To know the darkness

Also contains truths that could

Bring the light to its knees…"

Andrea then ends the poem by addressing us, the readers, as if we ourselves are grief astronomers, and speaking directly to us says,

"Grief astronomers, adjust the lens,

Look close, tell us what you see."

I share this poem with you this morning because I think old Simeon in today's Gospel text from Luke was a "grief astronomer" who adjusted the lens of his tunneled darkness when the infant Jesus was brought into the Temple for his dedication that day, old Simeon seeing in Jesus what he had been waiting his entire life to see… namely what Luke the Gospel writer calls "the salvation of the Lord, prepared in the presence of **all** peoples, a light for the revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to God's people Israel."

It's hard for us (almost impossible really) to get a sense of what Simeon actually saw as he focused his grief telescope on Jesus, in part because once we hear that what he saw had something to do with the word "salvation" many of us want to run the other direction, having known that word either as a boring old church word or as a word of judgment and exclusion for those who don't measure up to a certain standard of belief or behavior…

But we also fail to see what old Simeon saw when he adjusted his grief telescope and looked at Jesus that day because we miss what would have been to the first hearers of the story (namely Luke's early Christian community in the late first century), the most startling and unfathomable possibility… the possibility of the words "salvation" and "all people," and "Gentile" having any resonance with or relationship to one another…

All of which makes me wish we could invite Old Simeon to come to St. Brendan this morning so he could tell us what it is he saw that day when he adjusted the lens of his grief telescope in the presence of Jesus… Hoping that he could use words and ways that would do to us what Luke was hoping to do to those in his community who first heard the story…

I wish we could invite Old Simeon to come and tell us what he saw, because if we could, here's what I think would happen…

First, I think he would gasp and break into tears…

And then I think he would ask us all to follow him out into the backyard where he would invite us to lie down in the snow, to look up into the sky, to be silent for a good three minutes… and then to make snow angels in the snow…

Once we were back inside, I think Old Simeon would say how happy he was that we were having worship in the parish hall this morning, so we could look out into the world through our expansive windows, even as our chairs are configured in a way that allows us to look more deeply into one another's eyes…

Then I think he'd ask us what we think is the most important word in the Hebrew scriptures, and before we could even answer, I think he'd be so eager to tell us, he'd blurt it out… "All!" he'd say… "all…a-l-l… ***All***

*creation… **all** nations… Look at the creation stories in Genesis… They say it plain as day, 'God said it was good! **All** of it was 'good!'… Look at Genesis 12, where God gives Abram the blessing, saying, "in you **all** the families of the world will be blessed"… Read Isaiah 55 and see how **everyone** who hungers and thirsts is welcome to the table… Read Isaiah 56 and see how the Lord's reach of grace and love includes eunuchs and foreigners and outcasts… Read any number of Psalms and much of Second Isaiah and see how **all nations** are to be welcomed into the embrace of God… Read the stories of Elijah and Elisha and see how these prophets of old were called to minister to people outside the inner circle of Judaism… It's 'all'!... The most important word in the Hebrew scriptures…is **all**…"*

*And then I think Old Simeon would get very quiet… And then he'd say, "It's such a beautiful word… this 'all'… It's the word I hear every morning and evening when I read the Torah and immerse myself in the words of 2nd Isaiah… It's the word I hear whenever I reflect on the covenantal relationship and the blessing given by God **to the world** through my people… It's such a expansive, unboundaried, wild, and beautiful word…*

But it's also a dangerous word in a world where Empires are built and sustained on the exclusion and exploitation of some people for the benefit of others…I know this," old Simeon would say," because I remember the way Rome held many of us in its mighty grip… Empires do not much tolerate the word "all" when it comes to dignity and freedom and justice and equality"…

"Nor do many religious institutions," he would say, "apt as they are to focus on the surface questions of their faith traditions like, "How many sacrifices do I have to make in order to be right with God?" And "How can we keep unsavory folks from infecting our community with

their unsavory ways?" And, "How might we cozy up to the guys in power just enough to make our community of faith more secure and more successful?... I know this," Old Simeon would say, "because it's what's happened to many of the leaders in the Temple of my day, as well as to many of our people… So focused had they become on the life of faith being serviceable and secure and successful, even to the point of looking for a Messiah with those same qualities, they totally forgot about the radical inclusive "all" of God's steadfast love and mercy…

"Just as they forgot that the word 'salvation' comes from a root word in Hebrew that means "room to move again… room to move again… as in being freed from the things that hold us in bondage and in the small tight spaces of closed minds, narrow perspectives, hard hearts, and fear… Freed from those things so we can live into the 'all-ness' of God's infinite embrace, extending the 'all-ness' of that infinite embrace even to those we call "other" or "enemy"… Salvation to all… even to the Gentiles…"

I think Old Simeon would stop talking then and let silence fall upon the room… And then I think he'd say, "There was a good long time when I lived in tunneled darkness, seeing no hope as the unmitigated violence of the Roman Empire bore down upon us and as my people forgot their call to the "all" of God…

"There was a time when I had lost hope, even as I reminded myself of the promise spoken to me by God's Holy Spirit that I would not see death before I saw the Lord's Messiah…

"And then it happened… that day when Mary and Joseph brought their infant son into the Temple for his dedication, their sacrifice of two turtledoves instead of a lamb being an indication of their low estate, their place on the far margins of things, the deep meaning they found in their relationship with the God of steadfast love and mercy…

"And really, I can't explain how it happened, but when I took the baby into my arms and adjusted the lens of my grief telescope in which there was only darkness to be seen, I sensed the fullness of God's presence

down bound in that small child,

and wild with love…

God's very self rent and spent,

sent into the darkness

in a breaching reach

of incarnation

revealing truths about salvation.

Love ent'ring Herod's dark decrees,

Receiving them so all might see

In Love's immense intensity

The world's bright lights brought to their knees…

And from their lies all hearts set free…

Set free by love to bear God's grace

To every hate-filled, hellish place…

I think Old Simeon would stop then for a moment… And look at each of us, right in the eye… And then he'd say…

When I looked at that small child,

I saw God's promised presence, wild…

And knew that in that gift of seeing,

I'd been Eastered into being

a grief astronomer, called to tell

God with us now, Emmanuel…

With us always, below, above,

All creation held in love…

So too, you, my friends

Whose ends may feel so very near,

Take heart I say and do not fear,

For in your presence love's salvation

Shows forth in crazy incarnations…

Adjust the lens, look close, break free,

And tell the world just what you see…

And then I think Old Simeon, before finding his was back into the pages of the 2nd chapter of Luke's Gospel, would tell us that the times we live in are not so different from his own in regards to both the political and religious halls of power… Perhaps he'd heard about

Reverend Mariann Budde's sermon at the National Cathedral earlier this month, calling upon our elected officials to show mercy for the most vulnerable among us, and how she was ostracized and lambasted and ridiculed by the powers that be for her call to all of us to follow in the way of Jesus…

Perhaps Old Simeon had heard about the Christian pastor from one of the more fundamental congregations in our country who said that women should not have leadership roles in the Church because with women there comes the possibility of "un-tethered empathy… un-tethered empathy…"

Perhaps Old Simeon had heard about the suffering of those in Gaza and Ukraine and Sudan and of the plight of refugees and displaced persons in so many places, not to mention the suffering of our natural world…

Perhaps he already knew about the darkness each of us carries in our own hearts as we too are held in bondage to fear and hate and despair and a thirst for vengeance… no different in many ways from those we cannot stand to see or listen to…

Perhaps Old Simeon already knew all of this… But even so, despite everything, before returning to the pages of Luke's Gospel… Before returning to the Temple, where in the presence of the wild child Jesus, he had finally seen "the salvation of the Lord, prepared in the presence of **all** peoples, a light for the revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to God's people Israel…"

Before departing from us back into the pages of Luke's Gospel, I think Old Simeon would say…

If darkness is all that you can see,

And in despair is where you be,

Then know that Love is with you there
Because God's love is everywhere,
Stretched to breaking on the cross,
So we would know in every loss
There is no place that we can dwell
Apart from God, Emmanuel…

And in that darkness, far from light
With raw braille fingers we find our sight,
Sensing in that strange location
The slender thread of incarnation…

Grief astronomer, adjust the lens,
Look close, break free,
And tell the world just you see…