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“Dismissed in Peace”

A sermon by Sam R. Miglarese

First Sunday after Christmas (Year B)

December 28, 2014

Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3; Galatians 4:4–7; Luke 2:22–40

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to all of you! I hope it was a wonderful gathering with your family and friends. We welcome back old friends as well.

Every time I have listened to the Canticle of Simeon, every time I have sung the Song of Simeon, every time I have prayed the words of Compline, the *Nunc dimittis*: “Lord, now dismiss your servant in peace,” I cannot help but be full of admiration but also envious of the place and position of Simeon in the history of our salvation. Here is a man, righteous and devout, who had the spirit of God rest on him. It was revealed to him that he would not die until he experienced with his own eyes and listened with his own ears the Messiah of God. Guided by that spirit, he goes into the temple. Mary and Joseph, the parents of Jesus, go to the temple according to the custom of the law for the presentation of their son to the Lord. Simeon takes the child in his arms and says, “My eyes have seen your salvation, a light for the revelations of the Gentiles, and for the glory of your people, Israel.” His aged eyes saw the child of promise. His aged ears heard the cry of the infant. This freed him, allowed him, to let go in peace, to take leave of life. Fulfillment had arrived.

How many of us would love to have the opportunity to be able to say that to our God? “Lord, now you may dismiss your servant in peace.” What does it look like? What does it take to leave this life, not in anxiety, but in peace?

During my years in ministry, and I am sure Mark and Marilyn can identify with this, we have experienced at baptisms grandparents and great-grandparents who have the opportunity to lay hands on the newly baptized child with the sign of the cross and with the kiss of affection. In that kiss, you can almost hear the words of Simeon singing in their souls: “Now, Lord, you may dismiss your servant in peace.”

But there is another truth that surfaces in this particular Song of Simeon that touches the human condition. Bargaining with God goes very deep with us. I don’t mean silly things like, “O, Lord, if only my favorite baseball/basketball/football team will win a national championship, I will do all sorts of things to thank you.” I am thinking more of the sacred ways in which we pray for a longer life in order to experience threshold moments in our families’ histories.

I just turned 70. I have been thinking about this especially with a 16-year-old daughter.

All of us had friends, all of us had acquaintances who have died mid-life. They have left work undone, relationships incomplete and yet, their prayer so often has been, “Lord, let me live long enough to see my child married, to see my grandchild born and baptized, to experience one last Christmas with my family.” It goes deep with all of us in our prayer to experience enough of life that we can say with Simeon, “Fulfillment has arrived.”

We hope that when that time comes, it will be the right time, that we will be ready, that we will have feasted on the fullness of life—its joys and its sorrows, its griefs and its anxieties—and yet still say, “Lord, I surrender without regret, and I lay down all the burdens of my life. So be it.”

For many of us, and for me, there may be no resolution in our lives. We may not finish our lives with a grand culmination of all our efforts. Our memoirs may never be written, our books may never be published. There will be much unfinished business, especially in our relationships. Work goes undone, our efforts are unfulfilled, others pick up where we left off and finish where we started. And that’s the way it is.

If there is a chance in listening to the Song of Simeon today to make Simeon's words our last song, focus on the word *servant*. We must identify ourselves, and we must become servants of the Lord, his disciples. If we turn over and have given our life to God and to others, to love God above with our whole mind and with our whole heart and with our whole soul, and to love our neighbor as ourselves, if we become truly servants, then truly we will experience the spirit well enough to trust the ways in which that spirit touches and unfolds in whatever form in our lives.

Our heritage of service will sustain us as our bodies fail us.

I conclude with a question: What allows Simeon to be dismissed in peace? This season is full of great luminaries and poets and spiritual guides and spiritual friends, and I think the great answer and imagination of the great poet, W. H. Auden, in his remarkable long poem, *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*, captures best for me what I believe the image of Simeon is trying to communicate.

At the end of his meditation on Simeon, Auden says,

And because of [God's] visitation, we may no longer desire God as if [God] were lacking: our redemption is no longer a question of pursuit but of surrender to Him, who is always and everywhere present. Therefore at every moment we pray that, following Him, we may depart from our anxiety into His peace.

We will depart this life in peace, knowing the one we have served is faithful in ways beyond our ability to imagine. Amen.

Influences: John Shea: *Starlight*

W.H. Auden: *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*