

IN DAYLIGHTS, SUNSETS, MIDNIGHTS AND CUPS OF COFFEE

LUKE 2:22-40

December 24, 9 p.m., Eastern Standard Time. From here on in I shoot without a script. See if anything comes of it, instead of my old “stuff”...

Thus begins Jonathan Larson’s Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award winning musical *Rent*, which is based on Giacomo Puccini’s *La Boheme*. The story, as told by the young Jewish playwright, follows a group of artists on New York’s Lower East Side as they struggle against AIDS, eviction and each other. The story is told from one Christmas to the next. It reminds us of how precious time is, because one never knows what is going to happen from one year to the next.

In our culture, time is something that is managed, spent and sometimes wasted. We act as if it is something that we control when, in fact, it is a gift from God. Mark Twain observes, “Time and tide wait for no person,” and yet he acknowledges that this is a “pompous and self-satisfied proverb” and suggests that it “was true for a billion years; but in our day of electric wires and water-ballast we turn it around” to say human beings do not wait for “time or tide.” Twain does not say if this tide is crimson or not, but he does a good job of capturing the arrogance of the approach that we bring to time.

Now that Christmas is here, some will begin boxing up decorations. Others will start shopping for next year, which is an act of faith in itself, because only God knows how many of us will be here next Christmas (and by “be here,” I mean alive and well and giving glory to God for the gift of Jesus Christ).

The story of the first Christmas, as it is told in Luke’s Gospel, moves swiftly. Within two chapters, John’s birth is foretold, and almost as soon as he arrives, he starts baptizing. Jesus’ birth is foretold. Mary visits Elizabeth, sings a song and has a baby in Bethlehem. This baby is circumcised, named and then presented in the temple, which is where we find him this morning. As Scripture explains: “When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him

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(Jesus) up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy')." Yes, there are parenthetical expressions in Scripture: "and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.'" Nothing is said specifically about a partridge or a pear tree, but it is clear: (1) that Mary's purification is just as important as Jesus'; and (2) that animal, or at least pheasant, sacrifices were expected. Insert sermons on baptismal vows and stewardship here.

The Lectionary speeds through the story more quickly than does Luke. This past Sunday, the church awaited the Messiah's coming. This Sunday, he is being presented at the temple. So much for beholding Christ's nativity in all of its glory...

Every step from Bethlehem toward Jerusalem is meaningful. The time that it takes to move from one place to another is sacred. Traveler, composer and writer Paul Bowles observes that, "We think of life as an inexhaustible well. Yet everything happens only a certain number of times, and a very small number, really. How many times will you remember a certain afternoon of your childhood, some afternoon that's so deeply a part of your being that you can't even conceive of your life without it? Perhaps four or five more. Perhaps not even that. How many more times will you watch the full moon rise? Perhaps twenty. It all seems so limitless," and, of course, it is to God in heaven, and yet when God chooses to come to earth, even the historical Jesus' days are numbered, and if the historical Jesus' days are numbered, what does that suggest about yours and mine?

Among other things, it says, at least to me, "Use them well." Use them wisely and playfully and constructively. Build bridges not walls, and let your life bear witness God's majesty. Go where the Spirit guides, and follow Christ. This is how Simeon is led to the temple. This is why he has a song to sing: "It has been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah (this was on Simeon's "bucket list). Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple, and

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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, saying, 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word (now, your work is fulfilled in my life and in creation's story); for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles (even them).'" Simeon is at peace. His life is complete. He is experiencing salvation and is comforted by the knowledge that the Gentiles will, too.

Simeon blesses this child who blesses him saying: "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed--and a sword will pierce your own soul too." Talk about expectations that parents and religious communities place on their children! In this blessing, Simeon projects Israel's pattern of falling and rising into the future. In this blessing, Simeon recognizes that human beings have difficulty expressing themselves, of saying what they mean when it comes to faith and life. He also acknowledges that human beings are capable of brutality, especially toward those who pursue peace. Remember the stories of Gandhi and King.

Here at UPC, we often pray for clarity of vision and strength of purpose. We proclaim a Gospel that says that life is gained by offering it to God. Faith is difficult to quantify, and the faith of a community is even more difficult to appraise, but God knows how, and God says, "Leave this to me." Judge not, lest ye be judged.

I suspect that there were those who were critical of Anna, because every group, religious and otherwise, faces criticism from inside and out. Anna's story often is forgotten midst the pomp and circumstance of Christmas celebrations. This is what we know about her: (1) She is prophet; (2) She is the daughter of Phanuel of the tribe of Asher; (3) She is "of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four"; (4) She never leaves the

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temple but worships there with fasting and prayer night and day; and (5) When she comes, she begins praising God and speaking about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Israel.

Anna's story is prophetic and beautiful. It is prophetic, because it embodies the peace that Simeon describes. Her story is remembered. Her death is written into the Gospel. She praises God with her life and work, and her life's work is fasting and prayer. She speaks about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Israel, emphasis on "all." May our Christmas celebrations be as faithful, focused and life-giving and remembered fondly!

How do will you remember this Christmas?

How will you be remembered? How would you like to be remembered? Time is precious, because life is fragile. Mary knows this when she holds Jesus as a baby. Jesus knows this as he looks at Mary from the cross. You and I know this, because we are self-conscious and sentient beings.

Our stories still are being written. God continues to mold us into the body of Christ, and I pray that we will use our self-consciousness and senses to bear witness to the Messiah's coming.

This is the time of year when we look back and look ahead. We give thanks for the events of the past year, and we pray for clarity of vision and strength of purpose in the year to come. How we measure time and celebrate life makes all the difference!

If you are familiar with the musical *Rent*, you know that there are exactly five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes in a year. No math necessary. And yet there are other ways to mark time: in daylights, in sunsets, in midnights and cups of coffee (all of which proclaim God's glory), and so as we look ahead, I pray that we, like those to whom Anna speaks, will find ourselves looking for redemption not merely in our lives but in the lives of all God's creation. The whole creation groans, and at last the Messiah has come to bring hope, health and healing to those who behold him. Now to the

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One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more than we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

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