

Homily  
Candlemas Concert  
Marshall Joffray/Michael Smith  
February 1, 2009

It's now a little bit after 4:00 PM. We are gathered together in the midst of another busy day. People have much to do – so they say. Over the course of the past several weeks a good number of people have asked me: “How long do you think the service (this concert) will last?” Desire is confronted by obligation. “We’d like to come,” some say, “but we’ve got to be somewhere else at 5:00.” “There’s a party down the street at 6:00.” “I’ve got to catch up on some tasks and chores and work starts early tomorrow.” This is the tenor of our times: “Onward!” Before this moment is done, we are thinking of the next. Mark my words: in fifteen minutes we’ll start that subconscious, mental transition to the following item on our agenda. Our minds’ Rolodexes are persistent: and then... and then... and then... oh yes, and then! (I’m really looking forward to that.)

And what would you do if it suddenly became clear that this service was going to last much, much longer than you had expected? We didn’t tell you that we were inserting twenty minutes of silence between each part of the service marked in the bulletin. We have no intention of finishing by 5:00 or by 6:00 or even by 7:00 PM. What would you do if the length of this event became completely indefinite? You’re in church. You’re in the presence of God. Why rush? Why keep time? Imagine being here until 11:00 PM. Imagine staying until morning. Or, for that matter, imagine spending your life here... waiting, listening, wondering, expecting – without a firm sense of what is to come, without knowing that you’d recognize it when it came. Would that patience seem like hope? Or would it feel like an excruciatingly slow form of dying?

We are celebrating Candlemas, and we have just sung the *Nunc dimittas*, the Song of Simeon. We know almost nothing about Simeon, who plays such a central role in the story of Jesus’ presentation in the temple. This is the only place where he is mentioned, in these verses from Luke, and only at the very last, only once he has grown very old and very tired. Other than this, his life is quiet and his past his dark. Nothing of all that time demands mention or investigation. It’s as if all his years were comprised of just one thing: waiting. He yearned to see with his own eyes and in his own time the arrival of God’s Messiah. Thus the temple became his home and keeping watch became his whole vocation, for decades.

Imagine life in this form. It’s the complete opposite of our own ways, our habits, our impatient compunctions. We bristle at the idea of waiting. It’s a waste, a drain on our energies. We hurry on, as if collecting an endless array of trophies, never really admitting that trophies soon enough end up stored away in closets or collecting dust on the shelves that never gain our attention. For all our work, we run the risk of ending our lives buried beneath piles of detritus that we’ve feverishly gathered over years, which long ago lost its meaning.

Yet here is where Simeon is especially helpful to us. We know nothing of his time except that he lived consciously in God’s time, trusting that God could do more for him than he could ask or imagine. He was free to wait, and having waited long, he was free at last, in dying, to sing of

hope, for himself, for the world, for the whole of creation. Not hurried, he was given the grace to see God's eternity opened, standing before him in the person of Jesus, this child.

Here we are. By the lights of our own time, we are observing old rituals, speaking ancient words, listening to music written in a time and form now thoroughly past. So, we may assume, it will be good to move on to something more relevant.

Or we can say, by the lights of God's time, that presently the hour isn't important. And the words aren't old, and the music isn't just a bit of history remembered. For what's open before us in all these things is a glimpse of God's kingdom: the communion of saints, the culmination of creation, the redemption of all loss, the resurrection of all life, the joy of song, the hope of the heart, reunions both physical... and spiritual, love not pressed, not shortened by time's constraints.

So imagine, now, that you are quite literally sitting with Simeon... waiting... watchful for a glorious eternity to open in our music and in our song this evening.

The Rev. Peter Vanderveen