

Sermon, The Presentation, 2015

Luke 2:22-40

This past week, the world remembered the horrors of the Holocaust.

Last Tuesday, January 27th, was the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the WWII Nazi death camp in which unfathomable cruelties took place, a place that human beings filled with evil and darkness through their actions.

So this past week, the world remembered.

At the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, in the Hall of Remembrance, Jacqueline Mendels Birn, a Holocaust survivor, played the haunting melody of Ani Ma'amin.

The sound of her cello filled the room with memories for the other Holocaust survivors present there with her.

Here's why this melody took them back to what had been, for many, a time of hopelessness and death.

Packed into a cattle car headed toward Treblinka, the Reb Azriel David had listened to the sounds of those crowded around him, sounds of crying, moaning, weeping, and praying, some dying, and as he listened, a tune came to him, and he began singing a song of hope.

Many Jews sang this song as they were herded into the concentration camp gas chambers. As more and more of the prisoners learned and sang this song it eventually became known, according to Wikipedia, as the Hymn of the Camps.

Ani Ma'amin, a song of deep faith. Listen to the words.

"I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah, and though he may tarry, nevertheless I await his coming every day."

Tonight's gospel is about two people of faith who would have been right at home with this song of hopeful longing.

We have heard nothing about Simeon and Anna before they appear in the temple on that day that Mary and Joseph came to Jerusalem to present their first born son.

And then at the end of this story, Simeon and Anna, swept up in the ongoing story of our own salvation, vanish from the pages of Holy Scripture, their purpose served and their message delivered.

What we know about Simeon is that he knew how to wait with hope for something beyond himself. The Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.

Anna was an ancient woman who had been a widow for eighty four years and had spent all that time in the temple, worshiping God with prayer and fasting.

Both Anna and Simeon recognized that the baby in the arms of Mary was the one who would bring redemption and salvation to the world.

This beautiful light filled story remains with us in the Daily Office in the form of a canticle, the Nunc Dimittis, one of the songs we say or sing after the scripture readings in Morning and Evening Prayer.

But what else? Why is this day set aside on the church calendar as a Feast Day, a day on which the church calls us together to worship outside of our Sunday practice of worship?

Simeon and Anna have much to teach us about how to live—

how to live in this very moment, because every moment of our lives we are caught up in the intersection between the past and the future. And we must enter into this future, which we cannot see or imagine, but we have no choice but to enter into it.

The Holy Spirit had told Simeon that he would see the Lord's Messiah. Simeon knew why he was waiting and what he would see, but he had no idea when or where he would see the Messiah.

And so he waited with faith. Simeon waited for the Messiah with no images of his own in his head. Instead, he waited with openness, and as he waited, he himself became full of God's light. He became light seeking light.

Anna had spent eighty-four years in the temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer. Anna also had a steadfast openness to God. She simply spent her life coming before God with no expectations, just openness to her unseen future.

And because of this steadfast openness toward God, she instantly saw God's light and felt God's presence when she saw the baby Jesus. She saw what she had been seeking, without even knowing that she had been seeking.

And so Simeon and Anna show us that faithful waiting and steadfast openness to God can help us enter into our own futures. Faithful

waiting and steadfast openness turn us into light seeking light, even in the darkest moments of our lives.

Here's an example of what I mean about faithful waiting and steadfast openness to God in the face of the unknown future in the following story.

Victor Frankl describes his time in Auschwitz in his book, Man's Search for Meaning.

Early each morning, before dawn, the prisoners had to march through the darkness to their work sites over the frozen snow covered ground, with ill fitting shoes, or even no shoes at all, with the guards shouting and hitting the men with their rifle butts.

On one such march, a fellow prisoner whispered to Frankl, "If only our wives could see us now."

And Frankl began to think of his wife. He describes the experience with these words.

"My mind clung to my wife's image, imagining it with an uncanny acuteness. I heard her answering me; saw her smile, her frank and encouraging look. Real or not, her look was then more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise."

As Frankl stumbled along on this march, with the image of his wife accompanying him, he had what I would call a Simeon and Anna moment. He came into God's presence and recognized God with him.

He describes that moment like this. "A thought transfixed me: For the first time in my life I saw the truth...that love is the ultimate and

highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love....for the first time in my life I was able to understand the meaning of the words, "The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory."

And so Frankl lived through this horrid time of his life with a faithful and steadfast openness to the future, knowing that the infinite and light filled glory of God's love would fill all of the unknowns ahead of him, even his own death.

And Frankl too, became light seeking light, and his teaching and writing continue to bring light into the darkness of our world even in this century.

We too live in the decisive moment of now, with our own unknown futures ahead of us. We cannot know the future.

As Christians, we have seen the Messiah in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

But sometimes, in our times of doubt, and in our fears about what is to come, we forget that we have seen the Lord.

It is in these times of doubt and fear that we must make a choice about how we want to live—we can choose between despair and life.

But we can choose how we want to live—

When we choose life, and live as Simeon and Anna lived, as people of faith and steadfast openness to God, people with a vision of hope in something greater than ourselves, even when that is invisible,

Then God's goodness, light and love will fill us and we can see the world filled with light, even in the midst of darkness and in death.

Along with our Jewish brothers and sisters, we can hold these words in our hearts and sing them out into the darkness.

"I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah, and even though he may tarry, nevertheless, I await his coming every day."

Amen.

"A liberation day marked by Holocaust laments," by Michael E. Ruane. [The Washington Post](#), Wednesday, January 28, 2015 Metro, Section B Page 1.

Frankl, Victor E. [Man's Search for Meaning](#). Beacon Press, Boston. 2006.