

“The Shining Face of God”

Luke 2:22-38

December 29, 2019

Sharlande Sledge

“O Maker of the galaxies, Creator of each star,
You rule the mountains and the seas,
And yet – oh, here you are!”

Madeleine L’Engle

Admit it. How many of you wanted to hold Finnley Ramirez last Sunday as Charlie was walking him down the aisle for his dedication? When is the last time you’ve held a three-month-old baby? I know you wanted to hold Finnley. He was the picture of cuddly-ness. And he seemed like he would have let every one of us hold him. Finnley will likely be at least two-and-a-half when he returns from China and we see him again. We waited with his parents for his birth, and we waited for him to come to the church with his parents to be dedicated.

The drama we acted out last week seemed a joyful prelude to our story for today.

Today we see the face that Simeon saw when he gently took Jesus in his wrinkled old arms. Maybe he examined his tiny fingernails, counted his toes, scraped a fleck of hay off his cheek, and said to himself, “This is God in my arms.” Maybe Simeon smelled Mary’s milk on the baby’s breath, heard the baby cry an all-too colicky human baby cry. Maybe he loosened the tight swaddling of his clothes and thought, “I am holding God in my arms. This is what God has decided to look like! This is the salvation of Israel – who has come to save the people – but who is utterly unable to turn over on his back without assistance.”

This God, very God of very God, for whom the Israelites had been waiting for centuries now rested in the crook of Simeon’s arm. What would Simeon’s great-great-great-great-great grandparents in the Hebrew faith have thought?

Here he was looking straight into the shining face of God! Face to face with the holy.

Surely he had to pinch himself.

For who had seen the face of God? God was Yahweh, the great “I AM” – one not to be reckoned with on human terms. Part of the religious belief of Simeon and his ancestors meant that God could not be represented in physical form. No images. No artistic representations. No manipulations of the Holy Being of the Almighty. The ark of the covenant was the most visible symbol of God.

But still, God’s face – God’s presence – was a tremendous concept of the Hebrew faith. Moses had come down from the mountain, his face brilliant from being in the presence of God. And here was that incomprehensible face shining up at Simeon through the sunlight of the Temple.

The old man knew that the baby signified God’s blessing of giving protection to the Hebrews. The blessing was the expression of divine grace, the provision of peace, and the honor and power of God’s Being. Perhaps Simeon had prayed with the psalmist, “Let thy face shine on thy servant; save me in the steadfast love!”

Or “Restore us, O God; let thy face shine, that we may be saved!” Or “Lift up the light of thy countenance upon us, O Lord!” (44L3-89:15)

Or “Blessed are the people who know the festal shout, who walk, O Lord, in the light of thy countenance.”

Imagine it. A toothless old man looking at a toothless month-old baby. Could Simeon hear echoes of God’s words through Moses to Aaron?

“The Lord, bless you, Simeon.

The Lord keep you, Simeon.

The Lord make his face to shine upon you, Simeon,

And be gracious to you, Simeon:

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, Simeon,

And give you, Simeon, peace.”

Years before Simeon had been told he wouldn't die until he had seen the Messiah with his own two eyes, and the time seemed to be running out.

When the moment finally came, Simeon took one look into the baby's face, and even through his cataracts, that one look was all it took. He knew the blessing of the Lord was upon him.

And he said:

*Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;³⁰
for my eyes have seen your salvation,³¹
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,³²
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel."*

In the face of the child Jesus, Simeon saw God's salvation, a gift intended for more than him alone. The "glory of Israel," this baby whose cheeks were being tickled by the fringes of the old prophet's gray/white beard, is a blessing to Simeon, but, more importantly, he is a Light to the nations – to all people.

We are not in the Temple in Jerusalem. We are in a church in a neighborhood in Texas. We've not been scrutinizing every mother and father, bringing a baby into the space to see if that baby is the God of our Salvation, the light to the nations.

That was Simeon's calling. And Simeon believed in God's promise so strongly that he knew that it would be fulfilled before he departed this world. But seeing the Christchild assured Simeon that he would depart in peace.

He had lived his whole life with a singleness of purpose.

As I was thinking about Simeon and Anna this week, I had a call from one of my former seminary professors the day after Christmas, asking if I had heard the news about one of my fellow seminary students, Robert Dilday. Robert was the son of Russell Dilday, the President of Southwestern Seminary when Bill Bellinger was teaching there and Dilday's son and daughter and I were three of the students. Russell Dilday was the President who was so rudely ousted from

office by the religious right of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1994, even being escorted by armed guards to his home across the street. His son, Robert, who graduated from Baylor, worked in Baptist life for more than 35 years, serving as the editor of the *Religious Herald* of Virginia and then of Baptist News Global until 2018.

For many of those years, Robert had been drawn to the worship of the Episcopal church and felt a calling to become an Episcopal priest. He earned his second seminary degree, this time from an Episcopal seminary. Two weeks ago today, at the age of 64, Robert was ordained as a priest at St. Stephen's, his church in Richmond with plans to serve on the staff. He had already given vigorous leadership as co-founder of the Interfaith Alliance for Climate Justice and was eagerly looking forward to his parish ministry in Richmond that would start the fourth Sunday of Advent. A week ago today, on December 22, the fourth Sunday of Advent, he died in his sleep in the wee hours of the morning.

Writing in Baptist News Global this week, Molly Marshall, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary, said, "one of my favorite carols I enjoy singing and hearing each year during the Christmas season is "In the Bleak Midwinter" [the song Steve sang a few minutes ago] It includes the poignant words by Christina Rossetti: "What shall I give him, poor as I am?"

Marshall says, "It is the right question of course, along with asking ourselves what constitutes a gift to Jesus." She continues: "I believe Robert's roles as a journalist, a climate justice advocate and a priest (long before he was ordained) were a gift to Jesus. His singleness of devotion to truth, the church of Jesus Christ, and the glory of creation came from an undivided heart."

She says, "Christina Rossetti's carol concludes with the pledge, 'yet what can I give him: give my heart.'" This gift is a life-long pursuit, to be sure. Our hearts are vulnerable things, and we need the Bible's guidance to keep our hearts invested in the right things. "Among the things that impressed me most about Robert Dilday," she wrote "is that his heart was invested in the right things."

The heart is the center of both the physical and spiritual life. To speak of giving Jesus our heart, which is the language many of us learned in our formative years of discipleship, is about giving him our whole self. This is far more than sentiment; it has to do with what we believe in strongly enough to sacrifice

time, resources and personal identity in its quest. Giving one's heart to Jesus is not only a personal decision. It has to do with a re-oriented life that puts the well-being of others ahead of selfish interests. In other words, it is a persistent attempt to live as Jesus did, in the power of the Spirit.

Simeon saw the "shining face of God." He had virtually lived in the Temple his whole life with the intention of casting his eyes upon the one who gave meaning to all the waiting of all the years. Simeon had given God decades of waiting. Those who lived after him and knew Jesus as the incarnation of God would have an expanded mission.

If Simeon could have cast his eyes out into the future again --- he could have caught a glimpse of Jesus, the One with the Shining Face of God, blessing the poor in spirit on the hills of Galilee, and telling them that theirs is the kingdom of heaven. For this Child of God named Jesus taught the people that their very presence brings the reality of heaven to earth. They are always creating space for the work of goodness and inclusion and point beyond themselves to Jesus. They are not ones who are living to see Christ and then to depart for heaven; they are already enacting the beloved community Jesus initiated – on the earth where Jesus lived among us.

They are now – you are now -- "The Shining Face of God" on this earth. We have no time to wait.

Like Brittany and Casey Ramirez, giving their whole hearts to China; like Jo March, giving her whole heart to her writing; like Robert Dilday, giving his whole heart to the church's role in striving for justice and peace among all people and to respecting the dignity of every human being; like Missy Davis, as we learned yesterday afternoon, giving her whole heart, in Jesus's name, to loving her nieces.

. . . like Sarah Randles, giving her heart to the landscape of our church lawn; and Louis Garcia, giving his heart to the daily care of this building; like Ana Marie Houser, giving her heart to lessening pain through palliative care; like Kristi SoRelle, giving her heart to welcome and hospitality; like Tom Hanks, giving his whole heart to the particular gifts and questions of college students

like Simeon, giving his heart to seeing the manifestation of God in a baby in his mother's arms.

We are called to give whatever is ours to give to the Child in the manger, knowing we will see him in the “Shining Face of God” on each child on this earth.

In this new year, as long as we are on this earth, may we continue ask ourselves the question:

*“What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would give a lamb.
If I were a wise man, I would do my part.
Yet what can I give him: give my heart.”*