

“The Embracing Face”

There is a marked difference in mood between Christmas Eve and the Sunday following. *It has been called “the grand resumption after the grand intrusion.”* The birth of Jesus and the circumstances surrounding it were amazing, perplexing, and disruptive. Mary and Joseph anticipated their union and life thereafter the same as all betrothed couples in that day. Then Gabriel appeared to inform Mary that she and Joseph’s lives would be marked by one intrusion after another, and that it was all according to God’s purposes.

But dramatic as the events were surrounding Jesus’ birth, things would settle into a pattern. Things had changed to be sure, but after the grand intrusion came the resumption of daily living.

The shepherds returned to their flocks. The angels departed, along with the choir of heavenly hosts. The sign outside the Bethlehem Inn said, “Vacancy.” Mary and Joseph had a baby to care for. Jesus was circumcised and named according to the law. In our gospel lesson the family has returned to the Temple for Mary’s ritual of purification and Jesus’ consecration to God.

It is clear that Joseph and Mary took obedience to the Law of Moses seriously. It was also apparent that they were poor. The consecration of a male child called for the sacrifice of a lamb. During Advent we sang, *“What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I’d give him a lamb.”* However, Jesus’ parents couldn’t afford a lamb, so they offered a couple of pigeons, instead.

It is ironic that Jesus' parents couldn't purchase a lamb, but one day Jesus would be called, *"the lamb who takes away the sins of the world."* Jesus would be condemned as a threat to Judaism, yet from his birth he was raised to be an obedient lover of the Law.

Next, Luke introduces us to Simeon. Simeon had waited a long, long time to see the Messiah. There wasn't much sand left in his hourglass, but the Holy Spirit had assured Simeon that he would not die without seeing Israel's consolation. With cataracts in both eyes, seeing was a challenge. But when he held Mary's baby in his arms, he saw all he needed to see. One look was all it took to know that God had answered his prayer. No more climbing the watchtower, scanning the horizon with binoculars for a sign of the Messiah. Simeon's life was a testimony that *all good things come to those who wait.*

Simeon blessed God and said, "Now, Lord, you can let me depart in peace. Now I can die a good death knowing I've seen your salvation for all people." But no sooner had he said, "My eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord," than he saw the future in Mary's face. He didn't want to tell Mary that her son's future cast a shadow over the peace that filled his soul. He almost bit through his lip trying to contain the truth, but he had to say it. "Your son will mark the failure and recovery of many in Israel, a figure misunderstood and contradicted—*the pain of a sword thrust through you...*"

Had you seen him in the manger or at the Temple, chances are you would have seen just another poor baby with a bleak, uncertain future. But Simeon saw much more.

I heard a pastor describe the funeral of a saintly woman who was known throughout the community for her faithfulness and service. Other pastors had come to pay their respects to the remarkable woman. Her pastor said, "Sister So-and-So loved the church with all her heart. She never said No to her church, and now she is happy because she has gone to that place where every day is a Sunday morning." The pastor telling the story said, "At that moment I looked at the faces of the other pastors,

and all of them looked concerned at the thought that eternity might be an endless Sunday morning.”

As Simeon blessed Jesus, the prophetess Anna happened by. She was an eighty-four year old widow who worshipped, fasted, and prayed in the Temple day and night, year after year. Luke said she did not depart from the Temple. We don't know if she slept on a cot or ordered her meals delivered. When she saw Simeon holding the baby, there was instant recognition. Nothing is said about Anna having ecstatic spiritual states or visions. There were no miracles to keep Anna focused and patient while she waited all those years. She said nothing to Mary or Joseph. Instead, she told everyone that she had seen the consolation and redemption of Israel.

Can you think of something you waited and prayed for that finally came to pass? I'm not talking about a simple wish, but a deep longing. Perhaps you are still waiting, and your desire for it is such that you are not going to give up, but will keep on hoping, watching, and praying. Reflecting upon Anna, James Howell writes, “God's blessing was not a continual smorgasbord of titanic experiences and shiny baubles. God's blessing was just one thing, and it was eighty years in the coming.”

When Lisa was ten days old we took her to the Kosciusko County Hospital to meet her great grandmother, Lois Whitehead. Lois had congestive heart failure. Days before she had an episode we thought would take her. But she wasn't going anywhere, she said, until she saw her first great granddaughter. We quietly walked into Lois's room. She looked completely spent. Her eyes were closed and she struggled for every breath. Brenda carefully laid Lisa in her grandmother's lap. Lois opened her eyes, looked down and said, “Oh my... My oh my...” She was too weak to hold Lisa in her arms, so we put Lisa close to Lois's shoulder. With a serene look she said, “*I'd say the good Lord granted my wish, huh?*” Four generations of women were in that hospital room that day. The look on Lois's face was peaceful and content. Two days later the good life of that good woman came to an end. She saw what she hoped for.

I know a couple that believed something so deeply they put themselves in God's hands and lived with abandon. They worked for it, made sacrifices for it, made themselves objects of scorn for it, became targets of our government for it, put themselves in harm's way for it, and were willing to die for it if that is what God wanted. They spoke it, preached it, breathed it, and lived it and kept on, even though the fruits of their work weren't as evident as they would have hoped.

Phil and Louise Rieman served the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria. They were Christian activists. They pastored churches in South Bend, Wabash, Ivestor, Iowa, and Indianapolis. They worked for the Council of Churches in Sudan, seeking the warring factions to resolve conflicts nonviolently. They witnessed to Jesus' way of peace while bullets zipped over their heads and Sudanese government jets dropped bombs on the villages where they worked. They saw beyond what was in front of them to the future unfolding of God's plan for the world.

It was Christmas Day. Nancy Dahlberg's family was traveling a long distance to get home. Tired and frazzled, they stopped in a restaurant in King City, California. It was nearly empty. Everyone was busy eating, talking quietly, and aware that they all seemed out of place on a special day. As they waited for their meal, Nancy's 1-year-old son, Erik squealed with glee. He wiggled and giggled and then Nancy saw the source of his merriment.

A bum was sitting at the counter waving at Erik and saying, "Hi there, baby; hi there, big boy." He wore a tattered coat, worn-out baggy pants, and a ring-around-the-collar shirt. His face was unshaven, his hair uncombed, and his nose was so varicose it looked like a map of New York City. Nancy and her husband exchanged looks somewhere in between, "What do we do?" and "Poor guy." Erik continued to laugh, which made the old man to answer, "Hi, there!"

The bantering between the two continued throughout their meal. The situation was no longer cute, it was a disturbance. Nancy was embarrassed. Her husband was humiliated. They ate in silence- except for Erik who did his best to get a response from

the bum. Enough was enough. She turned the high chair and Erik screamed to face his buddy at the counter. Now she was really mad. Her husband went to pay the check and said, "Get Erik and meet me in the parking lot." Pulling Erik from the high chair she started toward the door, but the old man was poised and waiting with his chair between her and the front door. "Lord, just let me out of here before he speaks to me or Erik."

It was soon obvious that the Lord and Erik had other plans. As Nancy drew closer she sidestepped him, but as she did Erik leaned over her arm in a classic baby "pick me up" position. She turned and met the bum's eyes. "Would you let me hold your baby?" There was no need to answer because Erik propelled himself from her arms to the old man.

Erik laid his head on the man's shoulder. The man's eyes closed and tears hovered below his lashes. His aged, soiled hands gently cradled Erik and stroked his back. Nancy stood awestruck. The old man rocked the baby in his arms for a moment, his eyes opened and set squarely on hers. He said in a firm, commanding voice, "You take care of this baby." She managed an, "I will," from a throat that contained a stone.

He pried Erik from his chest as though he was in pain. She opened her arms to receive her baby, and again the gentleman addressed her. "God bless you, ma'am. You've given me my Christmas gift." She could utter nothing more than muttered thanks.

Nancy Dahlberg concludes her story, "With Erik back in my arms, I ran for the car. Dennis wondered why I was crying and holding Erik so tightly and why I was saying, "My God, oh God, forgive me."

What did the old man see when he looked to Nancy's baby boy?
Who will the baby grow up to be?

The future is uncertain, scary, sometimes painful. Simeon couldn't comprehend the mystery he held in his arms, hopeful of what God could do.

God says: Stop doing. Start being a light. Stop doing your duty. Start doing mine. Stop worrying about whether or not you've done a good job. Start leaving that up to me.