

THE WAITING ROOM
Sermon for the Feast of the Presentation – Lk 2:22-40
LPC, 2/2/14

Tell me if you've heard this before: "I'm sorry. All of our representatives are currently busy serving other customers. Your call is very important to us. Please stay on the line and your call will be answered in the order in which it was received."

When you hear that type of thing, how long do you usually wait? With me it varies. If I'm not expecting any other calls and can leave the phone on intercom and do other things, it's not so bad. At other times, I wait a maximum of five minutes, unless it's something I can't live without.

How long is it appropriate to wait for things? How long would you wait for a table at the Alpha? For a phone call from a loved one? For a back-ordered item from LL Bean? To see a doctor in the emergency room? For a delayed airplane flight? The length of time will usually depend on how urgent is the need, how deeply felt the want.

What would you wait a lifetime for?

We have in today's Gospel reading an example of a man who waits a lifetime for something deeply wanted. This is the prophet Simeon, a very old man who has spent his life longing for what Luke calls "the consolation of Israel," God's promised Messiah, the Chosen One. Simeon is righteous in his dealings with others and devout in his dealings with God. In other words, he has fulfilled the law, loving God and his neighbor as himself.

Simeon knows by direct revelation of the Holy Spirit that he will not die before seeing the Messiah. Now advanced in age, Simeon must be thinking, well, the Messiah had better come soon!

I wonder if Simeon ever flagged in his expectation. I wonder if he ever questioned that he really had been assured by the very Spirit of God. I wonder if, moved by the Spirit to go to the temple that morning, he thought, "I'm cold. I'm tired. And this might just be indigestion. How do I really know I'm being guided by God?" What was Simeon's mood as he approached the temple? Was he trying not to get his hopes up too high because he'd been disappointed so many times in the past?

We will never know. We do know that his arrival at the temple coincided with the arrival of Joseph and Mary and Jesus, coming to the temple at the required interval for Mary's ritual cleansing after childbirth, and for her firstborn son's dedication to the Lord, according to the ancient laws of Israel.

Simeon's meeting with the Holy Family is wonderful to contemplate. In fact, many artists have depicted this radiant scene. There is a stained glass window at St. Matthew's downtown with this theme.

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Think of the young couple, nervous, excited, perhaps a little breathless after their long trip from Nazareth. Think of the ancient prophet hearing them arrive, approaching, squinting. How does awareness come to him? Suddenly or gradually? But come it does. Imagine the old, creased face suffusing with joy. Simeon reaches out veined and spotted hands. Awed, Mary knows enough to trust her newborn into Simeon's age-weakened arms.

Many painters and photographers have been moved to try and capture the poignancy of very old and very new flesh in close proximity. One, papery, the color of parchment, the other plump and rosy. At first Simeon will have eyes for no one but the child, but then he raises his streaming eyes to heaven, and sings the song I will always think of in the form used for the 1928 Evening Prayer service:

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word,
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,
Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people,
To be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and to be the glory of thy people Israel.

Simeon has waited all his life for this moment. Now he can die happy.

Note that Simeon has only seen the person who will be Israel's salvation in a very unformed state. Jesus as yet hasn't done anything, except be born. He hasn't said a word, never mind anything memorable, or wise, or holy; he hasn't healed a single person; he hasn't fed anyone or raised anyone from the dead. Simeon is content with the revelation that has been given to him. He has been granted this one grace, to see the Messiah before he dies, and with that he is satisfied. He doesn't need to see the compelling man Jesus will become. He doesn't need miracles.

People today are often looking for signs from God. What can we learn from Simeon? Patience, certainly. Steadfastness. A willingness to respond to the proddings of the Holy Spirit to seek in certain places. And the faith that what we ultimately seek is so wonderful that we don't need more than a glimpse of it, a taste, to know it is there. We don't need miracles to believe.

That faith is both a gift and a discipline. Sometimes God grants that faith should be effortless for us. Sometimes faith is not effortless for us. These are times we remain steadfast regardless of our passing moods, reminding ourselves of the promise we know we have, and the wonderfulness of what we are promised we will have.

All we know about Simeon is that when his promise came true, he was able to recognize it. We don't know if he spent years in a misery of longing, when he had only the promise of wonderfulness to keep him going. But he kept faith with the promise, and the promise kept faith with him.

We too have this promise of wonderfulness. So we too wait. It will be worth it.