

January 1, 2006
Luke 2:21-40
First Parish Church
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Looking Forward

I know a woman named Lucille. Lucille is one of those elfish folk, who though small in physical stature, fills a room with her delightful presence. Her eyes sparkle and her laughter charms and warms your soul.

When I first met her, Lucille lived alone in a house filled with furniture from a different era. In particular, I remember the two large paintings of her grandmother and grandfather, which pretty much cover the living room wall. Those paintings must have originally hung in a room that had much higher ceilings than her present single story ranch style house. Sitting in that room with her grandparents you realize that you are looking back in time to before the Civil War.

You see, when I first met Lucille, it was around the time of her 96th birthday. As we talked she told me that when she died I should tell everyone that she was ready to go and had had a good, long life. I told her I would. The next year on her 97th birthday, she said the same thing. On her 98th birthday, she began to ponder that maybe living to 100 wouldn't be so bad. On her 99th birthday, she chuckled and said that seeing as how she had made it this far, she was looking forward to 100. What a joy it was to go to her 100th birthday party! Lucille is now 103 and still with us.

When we are young we spend much of our time looking forward – to our next birthday, to Christmas, to summer vacation. Time seems to drag on as we wait for the next big event in our lives.

When we are old we spend much of our time looking backward – to past birthdays, past Christmases, past careers, and we wonder where the years went.

When we are middle aged we are probably more like the Roman god, Janus, for whom this month January is named. Remember Janus was depicted as having one head with two faces – one looking backward and one looking forward, all at the same time.

This day on our calendar, January 1st, encourages us to look back and to look forward. It is a ritual of human community that acknowledges that the earth has taken another trip around the sun. On this day we also consider where we have been spiritually, and where we sense we are being called to go. So where are we at the moment?

At the moment we are still in the season of Christmas. In fact, this is the eighth day of Christmas. In the lectionary texts, we are still hearing the infancy stories of Jesus. We read the scripture stories each year. We embellish those stories and create Christmas pageants. And artists create crèches to depict the

story. In the back of the sanctuary is a display, by our historian Mildred Jones, of various crèche scenes. Think about who is in those scenes:

- A newborn, who amazingly is always silent. Rarely are nights so silent with a newborn.
- The tired and awe-struck parents.
- Rough and hardy shepherds come in from the fields
- Angels, bringing the good news of a great joy
- A star, guiding magi from the east

In thinking about this week's gospel story I realized who was missing in the crèche scenes– the elders – grandparents and the elders of the faith community.

Today's gospel lesson brings those folk into the picture through Simeon and Anna. The song of the angels is stilled. The shepherds are back with their flocks. And Mary and Joseph have traveled to Jerusalem to present their child to the Lord.

Just as we bring our children to baptism, Mary and Joseph have brought Jesus to the temple in thanksgiving for the gift he is in their lives, and to acknowledge that really their baby is ultimately a child of God.

It is
-a time for savoring the sacredness of life.
-a time for celebrating God's love.
-a time for planting seeds of faith.
It is an outward and visible sign of the grace of God as they present their child in the temple.

The temple in Jerusalem was no wayside chapel. It was the central temple of the Jewish people. It was a bustling place-

people coming and going, saying prayers, paying temple taxes, making sacrifices. The atmosphere would have been more like our sanctuary at the 4:00 Christmas Eve service than the quieter atmosphere we have this morning. Into that scene come Joseph, Mary and Jesus. In the midst of it all, they are noticed by two of the elders – Anna and Simeon.

Anna, an 84- year-old widow, apparently spent most of her time at the temple. She is the only woman in Luke's gospel referred to as a prophet. She had eyes to see God at work. We might say she was one of the ladies of the church, who often work behind the scenes - folding bulletins, preparing food for memorial services, walking in marches, visiting shut-ins - and praying for those she loves and for the world.

Simeon, on the other hand, wasn't always at the temple. But he had a special sense that he needed to be at the temple that day. He probably had other things planned for that day. Yet, the story says that he was guided by the Spirit to come to the temple. There were no angels, no star in the sky. He just knew he was supposed to be at the temple. How do you know something like that? I've found that the refinement of that inner sense of knowing usually comes from years of paying attention to the Spirit.

Simeon and Anna had many years to look back upon. They could have spent their days focused on the past. However, they were both looking forward – looking forward to God's ongoing creating, redeeming, and sustaining work. Their hearts were hopeful and open to God's saving presence.

Simeon and Anna, with the wisdom of age and lifetimes of attentiveness to God's Spirit, have the eyes to see the presence of God in an infant child of ordinary peasants. Christmas worked its magic on Simeon and Anna. In this infant child they see the light of the world.

Have you ever noticed that sometimes the old and the young see things in one another that the rest of us miss? When my children were young and we would be out in a public place, it was often an older person who caught their eye and welcomed them and they were no longer strangers one to another.

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Remember Lucille. One of the highlights of Lucille's year, in these later years of her life, was when people from the church would come Christmas caroling. We always sent the group with the youngest children to her house. She welcomed them with a twinkle in her eye and their eyes shone as they sang for her. Christmas worked its magic on them.

One more story of Christmas magic. It was a worship service on one of the Sundays before Christmas where the sanctuary is packed. After the service had already begun, a young college-aged man came in the front door. He was a bit disheveled. As he looked around it was clear that there wasn't an empty seat anywhere. So the young man walked down the center aisle. When he got almost to the front, he simply sat down in the aisle. Some eyebrows were raised, and the room seemed tense. The service continued, but the room was restless. I suspect many were hoping

one of the ushers would take care of it. Then Jim, an older white-haired gentleman, one of the elders of the church, who was sitting near the back, stood up and slowly made his way forward until he came to the young man. Then holding onto the pew, Jim slowly lowered himself to the floor and sat next to the young man. All was well.

Christmas had worked its magic on Jim over the years and Jim was now about the work of Christmas.... looking forward... to welcoming others as children of God, and keeping his heart hopeful and open to God's saving presence.