

May 6, 2018  
Luke 2:25-38  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME  
Mary E. Baard

## *Soul of Aging*

### INTRO to SCRIPTURE

As I was thinking of wisdom characters in scripture, Simeon and Anna came to mind. Their stories are found only in the gospel of Luke in connection to the Christmas story. Simeon and Anna are part of the widening circle to whom the *good news of great joy* is being shared. First, the angels appeared to the shepherds and now the Spirit reveals to Simeon that he is to go to the temple; and Anna is always there. These are people who have been steadfast in their presence in the community of faith. They are also people who are open to the new ways that the Spirit is moving among them.

### SERMON

When I was turning 60, a couple of different people asked me how it was to turn 60. Their tone, if not their words, implied that maybe it wasn't so good. I found myself replying tenderly, "It's a privilege." At the time, I was thinking of Susan Fitzgerald who I realized wouldn't live to 60. I find myself particularly thinking of Susan this morning, since today is her granddaughter Ella Susan's second birthday.

As people put more and more candles on their birthday cakes there is this paradoxical tension about the process of aging. Andy Rooney expressed it this way,  
*the idea of living a long life appeals to everyone but the ideal of getting old doesn't appeal to anyone.*

As many of you know, my husband, Ron, and I attended a *Soul of Aging* conference this past week in San Antonio, Texas. The conference was designed to help us practice creating a safe

space for one another's spirits, as we explored the experience of aging. For the leaders of this seminar the process is as important as the content.

After a couple of days, I realized that the covenant for our spiritual discernment process in our small groups (the way we talked with one another) reflected our First Parish Church covenant.

We used "I" statements, speaking directly from our own experience. In that way, we were **doing justice** to our own and one another's reality.

We did not try to solve, fix, or direct one another. In that way, we expressed **loving kindness** to the tenderness, and even shyness, of the other person's spirit.

We honored silence. In that way, we were **walking humbly with God**. We recognized the need to *be still and know that God is*. We took time to be attentive to God's Spirit.

In other words, we practiced listening deeply...

- To our own spirit
- To one another's spirit
- To God's Spirit

Ron and I are exploring ways we might share some of this spiritual discernment process with those who would like to be part of such a group. The content of the reflection could be about aging, but it could be about any aspect of life. If you have interest in this, please feel free to speak to either one of us.

At this conference the content was about aging, so as you can imagine it was poignant and humorous. In the back of my mind I kept pondering what I might share with you about the wisdom on aging that came from this gathering of people. Then a woman in our small group spoke of a Canadian radio show she used to listen to called *Dead Dog Café*. Each show ended with Jasper Friendly Bear saying, *Stay calm! Be brave! Wait for the signs!* That struck me as good wisdom for the process of aging.

***Stay calm! Be brave! Wait for the signs!***

***Stay calm.***

Birthdays can particularly set people into a panic. Birthdays remind us that time is passing quickly, and things are changing.

In his book *Aging as a Spiritual Practice*, Lewis Richmond tells a story about a public lecture by his Buddhist teacher, Suzuki. During Q&A, a man spoke up, *You've been talking about all this Buddhist stuff, but frankly I can't understand anything you are saying. Can you say one thing about Buddhism that I can actually understand?* Suzuki waited for the nervous laughter to die down and then quietly said, *Everything changes.*

*(Aging as a Spiritual Practice, Lewis Richmond)*

Even in the midst of such change, we need to keep breathing. One breath in, one breath out.

***Be brave.***

Being brave does not mean we are not afraid. Being brave is doing what the Spirit calls us to even when we are afraid. As Wendell Berry says in one of his poems,

*There is no going back.*

*Less and less you are*

*That possibility you were...*

*Every day you have less reason*

*Not to give yourself away.*

***Wait for the signs.***

You may be wondering *what signs?* I would say signs of the Spirit.

Over thirty years ago someone helped me on a plane flight and I've been waiting to "pay it forward." At the time I was flying alone with our older daughter, who was under a year. She was not happy, at all. The man sitting next to me offered to hold her. I was grateful. She settled right down when he took her. He was an angel of mercy.

Yesterday we were flying home and the four-month-old across the aisle from us was very upset. I think her ears were bothering her, since we were on the ascent. I wasn't sure how the mother would respond but I leaned over and asked if the baby was comfortable with other people holding her. The mother immediately held her out, so I could take her. I was a little surprised, since I had supposed that this was her first child. However, I learned later that she has three other children at home, so her response made more sense. Emmie didn't quiet down immediately but after a while she relaxed.

It reminded me of the story of Anna and the baby Jesus from today's scripture. Indeed, new life in a small child is a sign of the gifts of God in all creation. I felt blessed.

Signs come in other people and other aspects of creation. Mary Oliver is a poet who pays great attention to the world in which we live. Everywhere she sees signs of meaning.

*Wild Geese*

*You do not have to be good.*

*You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert,  
repenting.*

*You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves.*

*Tell me about despair, yours,  
and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the  
rain are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese,  
high in the clean-blue-air,  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese,  
harsh and exciting-  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.*

~Mary Oliver