

Sermon at First Parish
 April 7, 2019
 Text: Luke 2:22-35

This past week in his NY Times column entitled “the UK has Gone Mad,” Thomas Friedman began with a story about the French European Affairs Minister who named her cat Brexit. She chose the name because, “He wakes me up every morning meowing to death because he wants to go out, and then when I open the door he stays in the middle, undecided, and then gives me evil looks when I put him out.”

This story caught my attention for a few reasons, first because it reminded me of our stone deaf, often confused, 20 year old cat Gracie, second because it spoke to the polarized politics in our own country, but especially because England has been on my mind as I have thought about this sermon and lived with the text you just heard. This text is at the heart of my spirituality.

Karin Baard launched a sermon series a little more than a month ago admitting that in spite of her two clergy parents, she didn’t know quite where she landed before discovering the powerful appeal of Celtic Spirituality and its relevance to her generation. I related to her story. I too had wondered where I would land. Some days I still do! Like many in this congregation my religious upbringing had been complex, for me with pulls to the Congregational church, the Episcopal Church and to no church.

Several years after I was ordained in the United Church of Church our two boys sang in an Episcopal Men and Boys choir over the course of 12 years in the Connecticut town where we lived. This was a huge commitment requiring at least 3 rehearsals or services per week plus a lot of parent involvement. We loved it. We chaperoned several trips to England where the choir sang in their majestic cathedrals. As the choir in residence, they sang daily Evensong, or evening prayer, usually called Vespers in the Catholic Church. That service is sung every day of the year, year after year throughout the year. It includes two canticles the first of which is set to the Magnificat, Mary’s song, “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,” and the second of which is set to the Nunc Dimittis words included in our text for this morning. They are the words of an old man holding a newborn baby: “Now Lord I can depart in peace for my eyes have seen your salvation for me and for all people.”. Composers have written hundreds and hundreds of choral settings for these texts. Imagine Simeon’s words being sung daily in these spaces of grandeur and great beauty, “Now Lord let your servant depart in peace”...in the midst of the Brexit turmoil...on the day the World Trade Center was struck, on each of the days of senseless shootings at schools, in public squares, and houses of worship, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim...”Now dear God I can depart in peace for my eyes have seen your salvation for me and for all people.” On many evenings these words are hard to make sense of, hard to make sense of in the face of such struggle, evil, and pain. But in truth we live each day on the brink, an expression often associated with impending disaster but which also applies to being at the edge of something new and wonderful, or at the edge of all that we do not yet know. We live our lives with routines and expectations many of which are fulfilled. We make plans, we prepare, we pack our bags, but we also know that we *never* can be sure what a day will bring of the good or the bad.

There are theological answers to the question of how the words of the Nunc Dimittis make any sense in the face of struggle, evil, and pain, but for now it matters more to look at what is happening in this moment between an old man and a newborn child. Simeon was an ordinary and devout man and a dedicated scholar of the Hebrew Scriptures. Like all faithful Jews he knew the prophets’ telling of the coming of the Messiah. As we heard in the text, it had been disclosed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. And then one day the unexpected happened. He was led to the temple where Mary and Joseph were making an offering of two turtle doves for their first born son, the offering made by parents too poor to afford a lamb. Mary allowed this stranger to take Jesus in his arms and she and Joseph were dumbfounded by what he said, “Now dear God I can depart in peace for my eyes have seen your salvation for me and for all people.” He is

speaking not only about coming to terms with his own aging body and the inevitable end to life as we know it that we all will face. He also carries with him the weight of human history and a knowledge of what will come. That the coming salvation of Israel will reveal something about Israel's God to all people. Who is this God? This is not a God who gives us a Messiah of power and political might, but a God who gives us a Messiah in the form of an utterly dependent human infant that needs human connection, responds to love, and that will grow to offer that love to all people.

There are neurobiologists now convinced that our brains are wired for human connection through mirroring and through emotional resonance. There are studies by educators on what is now called the social brain. Children thrive and learn vastly more in classrooms where they work in teams to solve problems than they do alone. And something settles deep inside us when another person listening to our story or our pain reflects back to us with emotional attunement that they have heard us. We are wired for human connection and love as was Simeon, as was Jesus. It is through God's love and through human connection that we experience salvation, that we find our deepest fulfillment.

Even though this story is about the baby Jesus, it is not a Christmas story. It is a story for *every* single mixed-up day of the year. It is a prayer to be repeated over and over again. I included in our text what Simeon says to Mary after giving her and Joseph his blessing: "This child is destined to be a sign that people will reject. Your own heart will be pierced." This is a story for this time during Lent as we approach Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, a story about how hard it is for human beings, for us, to accept love and to be changed by it. It is so much easier to reject it or at least to keep a safe distance from it especially when facing chaos, evil or tragedy, either personal or collective. It is so much easier to reject what we most fear. This is Simeon's paradox. Although he grieves for what is to come for Jesus and for the people of God, he can die in peace with the deep sense of God's love.

What about us? How do we face the good and the bad? I think of that dreadful prayer that reminds children they are on the brink each night. "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." Thankfully my mother changed the words to, "Thy love stay with me through the night and wake me with the morning light," and for the most part, I slept well. As an adult the words of the Nunc Dimittis invite me to consider whether I am living my life each day in such a way that allows me to face the many things that come my way and respond with love and with strength, to find joy and compassion in connection with others, and that allows me to let go of fear and trust God's love.

"Now dear God, you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel."

Amen