

“The Christ event is like a stone dropped in the calm pond of history, its ripples impact past, present, and future - ours, and all of humanity’s.”

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A Song of Hope When the End is Near, Luke 2:29-32

Luke 2:29-32

“Master, now 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.”

When I was in college, we had an occasional street preacher set up in the middle of campus, calling us all to repentance. We were all doomed, he assured us. The end is near and we will be called to account for our actions. I’m sure you’ve seen such a preacher in your life. Or you’ve seen a sign at a sporting event: Repent, the end is near! But a few years ago, I ran across a picture that made me stop. It read: “Repent, the beginning is near!” The sign reminds us that God’s promises are about rebirth and renewal, not ruin. God’s hope and will is that we will live and flourish, not that we be condemned and destroyed. At the end of his life, Simeon’s song is a reminder that the promises of God speak to our dying, and, as such, speak to our living.

We’re not sure of Simeon’s age when he sings his song to the infant Jesus and to Mary, Joseph, and whoever else was in the temple that day. The hints from the text suggest the end of his days are near. It is beautiful to picture the aged Simeon taking the baby from his mother to offer a blessing - a gorgeous picture of the way religion unites the generations. I am reminded that the day I found out I was expecting Hope on a day I remember because it was also the day I buried one of my closest friends in that place, a woman just shy of her 99th birthday. The intertwining of death and life wrapped up in the promises of God moved me to tears, the same as the vision of Simeon’s undeterred faith that the baby Jesus was the Messiah, the Savior. After Simeon’s song and blessings, we also meet Anna, a woman who is either 84 or widowed for 84 years - the translation’s a little shaky. It is actually a notable number, because it would call to the minds of Luke’s listeners the biblical hero Judith, a widow who, when the men and warriors of her day refused to trust God’s deliverance, delivered Israel herself by beheading the enemy general. She, too, never remarried, and remained a widow for 84 years. Luke drops in these details to link Simeon and Anna to the story of God’s salvation of Israel. Their lives, then, concentrate all these stories into this moment, reminding us that God’s blessings are timeless. The Christ event is like a stone dropped in the calm pond of history, its ripples impact past, present, and future - ours, and all of humanity’s.

More than five and a quarter centuries ago, a lavishly decorated hospice was built in Beaune, a village in the Southeast of France. It was called "God's Hotel" - it sounds even more beautiful in French, but I can't make those sounds in my mouth, so you'll have to work it out for yourself. The site is now a World Heritage Site because of its Gothic architecture and beautiful frescos, but it is also notable because its splendor might make us think it was for the nobility, but, in reality, it served only the poor. It is the motto of the place that is most notable: "The sacred art of dying is the sacred art of living." Simeon - and Anna, for that matter - pattern their entire lives off the end of their lives. This could be a fearful enterprise, I suppose, if we fear death. But Simeon and Anna trusted that their deaths would be tied to the salvation of God. This is what we proclaim at funerals. In our worship materials, the notes for a funeral include this statement: "When the church gathers to mark the end of life, Christ crucified and risen is the witness of worship, the strength of mutual consolation, and the hope of healing." We are like Simeon and Anna. We will die, but we need not die in fear, because God's promises are eternal and we know that at the end of our lives, our Siblings in Christ will commend us to our merciful redeemer. And that is how we can live our lives, resting deeply in the hope of the resurrection and the renewal of all creation.

When Jenny Harrington's eight-year-old son reached the end of what radiation and chemotherapy could do for him, it was up to Jenny to tell Ewan that he was going to die. Jenny said she offered him three magical phrases to comfort him. "You are not alone. You will not feel pain. We will be okay." Ewan lived for one week after Jenny delivered the devastating news. Afterwards, Jenny wrote, "I died that day, too. There are no words that fill in for his silenced silly and cherished company. I feel incredibly alone. It is unimaginably painful. That's when I repeat the Three Magic Phrases in reverse order. We will be okay. You will not feel pain. You will not be alone. I feel myself caught in the arms of my beloved child. Now, I am not alone. Then, the pain eases. I will be okay." This is like Simeon, at the end of his life as he witnesses the fulfillment of his dreams, he sings a song about the hope that will hold him death as well as it sustained him in life.

Dag Hammarskjöld was the first secretary general of UN, and died, quite tragically, in a plane crash. After his death some of his journals were published, interestingly translated by his friend, the poet W. H. Auden. Many of the entries in the book, titled *Markings*, have to do with this connection between life and death in a way that rests deeply in the hope of the restoration of all people and all creation. One entry of note simply says, "Do not seek death. Death will find you. But seek the road which makes death a fulfillment."

Beloved, for each of us, the end is near. Human life is fleeting, a whisper on the breath of God. But we may yet live in such a way that the blessings we know we will receive from God may yet bless the lives of others. Let me leave you with this thought from the Swiss moral philosopher Henri-Frédéric Amiel, who once said, "Life is short. We don't have much time to gladden the hearts of those who walk this way with us. So, be swift to love and make haste to be kind."

Amen.