The Invitation of Light

Luke 2:25-32

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Marcia B Bailey, preaching

Classes resumed this week at Temple University where I teach, and I attended a faculty workshop titled “Managing Your Class in a Time of Anxiety and Fear.” It was a curious name for a workshop but it wasn’t a surprising topic at all; in fact, many of us have been doing just that….”managing” our classes and students who are, like the rest of our nation, and perhaps to some extent our world, all too anxious and afraid. We talked about how and when to discuss the violence of our present culture in the classroom: do we talk about the mass killings in San Bernardino or not? Do we bring up the on campus shootings that happen more and more frequently? How do we, in the context of North Philadelphia, treat the killing of young black men in our cities? Do we talk about Islamaphobia and ISIS and Syria and France and……well, unfortunately, the list goes on and on. How *do* we talk about the violence in the world?

Some folks thought we shouldn’t talk about it all; we had texts to read, discussions planned, objectives to be fulfilled. Stick to the script. Don’t risk getting into a quagmire. The academy is place where students expect to learn; it’s an escape. It’s a place of refuge from the struggles of the world. Some of us think the church should be the same.

But others of us disagreed. How can we educate without examining the truth of the world we’ve created? How can we resist hate and violence and divisiveness if we don’t name it, know what it is, talk about what breeds it in the first place, and finally begin to imagine something new? I was squarely in concert with this group.

And all the while this conversation was going on, in my head I was hearing the words of our text today: “Master, you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eye have seen your salvation… a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” (Lk. 2:29,30a, 32)

These are Simeon’s words, said in the Temple by a faithful old man who had prayed for the coming of Messiah and in who’s presence, God was revealing the very same. These are words full of expectation and promise; full of anticipation and release. Simeon no doubt had a vision for what he thought God’s Messiah would be: in those days, who didn’t? He would be a strong and powerful leader. He would be a compassionate and gracious caretaker. His rule would out strip the influence of Rome and bring justice and peace to Israel, who had waited so patiently so long. Simeon *must* have had a sense of who and what he was looking for so *imagine* what it must have been like for him to be nudged by God’s Spirit into the Temple on just another ordinary day, to receive yet another youngster into his arms for ritual blessing, and to know, immediately, that the culmination of his life’s expectation was being met: not in a king, but a child. Not in a moment of strength but in a moment of surrender. Not in political might but in faithful obedience.

We miss something if we read these majestic words of Simeon recorded in the text and think they are no more than a poetic utterance marking an old man’s exit; these words are strong, powerful, and prophetic! These words are no less than a huge paradigm shift! This was *not* what he was looking for! A national hero, a bold warrior, bundled in the arms of a peasant couple in a side room at the Temple? Simeon had prayed to see the Savior before he died and God kept that promise: but Simeon got so much more than he had ever bargained for!

“…my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared **in the presence of all peoples**…, ” he proclaims! What does this mean, “in the presence of all people”? I think it means that this revelation was not some “magic trick”, not some “import” from some other time or space but that in this child Simeon sees that indeed this Messiah was one of us, from us, with us, for us. “…you have prepared in the presence of all peoples”! Not hidden away for some, not secreted aside for others, but here was the Savior, the Messiah, presented in full view of all who would see, in the “presence of all”.

“A light for the revelation to the Gentiles.” The Jewish people understood that the Messiah would come for them, and them alone. Simeon declares that this Light has come, but *not* to them alone. The very same light that would illuminate the path of the Chosen Ones would also light the way for the Gentiles: **everyone** sees by this light!

And his final declaration: “ for glory to your people Israel.” Indeed the waiting of this faithful people could be over. The tension could be released. The expectation that Messiah would come was fulfilled. While it is “revealed” to the Gentiles (shown off for the first time), it is a homecoming for the people of Israel; the waiting is done. Whatever Simeon had originally had in mind, chances are good that his affirmation this day took even him by surprise.

Light is always more than we bargained for. That’s why I think it frightens some and energizes others. My conversation with my colleagues about the fear and violence in the world is only heightened by the political rhetoric of our time. I dare not make political pronouncements from this sacred spot but I will say that I am stunned by the support received in recent days and months for political candidates who use fear to exclude; their words of hatred towards immigrants, towards Muslims, towards women, their disrespect for the very office they seek invokes a kind of violence that is seductive and short sighted. They fear the light. They hide behind words that garnish personal gain at the risk of imperiling innocent others. Inclusivity is too threatening, too uncertain, to unexpected for them to imagine.

Just think about what it could have been like for Simeon. He could have rejected this sign from God. He could have recoiled, handed the baby back, or even had them thrown out at such a preposterous thought: that salvation would come to ALL people; that light would creep in in unexpected ways. That inclusivity would be part of the Divine design. That loving, powerful, indiscriminating Light would come….**to everyone**, as “revelation” and “glory” to all who would see!

Light is more always more than we bargained for. It penetrates, it includes, its ferrets out what is hidden and shines truth and justice into the places we might choose not to see. Light came, and comes, not just to some but to all. Not just for one but for many. Not just for those who were looking for it but for those who could *see* it.

As we remember and celebrate a light bearer himself, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, be reminded of his words: “darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” We live in a climate of fear and violence. What can change that? LIGHT CAN. And we can.

The light proclaimed by Simeon is the inclusive light of salvation: not for some but literally for all. It did not come with creeds and codes; it was not given with stipulations or conditions. It comes to us, for us, as us. It comes to bring peace and as a result, as Simeon goes on to say in an aside to Mary, such light inevitably divides. Because some reject the light; some refuse to see. But light remains. It shines. It does its work of bringing hope and life and possibility to the world.

Purveyors of fear only serve to increase fear and hatred; bearers of light spread love and illuminate the way. Choose wisely between them. Light loves us all.