

Ghosts, Garbage Truck Lights, and Dancing Like No One Is Watching

^{NRS} Luk 2:25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷ Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, ²⁹ "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." ³³ And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed-- and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

When I was about eight my family went into downtown Dallas to see a production of "A Christmas Carol." Normally when we went to the city, we went to the smaller and more pedestrian friendly city of Fort Worth, so it was something of an adventure going into Dallas. As we drove in I remember seeing the reunion tower ball in the night sky. It's this tall tower in the skyline of Dallas with what looks like a giant golf ball or microphone on top. When I asked about it, my folks told me there was a restaurant up there and that it spins. A spinning restaurant! At eight, I was imagining this being something like an amusement park ride, where you would have to hold on to your table just to keep yourself from being hurled to the edges. Of course the reunion tower actually spins more slowly than this, just affording everyone up there a chance to see the whole city no matter where they're seated. But I didn't care. My imagination was primed, and I was excited for anything.

Now, I hadn't been to a whole lot of plays at that point, so I was just looking at everything as much as I could and just taking it all in. I remember at the beginning of the play, they warned about the use of a smoke machine and some frightening moments.

Well come on. It's A Christmas Carol. How frightening could it be. Well, it turned out to be right up there with Jaws III in 3-D, which I watched with a popcorn box in front of my face. The climax of this particular version came at the end, you know the part where the ghost of Christmas future come in? Well, they put all their budget into this scene. They had a HUGE ghost like 18 or 20 feet high, draped in black cloth. And as it came out, they pumped out this acrid smelling fog that blanketed the stage and crept into the audience. And then they had these terrifying strobe lights and this loud, awful, horrible music. It was like Nightmare on Elm Street meets Rudolph. I nearly peed in my pants I was so scared. Now *that* would have been a merry Christmas.

Well, after a few more years, and a few counseling sessions later, I've moved on. I'm able to see a Christmas Carol without having nightmares. And my appreciation for it has grown. This year I read the original. I'd never actually read it before. And you know what? Dickens doesn't really care about the ghost of Christmas future nearly as much as we do with all our special effects. In fact I was surprised with how little attention Dickens gives to this last ghost compared to the others. The other spirits he describes in great detail, but this ghost he merely describes as being shrouded and "so dark as to be hard to detach from the night." And the scene with this ghost is much shorter than the others as well. No, Dickens himself didn't put much of an emphasis on the future in his play.

Do you know where Dickens places the accent? It falls on the past- it comes with the ghost of Christmas past. The real meat of the play, the place where Scrooge's nasty attitude first cracks is when he looks to the past- it's when he remembers what Christmas was like as a boy. It's when he remembers being young, when he still looking forward-

when he still had dreams. It's when he remembered being in love and what happened when life got in the way. It's when he remembered what it was like to have fun and to laugh. Oh, he looked back at those Christmases long ago, Scrooge did- and he measured his life against them, and he began to realize how far off course he had wandered. It's this nostalgia for what was- this is what made A Christmas Carol so powerful, not spooky ghosts.

Looking back- we do this too, don't we? Especially at Christmas. Every time we hear Nat King Cole sing "chestnuts roasting on an open fire" or taste the nutmeg in the eggnog we can't help but be transported back in time and remember Christmases from long ago. One writer puts it like this: "For good or for ill, Christmas functions like a kind of time machine for us, taking us back to every other Christmas we have spent on this earth. For some...it is the smell of pine boughs and oranges stuck with cloves, the taste of roast turkey and peppermint...for others though, this night is a reminder of the way life should have been but never was." (p. 21 *The Preaching Life*) Christmas is like a time machine in which we remember all our Christmas pasts and compare. Like Scrooge, we compare holidays and we compare ourselves- wondering how we're measuring up. We wonder if we've accomplished enough- if we're the people we were hoping we'd be by now. We compare our families and our relationships, wondering is this is really what we signed on for?

Oh, we look back at Christmas. We do. And you know we're not alone when we do this tonight. We're not alone in wondering about all this. Simeon is right there with

us. Simeon, this old priest Luke shows us, this old ghost rattling around the temple. Luke tells us how upright Simeon is, how devout he is, and then he tells us something which really helps to give us a sense for who Simeon is. Luke tells us that he's filled with longing. He tells us Simeon is filled longing for the "consolation" of Israel. Consolation is a strange word here. It sounds like second prize, doesn't it? Consolation isn't a very helpful translation here. The word in Greek, *paraklesis*, means much more than just to console or comfort- it means to save, to call back and restore. The best meaning here is to call back and restore, to make something like it used to be.

Restoration, bringing back the good, old days of Israel, when David was leading them, when no one had even heard of the Romans- this is what Simeon was really longing for, yearning for. And it must have been so frustrating for him. He'd been so good, so devout- and yet as his days were drawing to a close the world around him seemed about as dark as ever, his hopes and dreams for his country seeming so far from coming true, so far from really happening. It wasn't supposed to be like this. It wasn't...well it just wasn't fair.

Ever feel that way? Ever have an idea of how things were supposed to be, how your life, your career, your family, your health are *supposed* to be? And then no matter how hard you work, how hard you try- life just has other ideas sometimes. And it just doesn't feel fair.

Well this, this is how Simeon is feeling, hanging around the temple. But then something happens to him- something extraordinary. And it happens in the most ordinary of ways. Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph go to the temple to dedicate the

baby, something every parent did back then- no big deal. It's something Simeon's probably done a thousand times before- except this time, *this* time something happens inside of him. He stares down into those brown eyes of the Christ child, and something inside of Simeon just gives way. All of that frustration. All of that bitterness over how things were supposed to be. All of that falls away. And he starts to see possibilities around him he didn't see before. He ends up saying some of the most famous words in scripture, words the church now calls the *Nunc Dimittis*- Latin for "now dismiss." He says: 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."

This kind of seeing- this happens sometimes when we're around little ones. They help us to see things we're not always able to see- the things that are right in front of our eyes, but that we just don't notice. When my little boy Will was about 2, one of his favorite things on Friday mornings were the garbage trucks. Early in the morning, too early if you ask me, they'd rumble down the road like enormous elephants stopping to check out every home. And I remember one morning, one that seemed particularly early, I heard William calling for me, and I stumbled out of bed and crossed the hallway to his room still half asleep. And there I saw him in his PJ's, striped Hannah Anderson PJs with feet, and I saw him staring, transfixed at the garbage truck outside his window across the street. It was still dark, and there was a thick blanket of fog making the lights glow and sparkle. "Look Daddy!" he yelled. And I just stood there, honestly thinking that there probably wasn't much chance of us going back to sleep and kind of grumbling in my head. "Look at the lights, daddy!" he said insistently. "Look at the lights."

“Yeah, it’s a garbage truck,” I spat back. And then, as if to correct me, he turned his little round face to mine, his eyes growing wide with delight, “They’re beautiful lights!” he said. And what could I do but take another look and see that he was right, and to be grateful to be standing there with him and having my eyes opened, really opened.

I don’t know exactly what happened to Simeon when he saw Jesus. I’m not sure why he was able to let go of the bitterness of the past and say those words. But one thing I do know- Simeon didn’t respond that way because Jesus came to bring back the good old, days and make everything just like it used to be. Jesus didn’t. And he wouldn’t. Israel would actually be in worse shape after Jesus’ death than it was before. No, the change in Simeon happened *not* because Jesus was going to make everything exactly like it was years ago; it happened because Simeon caught a glimpse in those eyes that what was coming, whatever it would be- it would be something new, something better.

As Simeon cradled that baby in his arms, he realized in a deep, deep part of him that Israel’s best days, his best days- there weren’t behind them, but in right out there ahead of them. And this night, as we celebrate Christ’s birth again, the good news of Christmas is that God is still doing new things in our world, and our best days, our *best* days, are in front of us.

I’d like to leave you with these words from a short, popular poem about celebrating moments like this:

We convince ourselves that life will be better after
After we get married, have a baby, then another.
But then we get frustrated that the kids aren’t old enough
and we think we’ll be more content when they are.

But after that, we're frustrated that we have teenagers to deal with.
We imagine we'll be happy when they are out of that stage.
Then, we tell ourselves that our life will be complete when our
spouse gets his or her act together, when we get a nicer car,
or when we're able to retire.

The truth is, there's no better time than right now.
If not now, when? Your life will always be filled with challenges.
It's best to admit this to yourself and remember that time
waits for no one.

So, stop waiting

Stop waiting to live until your car or home is paid off
--until your kids leave
--until you go back to school
Stop waiting until you retire
--until you die

There is no better time than RIGHT NOW.

So -- work like you don't need money,
Love like you've never been hurt,
And dance like no one's watching.

Beloved as the Christ child in born again into our world and into our lives, my
prayer for us is that we may we let the past go and shake its dust from our feet. And free
from all of that, may we look for the hints of God's salvation hidden all around us-
whether in the face of the holy child, or in the dawn's early morning garbage truck lights;
and in step with the Holy Spirit may we dance like no one is watching. Merry Christmas.

Amen.