“A New Song for a New Year”

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From the Pulpit
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Singing and praying are the first things that children of faith learn. The melodies get into their heads and their hearts. And they learn to tell time with prayers – meals and bedtime. Songs and prayers always come first. They always come before doctrine and deeds. And let’s be honest, when children take the mic, you never know what you’ll get.

At dinner in my home, Jude, Lucy, Sadie, and I will chose between one of several prayers or songs that everyone knows. Usually Sadie, the smallest and youngest – and the one who attempts to run the house, of course – shouts first which prayer she wants to do. Her hand shoots straight up and she says excitedly, “I have a prayer! I have a prayer!” Then we hold hands, look at each other, and say the prayer together.

It doesn’t always work out so well, though. Like learning anything, there are bumps and mishaps. Last year around this time, we sat down for dinner and asked who has a
prayer. As is our custom...Sadie’s hand shot up and she said “I have a prayer! I have a prayer!” I said, “Okay, which prayer do you want to do?” She said, “Jingle Bell Rock.” Being the serious minister and strict parent that I am, and seeking to raise my kids in the faith...I said...“Okay.” So we held hands, looked at each other and sang Jingle Bell Rock. I closed our cover of that great tune with the word, Amen. And we ate.

We all need to keep learning to pray and sing. Sadie needs to keep learning to pray and sing. I need to keep learning to pray and sing. In fact, the Church Mothers and Fathers of the first centuries knew this and give us their wisdom in these words, “lex orandi, lex credenda.” “As we pray, so we believe.” Songs and prayers precede theology and scholarship, doctrine and deeds. Because it turns out, you don’t have to know much or be able to do much to sing and pray. Ask a child, how much do you need to know about God to pray, simply, ‘thank you.’ You don’t need to know much to say thank you.

In this morning’s lesson, on the First Sunday after Christmas, Mary and Joseph are teaching Jesus to pray. As devout Jews, after the appropriate time has passed, they have come to the temple in Jerusalem for Mary's purification and
Jesus’ presentation as a firstborn male to be consecrated to God. They are greeted by two people: Simeon, the minister on call, and Anna, a widow who volunteered in the house of worship every day. And they have been waiting and waiting and waiting.

What are you waiting for? There’s different ways that we wait. Maybe there is something you’re putting off, like saving the New Year’s resolutions for Thursday. Maybe you’re waiting for something because nobody wants to make a move, like getting into a cold pool. Who will be first? Maybe you’re waiting because you can’t make a move and it’s out of your hands, like our beloved interstates at rush hour or like standing in line at the BMV.

But there’s another kind of waiting that’s not about discipline (like a resolution) or fear (like a cold pool) or frustration (the BMV). There’s an active kind of waiting that is perhaps better called searching or looking. What are you waiting for? What are you searching for? What are you looking for?

Simeon and Anna were waiting. But they weren’t putting anything off, they weren’t being timid, they weren’t stuck in traffic. They were searching. Looking.
Simeon had been promised in a dream that he would not die until he saw the Anointed One who would bring comfort and freedom to Israel, in Hebrew, the Messiah, in Greek, the Christ. Anna was married in her teen years, just like Mary, the mother of Jesus, and like nearly every girl in her culture. But she was widowed a short 7 years later. So by her mid-20s she was alone. She never married again, but lived for the next 6 decades at the Temple, only giving herself to worshiping, fasting, and praying.

What are you waiting for?

The word in Luke’s Gospel that describes the waiting, the looking, the searching of Simeon and Anna is *prosdechomai*. It means *to expect*. But it also means *to connect*. When the word is used in this way, it refers to both friends and lovers, to both companions and to the most intimate of relationships. The idea here is to look for something with great meaning, great significance, great value.

What are you waiting for? What person or thing of great meaning, great significance, great value are you waiting for, searching for, looking for, connecting with? Who or what are you expecting to connect with?
This is the posture in which we find Simeon and Anna on Jesus’ 40th day. Simeon was searching for comfort. Anna was looking for freedom.

Like Mary and Zechariah and the angels before him, Simeon breaks into song. Remember, prayers and songs come first. Lex orandi, lex credenda. And if you’re looking for songs, look no further than Luke’s gospel. Luke has a soundtrack. And just like the best films have the best music – lyrics and melodies that move the stories forward and are forever linked to the action and the characters we come to love – the gospel story has the best music.

Simeon breaks into song. We don’t know what Hebrew hymn melody he set his improvised text to, but we do know the lyrics. He sang, “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.”
Songs and prayers shape us at the beginning of life. But they also bring meaning to the ends of our lives as well. Just as a child doesn’t need to know much to pray “thank you” at a meal or “watch over me” at bedtime, ask someone on their death bed how much they need to know about God in order to simply whisper “God, have mercy.” Simeon and Anna have punctuated their long, faithful lives with a song and a prayer in Luke’s gospel.

Five and a half years ago, I was able to spend significant time with my grandmother in her last days. And after all the doctrine and all the deeds were lost to memory, after she had buried a husband and a son, after she had worked herself ragged as a coal miner’s wife during the Depression, after she had given all the energy she had to her ten grandchildren, all she had left now were simple prayers and the songs of her faith. And that was enough.

Just like Sadie who has a prayer and sometimes misses the point, just like Jesus who heard Simeon sing when he was only 40 days old, just like Anna who sang songs of praise to her final day, just like my grandma who whispered the words to her favorite hymns, do you have a song? Do you have a new song for this new year? Here is my encouragement to you, like toddlers and widows, like
Messiahs and prophets, let’s learn to pray and sing from the beginning to the end. We could start with the lyrics of Luke’s angels. Glory to God. And peace on earth.

Amen.

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