

Luke 2:22-40

2:22 When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord
2:23 (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"),
2:24 and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."
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.
2:26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.
2:27 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,
2:28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,
2:29 "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word;
2:30 for my eyes have seen your salvation,
2:31 which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
2:32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."
2:33 And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.
2:34 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
2:35 so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed--and a sword will pierce your own soul too."
2:36 There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage,
2:37 then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day.
2:38 At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.
2:39 When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.
2:40 The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Those of us who are married or who have been in serious relationships are familiar with phrases such as,

“What are you looking at me like that for?”

Nothing!

What?”

In some families, the “Look” has achieved legendary status. Best behaviour or else the disintegrating ray!

It can be a quick lesson in family dynamics to ask who in the family possesses the most lethal look. Usually no more need for an analysis of family power after that.

Of course, not all looks are fearsome nor are all shooters even aware they’ve launched a rocket.

When I was young I used to think that older people were chronically cross; now, as I age, I realize that mostly it is because we just can’t see and we’re looking for the right angle so our vision kicks in! But the perception remains.

Of course, not all looks are scalding. Some say what words cannot – “I love the way you look at me.” Even stated wistfully the power of a look to nurture love can be recognized – “I miss the way you used to look at me.” Even in absence endearment can be felt.

Being looked at is only, in small part, about vanity. Often it has to do with the other person being able to see something of which we ourselves may be unaware.

When I – or a friend – might have their Kevlar vest scorched by a laser blast from a loved one usually it is not because I – or my friend – may have gotten caught doing something known to be inappropriate; more often the “what?” arises out of a sense that some new rule has been invented – and broken – in the moment or some totally innocent action has been torn free from its intention and deemed to be rude, uncaring, or selfish. Something of which I – or my friend – have been totally unaware has now not only been noticed but lifted up and condemned.

And the looks of being beloved – “what, what do you see in me that would lead someone like you to look at me with such appreciation that produces a sense of warmth, delight and possibility? What are you looking at; or, more accurately, what do you see?”

It is possible to look at the entire ministry of hospitality as an intentional effort to actually see people. For a long time in the church we did not really see great gangs of people – children (please ‘seen but not heard’.... and not really seen either); people of different cultural backgrounds (since they come here wanting to be like us, of course); women (except of course if it was in the kitchen helpers role – “Let’s get the ladies out here and give them a hand.”); people of different sexual orientations – we had our own version of the US military’s “Don’t ask don’t tell” policy; people who had been divorced (we don’t mention that); people who struggled being a parent; people who were in the military; people who had thriving businesses; people who struggle with addictions (but he seems like such a nice guy); people with mental health challenges; people

Now if this was a normal Sunday and a regular sermon we might expect, at this point, to be reminded of how Jesus seemed to be especially good at seeing people, particularly people that seemed invisible or beyond the circle of respectable vision of most good religious people. And if the sermon had a call to action the short version would be – now go, open your eyes and see the people.

But this week, things are a little different; most importantly because in the Gospel story the roles are flipped and it is Jesus – or rather the parents of Jesus – who are approached and told something amazing about their son.

Simeon, a good guy according to the code of the story, takes the young boy in his arms and says, “...(God) my eyes see 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 would be equivalent to a Yoda and Luke Skywalker moment or Neo in the Matrix movie series. Then along comes the prophet Anna and she begins “to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.” This is big time endorsement; like David Foster saying to you that your child – or grandchild – has Michael Buble, Josh Groban, Celine Dion calibre talent (and more).

What do you do with that?

One of our grandchildren looks like she may be a gifted child. I’ve already expressed my condolences to my daughter and son-in-law for their lives are definitely going to be off plan for the next 20 years or so. And forget about having any more children; there won’t be enough oxygen left.

Were there times in your life when someone looked at you or spoke to you in such a way that changed the way others thought of you and perhaps that you thought of yourself.

“Wow, you’ve got a great voice!” Or, you clearly are a dancer; or, you’ve got real potential as a writer, a business person, a manager, a leader, a change agent, a parent, a lover, a friend.” “You’re an amazing friend. I can’t imagine my life without you in it!” And that word fanned a flame.

I remember the first time this happened to me. I was about 15. At that time I was pretty much a quiet and reserved person, pretty good at being competent but struggled a lot with much of *church* – kind of like I am now actually. But anyway, I had been dragged to this big conference of youth, the token youth from my congregation. There was supposed to be a series of youth speakers who were to give these 10 minutes talks on some mother hood kind of topic. Anyway, one of the key people couldn’t make it so the organizers, being desperate at the last minute, grasped for any warm body and asked me.

“Why not?” I thought. But I said, “Can I talk about something else other than whatever the topic was?” And they, being absolutely desperate to just fill the time said, “Sure.”

I remember the feeling of speaking to 300 or 400 people and having a word to deliver, not of my own devising, but charged to transmit something in a way that communicated. So much of this church stuff could drive a person insane I thought but this part, there’s something here. Afterwards, the minister who had brought me said, “Wow, that was kind of different. I would never have thought you had it in you.”

“thanks,” I said.

Do you know those times when an opportunity released something in you or someone saw you in a completely different way?

In our family, many of our children had to run away from home to university in other cities in order to get that space from the role that our family had created so they could have a chance to hear another voice or to be seen.

One of the things that has now changed about the church in these new times is that whereas before we often looked at people as to whether or not they could fill a role – I think he might be a good treasurer or Board chair, or choir member or Sunday School worker - now we are being called to look at people in a different way. We are being called now to be like Simeon and Anna, who look at a person, and see someone wonderful, as being someone or something that is part of God’s dream. As a church we are being called not to look at situations and ask not primarily about the constraints but the possibilities. As a congregation we are having to shift from being an organization that is primarily about finding parts to keep the machinery turning to becoming a platform where people learn to see themselves differently and whom we assist to become what God’s dreams for them and so to change the world. That is now a big part of our job.

And there is work for us that cannot be done anywhere else in our society.

Some of this new look may even surprise those upon whom we gaze. We may look at an ex-soldier and say “Boy you look, act and sound like a healer to me.” Now we say to people, don’t show me your resume or business card; show me your soul. We may say to a banker or a business person,

“you really know how to make money. Now, how do we help you change the world in a way that quickens your spirit and serves God.” We may say to a young person or a child not just easy throw-aways like “good job” but we see something in you that we are going to support you in developing.

And we are going to have to figure out how to do that. But we will have evangelists, teachers and entrepreneurs who will come with those skills and help. Because we will need mentors and coaches as well as managers and creative dreamers.

Part of our calling now is to be those ones who look and see what parents and friends perhaps do not. “How might we help this person live the dream God has for them?” How are we being called to sustain and nurture another torch that burns with God’s light?

So, if you are taking this time of year as an excuse to be honest about who you might yet become and what you might yet do, do not be shy because you are in the presence of a God who looked at a void and dreamt up creation and a people who once may have been defined by endings, by guilt, by grief and who now regularly remind one another to rise up, to remember that **we** are carriers of the LIGHT of God. It is no accident that God is calling us, perhaps even through those dreams and goals we might too easily look away from as being too selfish or silly or un-Canadian.

Simeon and Anna, this is our time, this year, to look upon what may seem but a barely hatched idea or possibility and declare the possibilities. It is time to see as God sees.

Wouldn’t that be amazing! I wonder if we can stand it. I wonder if we dare pray it; can we keep up to the opportunities and possibilities that God will bring our way. Because, as Christians, we believe that will be our challenge because once God gets involved ... who knows what might be and who might be.

There is plenty of time to be careful about that for which we pray; this month perhaps we might just indulge the Dream-maker just a little. Who knows what might be seen?