



January 8, 2012 Reflection by Nancy Talbot  
“Looking Ahead” Luke 2: 21-40

Back in 1963, Hollywood came out with the film version of one of my favourite Broadway Musicals: Bye, Bye, Birdie. With a cast including Dick Van Dyke, Maureen Stapleton, Janet Leigh and Ann Margaret, and a plot line based on the real life of Elvis Presley, it has become over time a movie lovers classic. As a teenager I can remember hanging on every word and every note of the story as I watched it in black and white on the TV set in our family room. Playing the band in our high school production of the stage version was a thrill and cemented the lyrics of every song in the show firmly in my memory.

Perhaps that is why as I travel through my middle years, fast approaching my golden birthday, one of the tunes from that show periodically sings itself in my head: “Kids, I don’t know what’s wrong with these kids today. Kids, who can understand anything they say. Why can’t they be like we were, perfect in every way? What’s the matter with kids today?”

It really is a timeless practice isn’t it? The practice of looking down on the next generation, criticizing them; lamenting the way they don’t do things the way we did; questioning their values; wallowing in our inability to decipher their language and our incapacity to understand their new fangled ways. We’re intolerant of their music and their technology and often of the clothes they wear. All this judgement seems to come almost naturally with the territory of aging.

And that’s what I think makes Anna and Simeon from today’s scripture reading such remarkable characters.

According to the way Luke tells the story of Jesus’ birth, of all the people who could have eyes to recognize the infant Jesus when he’s brought into the Temple for purification according to ancient Jewish law, the ones who actually do see him for who he is, are a man close to his death and an aging widow. Luke the brilliant storyteller draws us in with his dramatic flair once again.

One might think that it would be a younger generation who would embrace Mary and Joseph this teenaged couple who have given birth to a child practically out of wedlock. One would expect a more junior crowd would have the capacity to see how radically this baby will upset the status quo; how the change he brings will call into question the systems of power in the Roman Empire; how he will cause people to choose between what has always been and what could be in the future. One would understand if the people ready to embrace this new way of living would be younger, especially when we see the youth of today rising up in protests around our world.

But instead Luke tells us that the ones who really get it are the old folks, Simeon and Anna.

Back in 2005 I attended a course at Vancouver School of Theology led by American theologian Matthew Fox. In church circles and beyond, Matthew Fox is known for his teachings on creation spirituality and for the liberal viewpoints that got him kicked out of the catholic church by the current Pope. He was nearing retirement at the time, so he spent some of his time with us reflecting on what he thought his life would be like as he moved into his “twilight years.”

I still remember what he said half a dozen years later. For starters he said he thinks it's time we retire the word retirement. He wondered if instead we might call this time of our life our "refirement" years. He confessed that he didn't feel all that tired as he approached his 65<sup>th</sup> birthday. There were lots of things, he said, that he still got fired up about: the unfinished business of the sixties, marches for peace and calls for social change. And then he said that more than anything, what fired him up was the younger generation and how so many of them seemed to be seeking out ways to make the world a better place. He shared about a project he was involved with in which he was using his elder wisdom, to fan the flames of passion he saw emerging in a young rapper he knew who was concerned about the failure of the education system to address the needs of African American youth. Together they were working on a project they called "edutainment" to reach out to inner city youth.

He also talked about the natural affinity between grandparents and youth and the need for elders to "let their light shine" instead of hiding it under a bushel in their "refirement" years.

I think I've always remembered those reflections of Matthew Fox both because they made so much sense to me at the time and because what he described is so often not what I experience in our society.

As I get older I wonder if when I hit retirement I will be someone who has the capacity to look ahead with younger generations to see in them and with them what is possible in the world; or if I will be someone who looks back on what has been and laments what is no longer there.

One of the core tenets of the Jesus story is that although all of Israel was waiting for a promised saviour, a messiah to lead the way (in parts of scripture it says all creation was waiting); at the end of the day most people rejected the way that Jesus laid out before them and refused to see it for what it was: a way of non-violence, compassion, grace, healing, inclusion of the marginalized, a political and religious system that honours and values the lowest and the least.

Simeon knew that when he said to Mary and Joseph in the temple "the child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed, so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed."

Simeon knew that to embrace the Jesus way of life would be to embrace the truth about ourselves, both the good and the bad. He knew the cost of a promise of peace and justice and he knew that many just wouldn't be willing to pay the price of a changed world.

So I wonder what was it that gave him and Anna the capacity to see in Jesus and the generation that surrounded him, hope for the future and a way forward; instead of a cause for fear and lament and a reason for looking backwards? What we can learn from them about embracing a new approach to life, even when that new way challenges some of the things we have come to cherish about the past?

At first glance the two of them, Anna and Simeon seem so different than most of us the answer to that question might be not much. Anna, a prophet and a widow doesn't just "attend church regularly" she actually lives in the temple worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day. Simeon doesn't seem to have much of a life outside the temple either. Not many of us are going to take up the call to live the kind of life they lived.

But maybe what we can take on of their living is the way they oriented themselves towards long-term commitment and faithful and active waiting: commitment to peace and justice for all; commitment to a deeply spiritual life; patient waiting and watching for the movements of the Spirit that indicate where life is to be found.

Perhaps what we can take on of their living is the way they allowed their lives to be shaped and formed by the patterns and the rituals of a lifetime devoted to the promise of a world that can be different.

In our present day and age, an age of instant everything, it's a tall order to take on a stance of patiently watching, waiting and working for change. We want immediate results and we want them yesterday. But Anna and Simeon model for us a slower paced way, a more spirit-filled and spirit-directed way.

I don't know about you but I do get impatient waiting for change, waiting for it in the church and waiting for it in our world. Lots of times it's much easier to look backwards and fall into old familiar habits or to keep doing what is comfortable and less controversial and maintaining the status quo.

But sometimes you have to slow down in order to speed up change and Anna and Simeon seem to point us towards that. They spent a lifetime watching and waiting for the promises of Israel to be fulfilled and then suddenly, in an instant, "aha" they saw what they had been waiting for in the birth of a child and the birth of a new generation. Suddenly they had the epiphany they had been waiting for. You can't make an epiphany happen, you have to wait and watch and create the circumstances for it to happen.

Many of you know that over the past several months I have been visiting with Dermott and Mae McInnes. Dermott will be 104 next Monday. Even though he is diminishing in stature as he continues to mature in years, what is still strong and evident is his unflagging resolve to work and pray for a world that is more sustainable, just and fair especially for the most marginalized. It's something he has done for the better part of his life. When I pray with him, he prays for us and for our ministry here. He's interested in what we're doing here at the church, he has the grace to affirm and support the work of younger generations who live in a radically different world than the one in which he grew up.

Many times Dermott expresses discouragement about the world and its troubles, but he never stops looking ahead, he never lets go of the vision he has for the future, a vision rooted in his life of faith.

Many of you also know that for several years now our youth have gone down to First United Church in the Downtown Eastside to share a meal with folks who are living in the refuge of the church or in the alley ways around it. They are youth who have a passion and a commitment to be the change they want to see in the world.

There they are, the saints in our midst young and old looking at the world together with hope for the future and an awareness of the cost that change requires. It's a picture we see when we gather together as an intergenerational community. It's a picture we see when we read Luke's story about a tiny baby in the arms of a young couple being embraced and affirmed by their

elders who share in common their longing for a better world.

Kids, I don't know what's wrong with these kids today, not much in fact, if I really think about it. They are after all the bearers of a world yet to be, sacred vessels of possibility: they and we together, sparks of light meant to ignite and fuel a revolution of new life.