

Swords Into Plowshares: Simeon's Song

Luke 2:25-32

Songs. We are thinking about ancient songs in these four weeks of Advent, as we prepare for Christmas, the coming of God into human life. God coming once. God coming again. God coming now. I wonder what the soundtrack of our days might sound like if it picked up what we sing under our breath, when no one is listening. I hear voices that sound a little thin, tentative. We are surely better than we were a year ago. We want to sing the songs that bring Christmas. We *will* sing them this year; this is not 2020. But still, I think, our voices are not yet full. They're not pouring out of overflowing hearts the way they have before. Our bodies and our spirits are still a little bruised. We are not as certain of ourselves as we once were.

I'm so grateful to the singers of this church who brought us the Festival of Carols and Lights last night. They reminded me of the power of music, how it can pick us up from wherever it finds us, gather us and renew us. That concert captured, I think, not only our joy but our trembling. The music felt like a steady shoulder, strong enough to lean on as we take stuttering steps back—toward life, toward one another, toward trusting that the world is still a safe place.

This year, maybe more than any other, we are conscious of the mix of life. The mix of our lives. We want to be hopeful about the future, *and* we know it holds danger as well as promise. The rope that held us to nostalgia for the past has frayed to a thread over the past two years; we know now we cannot go back to what was. We have no choice but to occupy fully this moment, this present--with all its uncertainty, its mix of welcome and unwelcome changes, things we have no control over.

And no doubt that has always been true.

On November 18, 1995, the Israeli violinist Itzhak Perlman was scheduled to perform at Lincoln Center in New York. Getting on stage is no small matter for Perlman. He had polio when he was a child, so Perlman wears braces on both legs. He walks with two crutches. To get to his chair on a performance stage, he moves slowly. Every time, the same series of motions. He sits, lays his crutches down, undoes the clasps on his braces, tucks one foot back and stretches the other forward. He reaches down, picks up his violin, notches it under his chin, nods to the maestro, and he begins to play.

On the night of this performance at Lincoln Center, just as he was finishing the first stanza of his first piece, a string on Perlman's violin broke. The audience could hear it snap; it sounded like a shot. People who were there that night said, "We figured that he would have to get up, put on the clasps again, pick up the crutches, and limp his way off stage...or else wait for someone to bring him another [string, or even a new violin]."

But Perlman didn't do any of those things. Instead, he paused for just a moment, closed his eyes, and signaled the conductor to begin again. The orchestra began to play. Perlman joined them

where he'd left off. He played that piece of music in a way the audience had never heard before, with a different kind of passion and power, like it was pure *something*.

Everyone knows it's impossible to play a symphonic work on a violin with just three strings. But that night, the violinist refused to know that. "You could see him modulating, changing, recomposing the piece in his head," someone said afterward. "At one point, it sounded like he was detuning the strings to get new sounds from them they had never made before."

The writer who told this story said, "When [Perlman] finished, there was an awesome silence in the room." And then, he said, the audience exploded to its feet. "We were all ... screaming and cheering, doing everything we could to show how much we appreciated what he had done." Perlman "smiled, wiped the sweat from his brow, raised his bow to quiet us, and then said, not boastfully, but in a quiet, pensive, reverent tone: 'You know, sometimes it is the artist's task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left.'"ⁱ

Sometimes the task is to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left.

Simeon was an old man when we meet him in Luke's Gospel. He'd been waiting for years, Luke tells us, for the 'restoration of Israel,' which meant, everyone knew, overturning the Roman Empire that held Israel as an occupied territory. This was the confidence Simeon's faith brought him: that he would not die before he had seen for himself the messiah God would send, the messiah who would liberate the Israelites from the political captivity they'd been living under for years. Just like Moses had liberated them when they'd been slaves in Egypt, thousands of years before.

Only now Simeon was old. He'd been waiting for a very long time. Legend has it that by the time he met Mary and Joseph and their little baby in the Temple, Simeon was 270 years old, and he was blind. I know no one lives to be 270, and so do you. But imagine what those embellishments to the story are trying to underline for us: that Simeon had been waiting for an endlessly long time, for a revolution that had not arrived. What did Simeon think, how did he hold onto his trust, when he turned 100, and 150, and then 250? How did he imagine he would 'see' the messiah as his eyes gradually stopped working? What happens when you spend years and years of your life waiting for something that does not come?

On this particular morning, Simeon felt a nudge to be in the Temple. He lugged his old tired body across town. He made his way with dim eyes. Maybe he had to ask people to help him find his way. He showed up, even though he had no reason to think this day would be different from any other day when he'd done the same thing and come home still waiting for some messianic triumph.

And actually, on this day Simeon didn't find what he was looking for either. But in the busy plaza of the Temple's buildings, he noticed something else. A young couple with their newborn. These two were so poor that they'd chosen the sacrifice, the ritual, with the lowest price tag—two turtledoves. The child they were carrying in their arms did not look like the restorer of Israel. There was no reason for Simeon, or anyone else, to notice them especially. But something about this family caught his eye.

Simeon drew in his breath, looked again. He got close enough to fasten his mostly sightless eyes on that baby's face. And suddenly he knew. In the face of this child, he saw something. Not the promise he'd held onto for 270 years; something else. Think of the mental adjustments Simeon made in that split second. He'd thought, he had read, he was sure—that a messiah would come like a mighty warrior to set everything right. But maybe not. There wasn't anything in this child's appearance that suggested the grand, capable commander Simeon had spent decades anticipating. Whatever holiness hovered around this infant, it did not match the one in Simeon's dream. This child was something else. *This* child held a different possibility, a promise Simeon had not been looking for.

A surprising feeling—maybe it was hope--kindled into a little flame inside of Simeon. He began to sing.

*Now, Master, I am ready go in peace...
Because my eyes have seen what they were waiting for.
You were doing something all along that I did not see.
You have come to save the whole world.
My people—I—will find our glory, our purpose, our wholeness,
Not in what this child will do for us,
But in what he will do for all people.*

Simeon laid the old dream down. He released the expectation that for years and years had given him confidence, the prayer that had given his life meaning. Was he disappointed that it was answered not with fireworks but in a baby's cry of hunger? I wonder. When Simeon sang, 'Now, master, let your servant depart in peace,' did his voice sound more like resignation than fulfillment? I don't know.

If you were here last week, you may remember we talked about Zechariah's song—also sung by an old man whose hope was long past its expiration date. There's a theme at work here. Luke believed that the birth of Jesus was the turning point of all of history, that Jesus' life marked the end of everything that had come before, the whole history of Israel—its triumphs and mistakes, all their waiting, their hope for vindication. Those years of *God With Us* were the hinge, Luke thought. Jesus' life and death bent the earth into another era, one that would be marked by the reality of God present in human life, in *our* human lives. Luke begins his story, soundtracks the turn toward a new world, with songs sung by old men, Zechariah and Simeon. People who had to let go of an old vision so that something new could grow.

Was there disappointment, sorrow, even fear, as they released the sureness that had held them for so long? Almost certainly.

Sometimes the task is to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left.

Our strings are broken. Our eyes are dim.

The vision we held, the one that drew a straight line from past to future, has been clouded over. It might be time to lay that dream down.

But even now, something new is being born. God is coming again, to be with us.

Let us make music.

ⁱ <https://www.atime.org/chizuk/with-whats-left/>