

Sunday December 20th, 2020

Advent IV

Luke 2:25-40

“Christmas for Those Past Their Prime.”

It's been several years now but I will never forget in the 2005 season of *Canadian Idol* (Remember that short lived show?) there was an episode in which venerable crooner Tony Bennett made an appearance. He is still performing at the age of 94. As part of his appearance on the show, Mr. Bennett spent one day working with the idol hopefuls, and then on the episode when they announced the one contestant eliminated, Mr. Bennett sang with the contestants and then sang a number himself.

I remember listening to Mr. Bennett at the time, and asking myself a question. A question all you Tony Bennett fans may not appreciate, but I asked it anyway. “Why is this guy on the program?” It seemed like such an odd choice of visiting celebrities. Mr. Bennett, who even in his prime, was not one of my favorite singers, but I will admit he was certainly a competent entertainer.

He has released numerous records; in fact, he has sold over 50 million of them, some of which represent gold or platinum in sales. In his prime, people just loved to listen to Tony Bennett, but on that 2005 Canadian Idol appearance something had changed. His voice was frail, he got confused when asked a question by the host Ben Mulroney, and he seemed so out of place in the midst of this youth obsessed culture.

Why? The answer is obvious. We may not like to express it, but Tony Bennett is no longer in his prime. His best days as a singer are behind him, and his only drawing card, it seems to me, is the lure of nostalgia. I have observed that soloists and musical groups that once filled stadiums, are now relegated to Casino Niagara, or fall fairs, or their once top ten music is now gracing elevators, or playing in your ear when you are on hold.

Many people come to terms with moving past their prime. Sports figures often, even in their thirties, need to retire because they are just not strong enough, or fast enough to play the game anymore. Just this past Sunday I was watching my favourite NFL team the Pittsburgh Steelers play against the Buffalo bills, and I have come to conclude that their venerable quarterback “Big Ben” Rothesburger needs to call it a day.. At times he was clearly outmatched by his opponents.

Of those who are coming to terms with their situation is singer Barbara Mandrel, who no longer sings publicly, because she knows her voice is not at its best any more. Christian writer Tony Campolo has seriously reduced his public appearances, because of ill health, and he finds he just doesn't have the stamina any more to preach.

Then, there are those who hang on far too long, who end up perhaps embarrassing themselves, for not seeing the writing on the wall. I remember such sentiments expressed when Eddy Shack came back to play for the Maple Leafs years ago at the end of his career. He could only skate a minute or so, before winding himself so bad he had to rest for five minutes. He just couldn't keep up any more, but he was a showman to the end.

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Coming to terms with the move out of our prime is one of life's hardest challenges. Those of us going through these experiences will appreciate the following story.

A story of two couples who had been friends for a number of years. They were playing cards one night when the wives went into the kitchen to fix a snack. One man said to the other, "Joe, you played a great game tonight. I usually have to remind you what cards have been played, but tonight I didn't have to." "Well, that's because I went to memory school," said Joe. "Really?" said his friend. "What's the name of the school?"

Joe thought for a moment and said, "let me see. Umm...uh...what do you call that flower that is red, with thorns on the stem?" "A rose?" the friend said. "Yeah that's it!" Then he turned to the kitchen and said, "Hey, Rose! What was the name of that memory school?" Laughing helps, but it is hard to feel jolly when you are moving past your prime. Maybe that is why we talk more and more about our yesterdays as we age, and that there is a note of sadness when we talk about these limelight years.

It is why our voices crack, and tears come, when we remember those long ago who were so vital to us, or were so exciting when we watched them. Like watching "Big Ben" and saying "I remember when he was at his prime. Now there was a real player." I wonder if Simeon and Anna ever looked back in those ways. I wonder if, as they grew older, the joyful tune of youth was replaced by the melancholy of age.

By the time we meet them in Luke chapter 2, Simeon was a graying saint. When he was a much younger man, the text says, "It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ." We can only imagine how that revelation played in his heart. "I'll have a front row seat at the Messiah's coming. I'll be part of a revolution, get a job in the new administration."

But the years went by, decades came and went, and nothing happened. There was a time when Anna too, dreamed of a glorious life, but her husband died just "seven years after her marriage," and things hadn't turned out as planned. Anna was older now; the text says, 84 years to be exact; an unusual thing to be that old at a time when people rarely lived into their forties. What we get is a picture of an elderly widow, and an elderly single man spending all their time in the temple.

The bible says that Anna never left the temple. Sounds like she actually lived there doesn't it. Normal wisdom would tell us that their best days were behind them. Their opportunities for influence in the world were now just memories. We made the observation that there is nothing better than watching someone do their thing in the prime of life. But is there anything wonderful about watching someone in their second prime years of life?

Second prime time, you heard me right. Do, we at all appreciate in this church, that the way the world defines "prime of life" is not the same way God defines it? The world sees our prime as when we are physically strong and mentally acute, but God sees our prime as when we are spiritually strong and intellectually humbled. The world sees us at our prime when we have fame in the world.

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The bible sees us in our prime when we please only him. The world defines our prime as when we are at our best to build our own little empire.

Scripture says that we are at our prime when we are most focused on building the Kingdom of God. We don't know what Simeon and Anna's first prime looked like, and frankly the bible really doesn't care about it. What Luke reminds us about, is that these two people have come into their God centered prime. The bible says that Simeon was "righteous and devout." That doesn't mean he was perfect. It simply means that over the years he had learned to devote himself to staying close to God.

The text actually tells us more about how Anna maintained that spiritual prime. The bible talks about her rhythm of "worship, fasting and prayer" that built up her spirit, even as her body was breaking down. The second thing we see is that these two people were persevering people. It doesn't take much effort to put your trust in God for a brief season, or when things are running high or low. We read that for 80 years Anna and Simeon trusted God's promises.

Through tragedies like the early death of Anna's husband, and through the long boring wait between God promise to Simeon, and the actual fulfillment of the promise, these two people persevered in trusting God's plan. Their world, like ours, had its share of noise and distractions, but both of these wonderful saints knew how to cope. Anna was a "prophetess" the text says. That's the bible's way of telling us that she heard God speak clearly to her.

Simeon was moved by the Holy Spirit, so he also heard God's leading voice. It is very important for me to state how critical to our spiritual health: faithfulness, perseverance and responsiveness to the Holy Spirit count with God. But one indication to us is that when the world regarded Anna and Simeon as candidates for a rest home, God chose them for to do one of the most important tasks ever performed in history.

These two beloved saints, whose spiritual power had been honed over decades of discipline and perseverance; were prepared to bless the Christ child, and in a sense mark him for the greatness that was to be his. In front of Mary and Joseph, they named the gift that Jesus was and is still. They spoke of his work to redeem mankind. Their blessing spoken so long ago still reaches us today, because their words were true.

Looking at Anna and Simeon one might realize that, "Beautiful young people are acts of nature, but beautiful old people are works of God's art." There is nothing in this world like the sound of one of God's instruments that is really in their prime. Such is the case of a concert given on November 18th, 1995 by the Israel violinist Itzhak Perlman given at the Lincoln center in New York.

If you've ever seen Perlman play you realize what a challenge it is for him to just get on stage. Stricken with polio as a child, Perlman wears braces on both legs and walks with crutches. He moves with great pain but he does manage to get on stage. There he removes his braces, lays his crutches aside, places his feet in the right place. Then with some effort he reaches down and picks up his violin. On this particular occasion, however, something went wrong. Just as he finished the first stanza of the piece he was playing a string on the violin broke.

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Everyone knew what had happened, as it sounded like a gun going off. What was Perlman to do? He would have to put on his braces, grab his crutches and hobble off to replace the string. But he didn't do that. Instead he paused for a moment, closed his eyes, and then signaled the conductor to continue. The orchestra started and Perlman jumped right in playing. He played with passion, power and purity like no audience had ever heard before. All of this on a violin with only three strings.

It is impossible to play a symphonic piece on a violin with three strings, but Perlman did it. The audience said they could see Perlman, modulating, changing, and recomposing the piece right in front of them to deal with the loss of the string. "At one point" an observer noted "Perlman even detuned one of his strings to get a sound he was missing from the fourth string."

When Perlman finished there was an awesome silence in the room, and then it exploded with thunderous applause and standing ovations. Perlman, sweating and obviously exhausted, made only one comment about his experience to the crowd, "You know, sometimes it is the artist's task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left."

What have you got left? Are you still playing the string of faithfulness? Are you practicing those spiritual disciplines of "worshipping, fasting and praying" with which you nurture a "righteous and devout" spirit? There is some real truth I need to share with our older brothers and sisters here today. Those of us who are younger do watch and do listen to you, and we need you to model faith like Anna and Simeon.

Are you plucking the string of perseverance? Are you one of those who, in spite of the losses, are still waiting upon the One who is "the consolation of Israel" and the hope of us all? In a world of quick fixes, there may be no more important ministry you can have than to teach others what it looks like to wait with hope, trusting in the good plans of God.

Will you be Spirit led? Do you have a prophetic word that others need to hear? Are you willing to still be "moved by the Spirit" and go where God tells you to go? The truth about First Baptist Simcoe is that some of our most vital ministries are led by people who the world might consider past their prime.

If this is true for you then maybe the most important thing you can do in this second prime time of your life is to sing a song of blessing upon the rest of us. Maybe it is God's call to you, as it was for Simeon and Anna. A call to provide the blessing for a special child's future-to name the true identity you see in them, to give thanks for the gift they are, and to remind young parents of the God given potential that each child possesses.

Whatever time we have left; can we dare to play it for all we are worth. If we do, I am sure that the divine chord of faith, hope and love we play in Christ can stir the heart strings of an entirely new generation.