

What Makes a Good Life?

Luke 2:22-40

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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Sunday after Christmas

²²When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³(as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), ²⁴and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

²⁵Now 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. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. ²⁷Guided 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, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, ²⁹“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” ³³And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴Then 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 ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

³⁶There 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, ³⁷then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸At 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.

³⁹When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him. (NRSV)

I

What makes for a good life?

You can find one vision of a good life at a blog called mrmoneymustache.com. Since 2011 the host of this website, who calls himself Mr. Money Mustache, has been handing out opinionated arguments on how people ought to be managing their money and their work lives. His basic point is that most people spend too much of their income, don’t save enough for the future, and consequently work far longer in the corporate rat race than they need to. His solution is to live frugally starting in college, save as much as possible, then quit working as soon as you can so you can live off your investments and do what you actually enjoy doing. He and his wife followed this very plan. In 2005, they quit their corporate jobs when they were 30 and have since been living off their

investments, along with whatever money they earn doing things they enjoy. They continue living frugally, yet they enjoy a comfortable, middle-class lifestyle. Their total expenses in 2016 for a family of 3 were only \$30,000.¹

On Mr. Money Mustache's blog, you can find argumentative advice on the evils of debt and the joys of giving money away, as well as practical tips on drying clothes, using electric cars, sharing an internet service, riding bicycles, and replacing your own furnace. Sometimes he uses coarse language, and he's apparently not a Christian, but some of the things he says are worth listening to. Whether or not you find him persuasive, you have to credit him for finding a way of life that clearly gives him joy and is based on an overarching, organized principle. For him, his wife, and their son, theirs is a good life.

II

Our story from the gospel of Luke offers another vision of the good life. Luke's vision of the good life centers on two senior citizens named Simeon and Anna. They've spent their lives waiting, keeping watch for the fulfillment of just one promise: the promise of a delivering, saving, healing, inspiring Messiah. Anna, 84 years old, has invested most of her very long life praying and fasting in the Temple. Many people in modern America would say Anna has been living a narrow, limited life.

Think about this for a minute. These two humble, ordinary, elderly Jews made it into Luke's story because they *waited*. Not because they led a social movement that changed the course of history. Not because they invented some useful object. Not because they cured cancer. Not because they published a ground-breaking book. Not because they were elected to public office. Not even because they dramatically gave their lives in service to others. They have a place in this story because they *waited expectantly* for God's future. Luke captures this in verse 25 with those words "looking forward." Simeon, and Anna too, are looking forward to the consolation of Israel, looking forward to a better

¹ Exposed! The MMM Family's 2016 Spending!, <http://www.mrmoneymustache.com/2017/05/19/2016-spending/>, accessed December 1, 2017. A feature article on Pete Adeney, a.k.a. Mr. Money Mustache, is at http://www.timescall.com/100/ci_31067570/100-pete-adeney-is-taking-his-formula-simple, accessed December 1, 2017.

world, looking forward to what God will yet do. Luke honors them for their discipleship of waiting.

Do you know what it's like to wait for God's future? Have you tried it lately? It's tough. The world as it is right now is not even close to the kind of world that God has in mind for the future. Not even close. The racial prejudice. The hunger. The killing and the wars. The animus toward immigrants. The favoritism for the already rich. The trashing of creation.

Waiting for God's future while living with these massive forces of evil isn't easy. It takes a mix of persistence, patience, hope, and trust that God has enough personal integrity and divine ability to create something better than we have now. I can't speak for you, but it tests my stamina to keep committing myself to God in the sort of world we live in. I careen between despair and hope, frustration and gratitude, anger and patience. I spend a lot of time lamenting. The Bible has at least 7 voices of prayer, including adoration, confession, petition, intercession, praise, thanksgiving, and lament. I use all these voices of prayer at one time or another, but frankly, the one I'm using most often these days is lament. Lament helps me stay engaged with God during a time when I don't see much evidence of God's activity. Lament allows me to transfer the pains of the world to God's custody. Lament makes it possible for me to survive spiritually and emotionally.

It probably wasn't easy for Simeon and Anna to wait for God's future either. In first century Palestine, death rates were high and life spans were low, thanks to poverty, poor nutrition, and medical care that was rudimentary at best, ineffective at worst. Taxes on ordinary peasants amounted to a crushing burden that made any kind of economic advancement mostly impossible. King Herod the Great still sat on the throne, so the political situation continued to be terrible.

Nevertheless, Simeon and Anna leaned hopefully into God's future. The story says Simeon was "righteous and devout" (v. 25) and willing to be guided by the Holy Spirit (v. 26), but it doesn't give us any details about exactly what that meant for Simeon, or what he was doing in daily life to become righteous and devout and receptive to the Spirit. With Anna we have a wee bit more information; Luke says she worshipped in the Temple

“with fasting and prayer night and day” (v. 37). How she made a living I don’t know, but the 3 core activities that sustained her were worship, prayer, and fasting. Those activities oriented her to God’s future, and while she waited over the course of many decades, they nourished her commitment to God.

III

The turning point for Anna and Simeon comes when Joseph, Mary, and their firstborn infant walk into the Temple for the obligatory post-birth sacrifice of turtledoves and pigeons. With the aid of the Spirit, they perceive (the real meaning of the verb *eidō* in v. 30) that this child is none other than God’s Messiah, the Sent One who represents in his very person the new creation that God is inaugurating in the world.

Let us ponder that for a moment. What God allows Simeon and Anna to see in their later years is a month-old infant (cf. Lev. 12), born to poor parents who don’t even live in Jerusalem, but who live up north in Galilee, in the boondocks (v. 39). This infant hasn’t done much of anything yet except nurse, sleep, cry, smile, and mess his pants. He’s only a sign, an indication of something that is not yet immediately apparent. Or if you like, he’s only a symbol, something visible that by association represents that which is invisible. But this baby is enough for Anna and Simeon, because both of them break out in spontaneous praise to God (vv. 28, 38).

What sign sustains you in this present moment? What symbol supplies you with the courage, the persistence, and the hope to keep waiting expectantly for God’s future? You have to answer that for yourself, because I don’t know what sign or symbol makes a difference for you. However, perhaps I can tell you what symbol has helped me.

In the basement of our home I have a poustinia, which is a Russian word that refers to a sparsely furnished room, or sometimes a cabin, which is dedicated to prayer. On the wall of this poustinia hangs a reproduction of the head of Christ from the Deësis mosaic on the second floor of the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, Turkey. The reproduction on my wall measures a little over 3 feet high and a little over 2 feet wide, so it dominates the room. You can’t be in the room and ignore its presence. Furthermore, it’s a giclée print,

which means that the colors are so vibrant they leap off the wall. I've been praying with this image for about 10 years. By now this image has become for me an icon of the glory of God which is constantly being refracted in the world. It helps to sustain me.²

IV

Simeon and Anna see an infant Messiah, but they do not see anything about this Messiah's future. Both of them are near death—in fact, Simeon openly asks God to let him die now (v. 29). In any case, by the time this child becomes an adult and begins his public ministry 30 years into the future, these two senior citizens will be dead. They will not live to hear the sermon on mount, or to witness the healing of Jarius' daughter, or to watch Jesus still a storm on the lake. They will not live long enough to see the crucifixion or witness the resurrection. When the Holy Spirit came to the followers of Jesus on the day of Pentecost, they were long dead, their bodies desiccated in the dry Palestinian climate.

I do not expect to live long enough to see God's future, at least not in this life. The future that God has in mind appears to be a ways off yet. We do not know when or how this future will come to pass. But if we look around and keep our eyes open, we may see signs and symbols of God's dream for the world—perhaps a baby, an act of compassion, a defense of the marginal, a stubborn refusal to give up, a process of reconciliation, an impassioned prayer, a song of praise. And maybe, just maybe, those signs and symbols will help us to live and die in peace. Which would be good life.

² A high-resolution image with relatively good color reproduction is available at http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/citi/resources/_JaharisLaunchPad/10_RS_1D.jpg, accessed December 1, 2017.