

When Susan first asked me to share some reflections today, as I recall she said it might be good to hear from one of those who were “keepers of the flame.” *Me? Of all people, me?* Since my ordination in 1990, of the six congregations I’ve served, I think only two still survive—and trust me, survival was usually their main concern. Or, truth be told, their *only* concern, and top priority for their pastor. Some flame keeper I’ve been. The last thing in the world I want to do today is talk about myself, but I guess it can’t be helped. If I’m honest.

Luke is nothing if not honest—not only about the destiny of this child, but for the “many” whose lives will be turned upside down by his unflinching commitment to *his* vocation, his *mission*. Of all the ways that could describe just what that means, Luke puts it this way: “a sign that will be opposed, so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed...” Let’s just stop there a minute. God with us will be a sign, in more ways than one, that will reveal what we humans *really* think, in our heart of hearts. It may be that this *is* what it is we have longed—God *with* us—but it’s also, I suspect, what we dread: truly *God* with us. God made flesh with a prophet’s heart and a prophet’s tongue—who might even sound a little like Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright. (Trust me, that man can preach.) A man whose very presence pierces hearts; even his own mother’s heart. According to Luke, this child has a decidedly *political* destiny, which gets very *personal*.

And this, we’re told, is what Simeon looks forward to; the One who will be the “consolation of Israel.” Strange to imagine this as “consolation”—heart-rending, heart and soul-piercing as it is. But Simeon, after all these years, still yearns for it. Yearning and yearning, year after year, can get old. And I know something about that. So I can’t help but think how at times Simeon was tempted to give that yearning up, stop hoping. Or he went to the temple purely out of habit, not really expecting much to come from it. This is just what happens us, at least those I know, we who may or may not be deemed “righteous and devout” by anyone who knows what we’re really like—but who nevertheless have been *called* to ordained ministry. We make promises. We exchange vows. We know we’ll never live up to them even from the get, but we try. There are dry periods; just ask Mother Teresa. Sometimes going through the motions is all we can do, but there’s a lot to be said for that. A promise is a promise. It’s not a “deal.” You keep at it whether you feel like it or not. *That’s* the deal. Amen?

So yes, stuff happens, and happened to me. I have been loved by the church. I have been sexually molested by a pastor. I've been prayed for, and supported in my yearning. I've been lied to and lied about. With clergy colleagues, I've been borne up and blessed, and also back-stabbed and betrayed. I've witnessed minor miracles of mercy, and major acts of depraved indifference. This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior... not exactly all the day long. But I will still praise him...*Amen*.

There is a quote from the Roman Catholic priest Carlos Carretto, that I've turned to more times than I can recall, over these heart-pierced years. It seems appropriate to share it with you today:

How baffling you are, O Church, and yet how I love you!  
How you have made me suffer, and yet how much I owe you! ...  
I have seen nothing in the world more devoted to obscurity, more compromised, more false, and I have touched nothing more pure, more generous, more beautiful. How often I have wanted to shut the doors of my soul in your face, and how often I have prayed to die in the safety of your arms.  
No, I cannot free myself from you, because I am you, although not completely.  
And where should I go?

from *The God Who Comes*, quoted in *A Guide to Prayer* (1983, The Upper Room)

Where, indeed. Where *could* I go? Wherever that might be Jesus won't leave me alone; not for long anyway. Revealing my inner thoughts, though I might not be proud of them. Continuing to pierce my heart, with a love that *will not let* me go. And then reminding me, as often as it takes, until it really takes: it is *well*. In spite of anything and everything, even in spite of myself, it is well, and it will be well, with this old heart-pierced soul.