

“Imagination in the Temple”—Urbane Peachey, CMCL, 12-30-18

Now “In those days,” the days of Anna and Simeon, “a **decree** went out from Caesar Augustus”, and Roman battalions scattered through region. So begins the Christmas story, in Luke 2. As larger context, about 40 years before “those days” (47 BC) Julius Caesar and Cleopatra had a little boy called Caesarean=little Caesar. Julius Caesar was assassinated three years later (44 BC). Octavian, the adopted son and heir of Julius Caesar succeeded him to become Caesar Augustus (the highest one) by action of the Roman Senate.

The Roman Caesars had a thing about **any** child-boy or girl- in the line of succession to King or Emperor. In Matthew’s Gospel, Herod was disturbed when people from the orient came to Palestine asking “where is he that is born King of the Jews?” There were claims that Caesarian should succeed Julius Caesar. Caesar Augustus eliminated Caesarian after subduing Antony and Cleopatra. **This is all context for Anna and Simeon.** You can read about it all in Stacy Schiff’s, *Cleopatra*.

Today’s story is only **one** scene on Luke’s theatrical stage chapters 1-3—Elizabeth and Zachariah, The Annunciation, Mary’s Magnificat, the birth of Jesus, angels and shepherds, Simeon and Anna, Jesus in the temple at age 12 and much later, as context, John the Baptist, was beheaded by Herod’s order.

I wonder if the Roman world was on Simeon’s mind when he turned to Mary and said, this child is “destined for the falling and rising of many,” and “a sword will pass through your soul too.” The scene concludes with Anna’s exuberant praise to God. So what do Simeon and Anna do?

This is their opportunity for “Imagination in the Temple—” Imagination around rituals of cleansing and naming-purification and circumcision. Instead of reciting the 10 commandments or the traditional prayer in the Jewish prayerbook, Simeon, **inspired by the Holy Spirit**, imagines salvation for all peoples, and a light to the Gentiles. Temple priests had little interest in being a light for Gentiles. They were avoiding Gentiles.

I offer a few comments about my own advancing years....(I have been under the false impression that nobody noticed)

1. I imagine congregations and denominations in which the rituals of **naming and cleansing, liturgy and sacrament** are occasions for mediation of God’s salvation—congregations and denominations in which traditional practice leads into an imagined future and not just preservation of a treasured past. Ritual in faith and church is occasion for world changing imagination—our personal and public worlds.

2. For the last 30 years I have been a student of historical contextual theology—i.e. meaning of a text is shaped and given life by the (a) living cultural and political environment when the text was written, and (b) neighboring texts. “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus....!” That is the neighboring text setting the mood for all that follows. It is in contextual theology that we discover the **First Century Jesus Movement**.

In my spiritual and theological journey I would like to commit to the **first century Jesus movement** rather than to creeds like the Nicene Creed or the Mennonite Confession of Faith. **Jesus Movement theology** integrates personal and public ethics with our God relationship.

3. Taking a cue from Simeon and Anna, perhaps imagination is a way to push through the changing years,,,there is still much to learn-like the discovery that baking powder expired in 2016, doesn't work well in 2018---

a. I am a very ordinary person blessed with an extraordinary life—

I was gifted with rich family life, and I spend my older years dotting affectionately on family members. In my retired years I have rediscovered my mind with its imaginative powers.

b. In my life work I was present in and interacted with the sacred passages of hundreds of people and their communities. My **first career** included studies in international affairs and more than a decade of negotiating development project agreements with village leaders and governments in four countries of the Middle East, followed by ministries for justice and peace with Mennonite World Conference and MCC. In my **second 20 year career** as pastor and counselor I was gifted with the learning spaces of hundreds of people in their formation, re-formation and transformation...**You can read about it in my spell binding Memoir in the library.** We are not captive to the past. Are we not all in the process of leaving, arriving and moving on?

4. The **first century Jesus Movement** is a source of my spirituality and theology that speaks out in many directions including a fresh discovery of great music, seated behind and up close to the Philadelphia Symphony. In the last five years I have spent some time in East Coast cities. (Parenthetically, the Jesus movement I embrace does not include the false guilt producing legacy of St. Augustine)

5. **Jesus movement imagination** bleeds into ethics for public policy and politics integral to my spirituality and relationships. Spirituality bleeds into my anguish over the dehumanizing treatment of immigrants on our southern border and the suffering of the world. My imagination has turned me into an advocate for the Common Good emphasizing Equality against inequality. (encompassing all the activism poured into single issues)

6. Tragedy and sorrow in my life is intertwined with unspeakable joy and gladness all mixed together like a bowl of Spaghetti...finding joy in Bach's Christmas Oratorio while grieving the suffering of the world. CONCLUDE with two lines—

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, the youngest woman ever elected to Congress—

“In the wealthiest nation in the history of the world, our greatest scarcity is not a lack of resources but the absence of political courage and moral imagination”

The devotional longing of Bach's Christmas Oratorio—selection before the last Choral, Soprano—anguishes—“Oh When will the time be ripe?”

Tenor answers—“Oh, when will the comfort of His people come?”

Alto interrupts—“He is surely already here.”

Then the Soprano and Tenor—conclude in a never ending Bach duet—

“Oh, Jesus, come then, to me.”

