

“Seeing Something New”
1st Sunday of Christmas – 12.27.2020 – Luke 2:22-40/B

(Beginning and ending with prayers by Steven Charleston. Please bow your heads and your hearts for prayer.)

We made it. Here we are, on the eve of change. And what better way to cross that threshold than by pausing here, at the birth of peace in all the world, to give thanks to the Spirit for bringing us this far. May this Christmas bring a blessing of healing and hope to everyone in our community and beyond. May it restore us to sacred balance as a people. May it mark the beginning of the end for the virus. May it open the gates to unity and renewal for our nation and for every nation. May it bless the Earth with a return to environmental justice. Faith brought us to this eve of a new vision. Now may it take us the rest of the way to the place for which we have prayed these many long months: to the home we remember as if it were a shining star. We have made a journey through darkness. Now comes the light. We made it. Amen.

Grace and peace to you from God the Creator, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

When I was very young, my sister and I would regularly have sleepovers in town at the family residence of my five Great Aunts. Mostly we did it in the summertime for a day or two so that they could love on us and teach us stuff that my folks didn't know – like sewing and knitting and making hats (for three of them were milliners.) We also learned about gardens and goldfish ponds and free-standing garages in the alley behind their house.

At one time, the House on Geraldine Ave held 14 – John and Anna Schramm and their 12 children, so I never stopped looking for its nooks and crannies, trying very hard to imagine where all of them slept and bathed and worked! My favorite time to stay there was on New Year's Eve. Mom and Dad would go out with friends, and my sister and I would stay up late with the Aunties, playing cards and dominoes and eating leftover Christmas cookies. But the most magical part was when Aunt Frances (my muse) would sit us down each year and tell us that at the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve, Father Time would run down Geraldine Avenue chased by the Baby New Year. All we had to do was watch carefully, and not fall asleep, to see them right outside the front windows. Then they would put us on the window seat with blankets and pillows and they would “go to bed.”

I never saw Father Time and Baby New Year run down Geraldine Avenue. I never could keep my eyes open during those long hours until midnight. And then, I would wake up the next morning in the big feather bed, next to my sister, and smelling hot chocolate being prepared in the big kitchen at the heart of their home. It was heaven. But I really wished I had seen Baby New Year, running down the street in a diaper, chasing after an old man. I imagined it every year, as my eyes closed, sleep came, and another shiny and brand new year dawned. But I wish I had seen the baby.

Now, I suppose that many of you out there have held a newborn in your arms. You look at their dark eyes and perfectly smooth, new skin and you are changed forever. You imagine the life that the child might have – first with family and close friends celebrating their arrival – then with a faith community as we perform traditional rituals of life, death

and resurrection to new life through the waters of baptism. It is a time of endless possibility – a time when the dangers of birthing are no longer feared - and the breathless anticipation of entering into a community of love and protection are experienced. And, there's something about a newborn baby that makes everything around it all brand new.

Thus it was for Mary and Joseph. According to Luke's Gospel, once the angel-sent shepherds had come to see what was happening, they returned to their fields overwhelmed by what they had just witnessed and praised God for the miracle of birth. Mary treasured the words they had spoken, and pondered them in her heart.

Eight days later, her baby was circumcised and named Jesus, and 33 days after his birth in Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph began their trip home to Nazareth, stopping in Jerusalem at the Temple to present Jesus and Mary for the rite of purification from their life- blood experiences. By doing this, they were declared "clean" and acceptable to the community. They fulfilled the rule of law written in Leviticus 12 and brought a small sacrifice of two birds because they could not afford a lamb. But indeed, their firstborn was the lamb, being brought to God as an offering – their first fruits. The first born son, now designated as holy (set apart) for the Lord.

And there, in the Temple were two of the elders of Israel, who were faithful servants of their people in God's house, and filled with God's Spirit. Both of them laid eyes on Jesus and just knew that he was The One. ***Simeon's Song*** is one of the most beautiful praise songs we have in scripture: *"Lord, let your servant depart in peace according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light to enlighten the Gentiles, and for glory to your people, Israel."*

Anna, too, knew immediately who Jesus was, and also spoke about him as being the One who would redeem Israel, and praised God for his presence in her sight. After Jesus had been blessed by these ancient ones of Israel, they all received Simeon's blessing and began to make their way home to Nazareth. You can imagine, I'm sure, the quiet conversation they must have had as they walked north to the Galilee. Who was this child? What would he become? Why would God come like this and how in the world can we be faithful to this awesome task? (Not unlike the whispers of new parents anywhere, anytime in human history.) There's just some-thing about a baby that makes everything around them brand new.

Something Brand New. Have you ever heard that old children's story about the King who was very bored? He had waited his whole life for something to interest him, to fill him with purpose and joy. One day he sent out a decree to his entire kingdom, offering a prize to anyone who could provide him something to distract him from his pitiful life. "I want to see something that no one has ever seen before! And whoever can bring me such a wondrous object, I will give them up to half of my kingdom." Well, everyone brought stuff to the palace. It was fun for a while, but even the anticipation became tedious. The waiting just bored him more. He was so sad that he thought he'd never be happy again.

Until one day, a small boy from the far side of the kingdom entered the back of the hall with a burlap sack. He walked straight forward until he stood right in front of the King. He didn't seem scared, he actually looked pretty confident that he would be able to solve the King's dilemma. From out of the bag he drew an egg, and set it on a pillow that was at the King's feet. The King raised his eyebrow and was about to object – he had seen eggs

before! But then, right before the eyes of all in the Palace, a small beak broke through the shell, and after a bit, a little chick stood on the pillow next to the little boy. The King saw in the face of the child a purpose – to bring his King a tiny bit of joy - and his heart softened. Scooping the little boy up into his arms, the King settled him on his very own throne, and proclaimed that henceforth he would be the Prince of the entire kingdom, and the bringer of Something Brand New. . .

Sometimes, we fall asleep before the possibility for something brand new appears. Sometimes, we despair that something brand new will never, ever be found. But sometimes, because we slept when weary and despaired until hope arrived, we find we are more able to see the new life being born among us. If not for the waiting, the longing, the being tired of this pandemic, we might not have been ready to perceive a new thing.

But now we can, because God has come. Now we can, because God sends us out. Now we can share the brand new thing that we know as if we knew it all along. For the Spirit of that baby is in each of our hearts, just waiting to be spread to all the corners of the world. And it will come thru us, by the breath of the Spirit. **Listen:**

“Into the darkness quickly, skating the cold air like ice, seeking the lost and lonely, the ones who are hanging on, the ones who are feeling afraid, the keepers of sad memories, to each of them comes the Spirit, gliding on the cold air like ice, bringing a blessing to each and every one, healing and mercy for the broken hearted, strengthening for tired souls, lifting up neglected lives, making the dark corners bright, comes the Spirit, the ageless power of love, the force of love, breaking through gently to free every human being who feels the weight of this season, setting them at liberty, restoring each one to hope and wholeness, into the darkness quickly, skating the cold air like ice, comes the Spirit, to light a candle in every window, every window of the world.” – Steven Charleston

There’s just something about a baby that makes everything around them brand new. Amen.

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Resources: Steven Charleston online devotions 11.2020 and 12.24.20