

“Depart in Peace” / Luke 2:22-40 / 1 January 2012

“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou has prepared before the face of all people: a light to lighten the gentiles and to be the glory of thy people Israel.” It’s my lot in life always to detect just a note of sadness in these beautiful words, because I utter them near the close of every funeral I ever conduct. And yet, in these first two chapters of Luke, where angels and ordinary people are forever breaking out into song, and each song is more eloquent and more joyous than the last—well, Simeon’s swan song is no different. It may have a funereal ring to my ears, but it’s a song of fulfillment and joy. It’s a song that declares, “I’ve seen everything I was meant to see. I’ve done everything that I was meant to do. Now I’ll move on to the next thing...in peace.” What a beautiful blessing to speak over an old custom, or an old routine, or an old year as it gives way to the new. “Depart in peace. Depart in peace. You’ve done your job; now I release you.”

As a child, I was always confused when I heard older people say things like, “See it and die.” They would say things like, “Oh, the Grand Canyon! See it and die.” Or “Times Square on New Year’s Eve! See it and die.” As a child, I wondered what was so horrible about the Grand Canyon or the Times Square that the very sight of them could kill a person. And if looking at them was as harmful as looking at Medusa, then wouldn’t you at least try to avert your eyes? What I didn’t understand was that grownups had a concept of mortality that I did not share. There were certain things they wanted to see, and do, and taste, and hear before they passed from this earth. Many people devise so-called “bucket lists,” things to experience before they die, ultimate experiences that will give them a sense that their life has been full and complete: climb Mt. Kilimanjaro, swim the English Channel, run for elected office.

Five or six years ago, an old college friend sent me a book entitled “1,000 Places to See Before Your Die.” The subtitle was even more interesting: “A Traveler’s Life List.” Actually, the Travel Channel has a whole series of “before you die” books: things to do before you die; books to read before you die; natural wonders to behold before you die. But in the “places to see” book, you’ll find one person’s opinion about the 1,000 most interesting or beautiful places in the world. It’s a travel book that graces the shelves of many a guest bathroom. Like those large, ornate Bibles that used to sit unread on coffee tables all over America, this book can be found in many homes, mostly unread. And, much like the Bible, it is not meant to be read cover-to-cover. You’re supposed to pick the book up when you’ve got a few minutes, thumb through it, perhaps congratulate yourself on how many of the world’s top 1,000 destinations you’ve already seen, and then put the book down, contented. Actually, I’ve visited forty or fifty of the book’s suggested 1,000 destinations, and considering that I’ll soon be 42, I’d better get busy if I’m going to catch the remaining 950 attractions that the planet Earth has to offer. By the way, the only listings in Pennsylvania are all in the southeast, except for Gettysburg.

And so, all of this begs the standard New Year’s question: What are your life goals for the time that you have left? What could you see, or do, or taste, or smell before saying, “Okay, now I’m satisfied”? Today a whole new year begins. And it’s not just a new year, but we stand at the onset of a new day, at the beginning of a new week, at the start of a whole new month. Everything is new today, fresh and unsullied. And on this bright day of new beginnings, what goals do you set for yourself? What will you do with the empty canvas that spreads out before you, gleaming white and full of possibility?

Some may fill this date with fresh resolutions for self-improvement and the greater good of our world, and those are very fine goals. Some may make New Year's resolutions to meet private objectives that wouldn't really make sense to most other people: profoundly personal aims. Others might yearn to check things off a bucket list, as the sand in the old hourglass seeps toward the halfway mark—or well past it. It seems to me that old Simeon had the best bucket list. All he wanted to see before he died was the dawn of hope for a dark world. Ah, who am I to judge another person's dreams? But wouldn't it be nice if all of us saw a little bit of worldwide redemption this year? What are some things that you and I need to dismiss in order to see a little more well-being in ourselves and in our world? What old (and perhaps once-useful) patterns, and habits, and ways-of-being need to be allowed to depart in peace?

Letting go of things that we've cherished—whether good things or bad—is always hard work. But what is the act of forgiveness if not a healthy letting go? I believe that the thing many of us are waiting for, longing for, is forgiveness. That's to say, we're either waiting to be forgiven by someone, or else we're waiting to forgive someone, perhaps both. At the dawn of a new year, all is fresh in theory, but we still bear bruises from all the previous years. What grace does our world crave more greedily than to forgive and to be forgiven? Forgiveness! Between Israel and Palestine, North and South Korea, the ethnic groups in South Africa. Forgiveness. No matter how hard we work at it, or how long, forgiveness always comes as a surprise and a mystery. What would life look like this year if you decided to improve your corner of the universe by learning to forgive an old, old hurt? Let it depart in peace!

Oh, those old, lingering wounds that it's really time to let go! Did you see in the news that there was a broomstick battle in the Church of the Nativity this past week? The Church that stands on the spot where Jesus was supposedly born is shared by the Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Armenian Orthodox churches. Each denomination has its own little segment of the church, and as the Eastern Orthodox celebration of Christmas approaches—on January 7—the priests wanted to clean the place up in preparation. But the Greek clergy kept stepping out-of-bounds into the parts of the church that were claimed by the Armenians. Some name-calling ensued. Then somebody threw a broom. And within minutes, the bearded priests in their robes and golden crosses were attacking each other with broomsticks and mops. And all of this took place in Bethlehem, a city where to be a Christian is to live in danger of persecution from both Muslims extremists and right wing Jews. Without mentioning the obvious fact that no one knows where exactly Jesus was born, is it really worth fighting over? But the animosity between the Greeks and the Armenians is so old and deep that it takes very little to bring it to the surface. It's time, time at last, to let it depart in peace!

But that's the thing about letting something go: it can only happen when its time has come. You can't hurry forgiveness, for true forgiveness only occurs after the one who was wronged has had time to fully grieve the hurt. When I was a high school student in Canton, Ohio, I saw a horrible story on the news about a murder that took place in a church. The husband of the murdered woman appeared on the evening news the very day of the event, and he pleaded, "Whoever you are, we forgive you. Please just turn yourself in." As much sympathy as I've always felt for that man whenever I called his story to mind, I can't bring myself to believe that he was speaking the truth. You can't begin to let go of what you haven't even fully picked up yet. It can take years.

Depart in peace. I release you. I forgive. A woman had a parrot that was forever abusing her. It pecked her arm and called her names. One day she grew weary of the abusive parrot. She reached in and took it from its cage, as the bird pummeled her with insults. "You're rubbish. Your hair's a mess." She threw the bird in the freezer, and after a few minutes the insults stopped. The woman thought, "Oh no, I've killed it." She opened the door, and the parrot said, "I sincerely apologize for all the pecking and all the unkind remarks. It will never happen again." The woman said, "Oh, parrot, I forgive you." Timidly, the parrot continued, "Um, can I ask, what did that chicken do?"

You know, we are forever hearing that we need to let go of this or that; we need to forgive; we need to move on. But most of the people telling us to do such things aren't giving us the steps to get there. As I've thought about the nature of forgiveness, I've reached the conclusion that there are really only three steps to it. And like most good things, forgiving is at once simple and difficult. The first step is to tell yourself that you are determined to forgive. Make a conscious, verbal statement. Give it a name, because naming a thing will give it power and reality. Make a definite statement: "I'm choosing to forgive you for what you did to me." Or perhaps, "I'm choosing to forgive myself for failing to be the person I should have been at the time." Step #1: Make a conscious decision to forgive.

Step #2: Dwell on the humanity of you enemy. Try to comprehend all the tangled, messy human brokenness that stands behind the wrong that was done to you. People usually do hurtful things to others because of some fear that they nurture within themselves. Even a terrorist thinks he's doing the right thing; people rarely act out of pure malice. If you can find the human fears at the heart of unkindness and injustice, you can usually begin to understand why a person acted the way he or she did. Seeing a person's underlying fears does not excuse everything, but it does give you a view of their humanity. Very often, I can convince myself that someone is a real villain. I can tell myself how right I am to be angry. I can shore up reasons for my resentment, but as soon as I actually see the person I've been so angry at, it dissipates. I might still be mad, but a real life person with real life needs and fears, like me, replaces the cartoon villain of my imagination. Our minds make monsters of those who hurt us. But dwell instead on the humanity of your enemy.

Step #1: Make a conscious decision to forgive. Step #2: Dwell on the humanity of your enemy. Step #3: Don't permit yourself to dwell on the hurt. If the time is right at last, and your grieving is done, then make yourself stop lingering over the wound. Give yourself other things to think about, life-affirming things, beautiful things and good.

"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou has prepared before the face of all people, a light to lighten the gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel." Depart in peace! After all these years, here on the threshold of a new one, speak these words of benediction over all the heavy, unnecessary baggage that you've been carrying around. Speak it over the self that you were incapable of being, the self that you were instead, the self that you've never quite forgiven: Depart in peace. Speak it over those persons long-since dead who still stand as the great adversaries of your private drama. Depart in peace. Whisper these words over the hurts, and the offenses, and the regrets. There are not 1,000 places that you need to see before you can die contented. There are probably really only five or ten things that you need to lay down, let go. Allow them to depart in peace. Amen.