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*Taken Up Into His Arms*

“If we live, we live to the Lord, if we die, we die to the Lord. So then whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”

I recently learned about the Threshold Choir. Kate Munger writes, The seed for the Threshold Choir was planted in June of 1990 when I sang for my friend Larry as he lay in a coma, dying. I did housework all morning and was terrified when the time came to sit by his bedside. I did what I always did when I was afraid; I sang the song that gave me courage. I sang it for 2 ½ hours. It comforted me, which comforted him. The contrast between the morning and the afternoon was profound. I felt as if I had given generously of my essence to my dear friend while I sang to him. I also found that I felt deeply comforted, which in turn was comforting to him. There are about 200 chapters of the threshold choir worldwide, with people doing this work as volunteers, singing to folks who are facing death or grief or suffering.”

On the 40th day after Christmas we celebrate the Feast of the Presentation of our Lord. In the temple we are greeted by two elders. The prophet and widow Anna and the righteous Simeon. Two servants with long lives of faithfulness behind them. Their signs of age, also signs of prayerful devotion. Perspective. Their well-worn bodies bear witness to decades of worship and connection with God. Who are the Anna and Simeon’s in our life and in our church? Advanced in years but with much to teach us about the life of faith throughout the seasons.

It had been revealed to him that he would not see death before he had seen the Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when Mary and Joseph brought in the child, to do what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and began to praise God- and sing.

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant 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 for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

Anna too, began to praise God.

Since the sixth century the song of Simeon has accompanied Christians as they have prayed Compline. Prayer at the close of the day. With phrases like “Almighty God grant us a quiet night and peace at the last” and “into your hands O Lord I commend my spirit” this cardinal liturgy of the church is meant to be a kind of rehearsal of our own deaths. We can face the coming night with courage, even with a song. With Boldness like Anna and Simeon and so many others throughout the ages.

Since the 1530’s Simeon’s words have been sung by Lutherans as a response to Holy Communion. God’s word fulfilled. Salvation heard, seen, tasted, we go in peace.

Simeon's song of trust now becomes ours whenever we receive this child as gift in bread, wine, word, stranger, and at the close of each day entrusting our waking and our sleeping into his hands. The child that Simeon took up into his arms now has taken us up into his. He holds us through every threshold of our lives. Disruption. Ending. His body is now our temple. Dwelling. Food. Sustinence. Home. Sanctuary. Abiding place. Journey. And final destination.

A sword will pierce Mary's own soul, as a sword one day will pierce this child. Simeon's song will trace his lips as he dies. In his dying he has set free those who have been held captive to the fear of death. He will rise again revealing once and for all that the ways of death so prevalent in this world will not have the final say.

We can face the night with courage, even a song. Another compline prayer says, "Eternal God, the hours of both day and night are yours and to you the darkness is no threat."

This 40th day after Christmas is also Candlemas- celebrating again Jesus as the light to the nations. Traditionally candles would be blessed on this day that would be used all throughout the year. Candles that would illumine the darkness wherever they burn. Poured from the same promise of those candles we were given in baptism when we walked out of our tombs. The death that now makes every one of ours a doorway into abundant life.

Online, back in September Afghan women were committing what would be a crime under Taliban rule: They sang. Like Fatima Etimadi, 34, and her girlfriends, belting out this defiant tune, "The flower will unfurl, revealing a spring of freedom." "I sing the anthem of freedom, again, again, freedom." At the threshold between slavery and freedom the song rang out: "Go down Moses Way down in Egypt land Tell old Pharaoh To let my people go!" At other thresholds, in a few months at the Easter Vigil we will sing at sundown around the graves, candles in hand, of the light of Christ that shines upon all creation. What other thresholds might we find ourselves at, and who might we accompany? Harmonizing the world right. Songs of solidarity. Risk. Justice. Compassion. Courage. Connection. Songs whose notes speak of the dignity of every life.

From this place- flooded with light- we are sent to them. What else would we do? Sent headlong into the shadowy/liminal places. We carry light. Hope. Peace. A song. For we know that no darkness will ever overcome it. Even when all evidence seems to the contrary.

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