

## “Our Bucket Lists”

Luke 2:22-40 – December 28, 2008

INTRO: Jesus was born into a Jewish family, and was brought up living out the proper tradition of Judaism. As an infant, his parents were following traditions and bringing him to the temple to be circumcised, and as the firstborn, to be dedicated there. Today’s story tells about the people that were there in the temple—Simeon and Anna.

In a local bookstore I recently found a sale I passed up. The book was *1000 Places to See Before You Die*, and it was on sale for under \$10. It was a good price. And I’ve picked up this book before, but have never bought it because I thought it might depress me that I never have enough time to see all the places I already want to see. And this time, I looked at the 2003 copyright, and got to thinking that maybe the author is coming up with a new list, and 2000 places to see before I did is far too overwhelming for me. So I left the book at the store.

A popular movie called *The Bucket List* follows a similar train theme of things to do/places to see before you die. Two fellows meet because they end up as hospital roommates. “Blue-collar mechanic Carter Chambers and billionaire hospital magnate Edward Cole have both been diagnosed with cancer and they become friends as they undergo their respective treatments. Both are diagnosed with a year or less to live. Carter begins writing a ‘bucket list,’ or things to do before ‘he kicks the bucket.’ After hearing he has less than a year to live, Carter wads it up and tosses it on the floor. Edward finds it and reads it. Edward pushes Carter and promises to finance the trip. Despite the protests of his wife, Carter eagerly agrees. The pair then begins an around-the-world vacation, embarking on race car driving, sky diving, climbing the Pyramids, and going on a lion safari in Africa.” (Wikipedia)

Other things on their list: witness something truly majestic, help a complete stranger for a common good, laugh till I cry, drive a Shelby Mustang, kiss the most beautiful girl in the world, get a tattoo, visit the Taj Mahal, see the Great Wall of China.

They don’t get everything accomplished on their list, but the relationship that developed between the two of them allowed them to check off “help a complete stranger for the common good” because these two fellows who were strangers not long ago, helped each other immensely.

I don’t know about you, but I’ve worked on my own Bucket List over the years. I wanted to get to the bottom of the Grand Canyon before I turned 50, and I did that. I wanted to share a vacation with three of my best friends on an island, and we did that. I still want to see Australia and Alaska and take a hot air balloon ride someday. And I want to learn Spanish well enough, that I can speak it better than I can read it. And, I’d like to learn to sign.

We don’t know if old Simeon had a long bucket list, but we do believe that there was at least one thing he wanted to do before he died—that was that he wanted to see the Messiah. He somehow knew he’d seen the light of God in the face of this infant who was put into his arms, and he could now die contentedly. Simeon was a righteous, devout, resident of Jerusalem. “Years before, he’d been told he wouldn’t die until he’d seen the Messiah with his own two eyes, and time was running out. When the moment finally came, one look through his cataract lenses was all it took.” (Frederick Buechner)

Simeon understood Jesus to be the fulfillment of the expectation of a divine deliverer—the Jewish hope for the Messiah. He’s open to the Spirit who guides him to recognize this particular child as the promised one. He’s open to the future. He hasn’t been made hopeless by everything around him—he still hopes, even though he lived in a time of despair.

The other important person in this story is Anna, who is a widow, someone getting up there in years. She belonged to a group of people in the temple who prayed day and night, and found the temple to be her home, because she had no other home. She, like Simeon, had the ability to recognize who this child was and proclaim it.

In these two, aging, pious Jews, we find the first witnesses who recognize Jesus’ identity. We also identify the gifts of age and wisdom that they bring to this story. They knew how to wait—they’ve somehow learned the value of patience. They’ve been faithful through the years, and it has paid off—here’s the one they’ve been waiting for. They are grateful for what they have—for all of life’s gifts, from the smallest to the largest—another new day, a letter from a friend, the gift of the Messiah. They retained the capacity for hope and eagerness and growth, even into their elder years.

I remember a conversation I had with my father, in the midst of some difficult years in my previous appointment. I had followed a pastor who had died while serving that church. When I arrived, the church really didn't want to see me, or any other pastor—they just wanted the one they had known and loved for eight years. In the first two or three years, there were numerous times I said to my dad that maybe I needed to think about leaving. That perhaps another person could come in after me, and they might have an easier time and be able to move the congregation along, because they weren't this person who had followed the dearly loved pastor. And, my Dad said, "I think you just need to ride this out— just be patient, and see what good might come." He was right. His 80+ years gave him a perspective that I very much needed.

I believe this is one of the stories in the Bible that connects generations—it goes both backward and forward in time. The wisdom of these two people connects with the promised Messiah, and the story continues to connect with us. It's a story that reminds us of the importance of passing along traditions/hopes/dreams between generations. Sometimes holidays are ideal times for that to happen, as stories are shared between the generations. It may be some of what goes on when grandparents come to see their grandchildren in a church Christmas program—it's another generation taking their place in this journey of faith, like all those generations who have gone before. As we move into a new year this week, we perhaps have an interesting parallel between this story of Simeon holding the baby Jesus and father time with the new year's baby—one year to the next, one generation to the next.

Walter Wangerin, a Lutheran pastor and author, tells the story of how an older woman in his parish, kept his hope alive as a beginning writer. This woman's name was Emily Dichter. She was almost 90 years old and nearly blind. Walter received an invitation for lunch at Emily's—a written invitation. Walter couldn't figure out quite why Emily would want to see him—he was responsible for education, youth work, and a lot of minor duties. Walter didn't know what Emily had in mind, but he had the good sense to accept her invitation. What Walter didn't know, was that Emily saw something in him, that others hadn't really named yet. Emily had a special interest in him because she knew his grandfather when he was the pastor of a church she once belonged to. At lunch, Walter found out that Emily was a published author. Her daughter served as her amanuensis—she reads and writes for Emily. And, whether it was through his preaching or his newsletter articles read to her by her daughter, Emily affirmed Walter's writing talent and wanted to mentor him. She said to him, "You, sir, you are an author." Walter was astonished: "She called me an author! She named my dream as though it were true." Emily shared with him: "An elder author can perhaps inform the younger of difficulties before they arise. You should never, never be sentenced to dance in the dark! No one should. Not ever." You see, when Emily found out that her own book was going to be published, she was so excited. She twirled around her dining room, with her arms above her head. But before she did so, she shut the drapes, thinking no one else should see this outburst. There was no mentor for her—and she wanted it to be different for Walter—so that he wouldn't have to dance in the dark by himself. *(The Manger is Empty)*

Simeon and Anna invite us to identify for ourselves, what are our real, abiding, and powerful hopes and dreams. If we were to create our own bucket list, what would it look like? Would there be places we want to go, experiences we want to have, or hopes of service we want to realize? In the *Bucket List* movie, there were lots of places to see on the list, but Carter had added "help a complete stranger for a common good." He had a better sense than Edward did, that our lives need to be lived in service to each other. Edward learned that from him.

We need people in our lives who can mentor us—who can see something we perhaps aren't able to see yet. They help us identify who we are—what may be our gifts and talents, and in the faith community, they help keep alive the hope that a child who was born so long ago, can continue to make a great difference in our world. Perhaps we can be to each other, people like Anna and Simeon, who help keep hope alive as we wait for whatever God has in store for us in the coming year.

--Sue Burwell