

“Time for a New Bucket”

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A Dialogue with the Congregation 12-30-18

Based upon Gen. 18:1-15; Luke 2:21-40

In the sacred musical which is the birth narrative in *The Gospel of Luke*, Luke uses a series of character pairs to convey fully the unfolding good news of Jesus’ birth and identity. The first pair in the story is Zechariah and Elizabeth, parents of John the Baptist, who was called before birth to prepare the way for Christ. The next pair is Mary and the Angel Gabriel, as God’s plan is more fully revealed. The third pair is Mary and Elizabeth, who each get to proclaim the blessings of the Lord. Then we get Elizabeth and Zechariah again after John’s birth, and then Joseph and Mary, for Jesus’ birth. In Luke’s gospel, Joseph is the strong silent type. All he does is travel with Mary to Bethlehem and the Temple; he never says or sings anything. The last pair of characters, we meet today, on what the Christian liturgical calendar calls the first Sunday of Christmas. As we just heard, in accordance with Jewish law, Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus to the Temple to be dedicated. While they were there, they encountered two somewhat mysterious figures, Simeon and Anna, who both had felt called to meet the Christ child. They were not a couple, but shared many things in common, nevertheless. Simeon was a very old, very righteous man, perhaps a retired priest. In the space of two verses, Luke tells us three times that the Holy Spirit was involved in Simeon’s life, resting on him, revealing God’s secrets to him, and guiding him. Simeon recognizes baby Jesus as the Messiah, and offers a prophetic pronouncement called the *Nunc Diminis* to acknowledge this. Then Anna, who was also a righteous and very pious woman, sees the baby. Widowed at a young age, Anna had spent the majority of her life in the Temple worshiping and praying, almost like a cloistered nun before her time. Although Luke does not record her voice, the narrative makes clear that seeing the baby inspired Anna to proclaim the good news far and wide in Jerusalem.

**Neither Anna, nor Simeon appears again in the entire rest of the New Testament.
Why do you suppose Luke includes their stories in the larger story about Jesus’ birth?**

Simeon’s encounter with Mary, Joseph, and the Christ child affirms three important things: 1) Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah; 2) his ministry will be to the Gentiles as well as the Jews; and 3) it will be an unsettling and contentious ministry which will cause his mother great pain. Notwithstanding the sadness of that last observation, however, Simeon was filled with joy. “Now I can die a happy man,” he cries. “I’ve seen the future and can die in peace.” In terms of prophetic revelation, Anna’s encounter with the holy family doesn’t really add anything to what Simeon observes. She, too, recognizes the baby as the long-awaited Redeemer of Israel. But unlike Simeon, who behaves as if his life is now done when he sees the baby, Anna behaves as if her life has just begun. After living a lifetime in the Temple, she leaves her sanctuary as an inspired prophet called to go share the good news about God’s plan with the people of Jerusalem.

In light of this difference in response, and recognizing that we are also on the eve of a New Year when people typically make resolutions about their future, I’ve been thinking this past week about bucket lists. You know the lists that people sometimes make of all the things that

they want to do before “they kick the bucket,” like swim with dolphins or sky dive? It was clearly a bucket list item for Simeon to see the Messiah. In fact, the Holy Spirit had told him that he wouldn’t die until he did. So, once he did see Jesus, he felt satisfied and done; he was finally able to check off the big box on his list that had remained empty for his entire life. Anna initially seems to have a similar bucket list in that she has spent virtually her entire life in the Temple praying. Depending on how you translate the Greek, she was either 84 or 105, so that’s a lot of time praying. But when she sees Jesus, it’s as if he gave her not just a new list, but even a new bucket, one that was going to be filled with adventures in evangelism, rather than hours in secluded prayer.

Have you ever made either a mental or actual bucket list? What kinds of things are on your list, or would be on your list if you took the time to make one?

The bucket lists created by the characters played by Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman in the movie by the same name, included lots of different kinds of adventures. They go skydiving, fly over the North Pole, visit the Taj Mahal, ride motorcycles on the Great Wall of China, attend a lion safari in Tanzania, and visit the base of Mt. Everest in Nepal, among other things.¹ But those fictional characters had nothing on a real man named John Goddard, whose bucket list is perhaps the most famous in the world. When Goddard was 15, he overheard his father complaining that he had never done the things he had dreamed of doing. So, Goddard decided right then and there that he would live his life a different way. He made a list of 127 goals for his life, and spent the remaining 73 years that he lived, checking them off. When he died in 2013, he had completed 120 of the 127. The list included a lot of adventure, exploring 8 major rivers in the world, studying primitive cultures in 12 different countries, climbing 21 major mountains, exploring 6 underwater ecosystems, visiting 14 famous places, and more.² So it’s not surprising that he nearly died or was almost killed more than twenty times checking off these items from his list. But his list also included less death-defying items like: become an Eagle Scout, type 50-words a minute, visit a movie studio, and read the Bible from cover to cover.³ The last item in particular has made me think specifically about spiritual bucket lists.

Do you have, or did you ever have a spiritual bucket list, either written on paper or your heart? What are some of the adventures or experiences your spirit longs for before you meet God in heaven?

Some people’s spiritual bucket lists include understanding and worshiping-related items on them, like reading the Bible, learning to pray, journaling every night, worshiping every Sunday, etc. Some have mission-related items on them like: help build a Habitat house, participate in a protest against injustice, serve in a soup kitchen or homeless shelter. I think lists like these are helpful to a degree because they keep us motivated in our discipleship and growing

¹ *The Bucket List*. Directed by Rob Reiner. Performed by Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman (Warner Bros., Castle Rock Entertainment, Two Ta Films, Storyline Entertainment, 2007).

² See e.g. Flood, Danny, “*The World’s ‘Greatest Goal Achiever’- The Legend of John Goddard*,” OpenWorld Magazine, Oct. 28, 2014, retrieved Dec. 26, 2018 from <http://www.openworldmag.com/real-life-indiana-jones-john-goddard/>

³ *Ibid.*

in our faith. But the downside to reducing what is supposed to be a relationship to a to-do list, is that when we accomplish our tasks, we can feel like Simeon, as though we are done in our faith development, and if we can't accomplish them, we can feel forever distanced from or waiting for God. As Joan Chittister observed: "It's easy to keep a religious checklist and call that a religious life. It is far more difficult to become a spiritual person for whom life is more an adventure in spiritual growth and wisdom than it is a series of setbacks, an endless list of woes. God does not create us to tease our appetites and test our endurance. God creates us to enable us to see the Face of God in every dimension of life."⁴

What are items on your spiritual bucket list that still remain unchecked? Do you have any sense of why you or someone else put them on your list, or why you can't check them off?

In order to see "the Face of God" in every dimension of life as Chittister put it, sometimes it helps to focus less on the list, and more on the bucket. Abram and Sarah learned this the hard way. By the time that God called them to leave their homeland and travel into a new land, they had long since given up on checking the traditional "have a baby" box on their bucket list. Sarah was both barren and also post-menopausal, so they had made their lives about other things. They had probably even come to terms with the fact that parenthood wasn't a part of God's plan, although I'm sure Sarah spent at least a few nights wondering why she was denied the pleasure, and Abram, nights wondering what he would do about an heir. Anyway, when God called them to head into the Promised Land, that adventure became the focus of their lives, until God told them that they would have as many descendants as the stars. But still no baby arrived. So, when the strangers showed up with the news that Sarah was going to bear a son, by that point, what else could she do but laugh? It wasn't just the chuckle of an old woman who knew enough basic biology to know that having a baby was doubly impossible for her. It was also, I suspect, the bitter laugh of a woman who had heard God's promises to her husband for quite a while, and who had watched as he tried to make them come true on his own with her own maidservant Hagar, and who had felt the bitter confirmation through Hagar as well as through decades of living barren, that she wasn't going to get to experience what other women did. It was the laugh of someone who had ambivalent feeling about God, and knew with certainty that she wasn't a mother and was never going to be.

God understood all of this. But instead of being mad at her for her lack of faith, God surprised Sarah by giving her a new bucket. Instead of the barren old lady bucket she was used to carrying, God gave her the "mother of a nation" bucket. Instead of the "ignored by God" bucket, God gave her a "chosen one" bucket instead. God did the same thing with Anna. Since she was widowed at such a young age, her life had not been about love or children or human beings in general; it had been about solitary worshipping God in the Temple. But once Anna saw Jesus, God gave her a new life, one of a prophet to Jerusalem. Both women were given more than a new task list by the grace of God, they were given a new understanding of themselves and their relationship with God too.

⁴ As quoted in Douty, Linda, How Did I Get to Be 70 When I'm 35 Inside: Spiritual Surprises of Later Life (Woodstock: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2011), 175.

Think about the assumptions about yourself or your life that you expect to carry into the New Year. If Christ were to call you to change them as radically as Sarah and Anna had to change, how would you feel and react? What assumptions do you carry about how you can interact with or serve God?

We all carry with us assumptions that affect our understanding of God and ourselves. Based on our experience we may assume that God interacts with humanity in general, or with us specifically, in certain ways only, or assume that God is or is not reliable. We may also approach our discipleship with certain understandings of ourselves that we have had for years, assumptions like: “I am not a people person and so cannot care well for others;” “I am not a Bible scholar and so could never teach the Gospel;” “I’m not the kind of person who believes in the supernatural;” “I have believed x, y, z about the world my whole life; therefore, I am too old to change;” or even “God has been good to me, and I have done my part. But it’s someone else’s turn because I’m done.” All of these assumptions shape the lists that we make, whether they are general bucket lists or specifically spiritual ones. But today’s lessons show us that none of these assumptions needs to define us forever. Even Simeon, who was ready to die after seeing Jesus, recognized in his face that the people’s assumptions about whom God was going to save were wrong. Jesus was coming to save the Gentiles as well as the Jews. Christ’s coming into the world gave us all a new bucket. Whether we are 84 like Anna, or 15 like Goddard, through God’s grace we all have been given the opportunity to be different and do different things. We have seen the baby as Anna and Simeon have, and we know what he can do, did do for our world, does do, and will do. Therefore, we now have an opportunity to live differently, believe differently, serve differently. We have the opportunity to change, be surprised, and learn all kinds of new things.

Recognizing this, for our affirmation exercise today, after we sing the hymn, we are all going to be given an opportunity to begin the new year by offering God a piece of ourselves and our hearts. In Christ we have been given a new bucket. What is it that you hope will fill yours with God’s help? Perhaps you want to make a bucket list of new spiritual disciplines to try, or new mission experiences to stretch your discipleship. Perhaps you will want to make a pledge to God to try to trust more in the new bucket than in your old understandings about yourself, the world, or the Gospel. Perhaps you will want to make a list of old habits you will strive to relinquish, or new approaches to how you live your life. There isn’t a right thing or a wrong thing to write on the piece of paper you have been given. Even the traditional New Year’s resolution kind of pledge to lose weight can have a spiritual dimension if you are pledging not just to eat less and exercise more, but to explore with God’s help how you treat your body and soul and why. Whatever you write, it’s between you and God. But I hope that you will take the opportunity to respond in some way to the Christ child, other than by saying, “Thanks see you next year,” or “Now that you’re here I’m done.” Because if there is one thing that we know to be true from Scripture, it is that in this life at least, we are never done growing and learning and discovering who God is, and who God made us to be. That is one of God’s greatest gifts to us. Thanks be to God! Amen.