

Sermon – Slow Cookin’ Our Souls**Scripture – Luke 2:22-40****Preacher – Rev. Will Burhans****Date – December 27, 2020**

And so the birth story continues with Simeon and Anna having waited in the temple it seems all their lives to catch a glimpse of God’s salvation and they glimpse it with great joy and relief... and some foreshadowing of pain to come for Mary who must simply ponder all these remarkable things in her heart.

The 20th century philosopher, scientist, and Jesuit, Teilhard de Chardin, has a poem where he says “trust the slow work of God”. Anna, Simeon and Mary all throughout had to trust the slow work of God. You and I have to do so also... but it is hard to do. In a culture of instant gratification, where so much value is placed on efficiency, it’s hard to do. Within a world-view where it is up to each individual to make a life and a living for oneself, trusting the slow work of God doesn’t come naturally. And it doesn’t for two primary reasons - because God’s work in our lives is often veiled in a cloud of unknowing. There’s no way to know for sure if and how God is working in our lives, we can guess but it’s rarely clear, and secondly, God’s timing and our timing rarely coincide which usually looks like us wanting something to happen faster than it does.

God interacts and responds to the needs and purposes of our souls and while our surface-lives might be on a gas burner so we can turn up the heat in order to more quickly produce whatever we want to produce, our souls are being worked on in a slow cooker, so that the juices of these experiences here and the flavoring of our lineage there and the nutrients of these gifts and

seasonings of those weaknesses can be drawn out and mingled together to form the delectable soul stew that is needed. But it's not a gas burner but a slow cooker dynamic within the soul which means, we don't necessarily need to stir it or check on it or add anything else or do anything to it other than allow it to be. Hopefully we'll catch a whiff of it and at a certain point the aroma will fill our house and bring us joy in what is cooking. But unfortunately our souls don't have a timer on them and we can't look and see how much more time is left before our soul stew is ready so we have to trust through all the experiences of our lives the slow work of God.

The mystics of old would say that there is a certain delicateness to the process our souls are undergoing that needs to remain hidden from our conscious minds otherwise we would be too tempted to meddle with it. "Man, these potatoes are not getting soft, I'll just take 'em out and boil them for a little while and then add them back in." Or we might sabotage the process altogether because our surface-selves are less interested in what our souls are going for. So for instance our souls are going for a more enduring joy than mere immediate happiness and a more common good than our own benefit and more relational advancement than material success. And so the process God takes us through needs to be largely hidden from our conscious minds. The dark night of the soul or the cloud of unknowing by which people have referred to the slow and obscure work of God in our lives is what is needed so that our ego selves, the part of us that wants success and achievement and accolades and victory (and wants it quick!) won't get in the way of our soul selves, our true selves, that wants love and union above all else, no matter how long it takes.

And yet there is this fine point, this thin place, where the land of our souls and the world of our conscious thought meet, where our conscious willingness and choice is required so that the mostly unconscious work of God can be done within us. At the annunciation, Mary offered her conscious consent for that unconscious working and Simeon and Anna at Jesus' dedication in the temple had dedicated their lives to awaiting for God's action in the world so that they caught of glimpse of it when they saw it. They received no angel visitation but just attuned themselves to God's workings such that when they looked in the infant Jesus' eyes they knew it, this was God's presence and yet they would die before 30 years were up and Jesus actually began his ministry. Mary and all she heard from the angels and shepherds and then this ominous warning of sorts from Simeon, just held onto all this as Jesus grew into a little boy and then an early teen and a teenager (when Jesus was probably a bear to deal with) all the way into his adulthood... and then it all began to unfold more dramatically... but even with the drama of that there were still doubts and questions as to who this son of hers was and how exactly God was working in his life and in the life of the world. And 2000 years later we are still trying to figure it out... talk about the slow work of God!

So yes, God's timing is not our timing after all we are talking about GOD here, the creator of ALL THAT IS and as the Psalmist says in Psalm 90 "a thousand years in your sight, O God, is like a day that has just gone by." But we've got to hold that with the paradox that God DID enter into the specificity of time and God did come to touch our hearts and our lives and to let us know we are noticed and loved, and to work in and through these fragile vessels of our lives... and yet God's timing is not our timing and we must trust the slow work of God. Let me end with the full poem from Teilhard de Chardin because

I think here at the end of 2020 when we are going to step into 2021 in much the same situation that we are ending 2020, and maybe worse yet in terms of the pandemic, I think it's a good reminder to us...

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.

We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay.

We should like to skip the intermediate stages.

We are impatient with being on the way to something unknown, something new.

And yet it is the law of all progress

that it is made by passing through some stages of instability—

and that it may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you;

your lives/your ideas mature gradually—let them grow,

let them shape themselves, without undue haste.

Don't try to force them on,

as though you could be today what time

(that is to say, grace and circumstances acting on your own good will)

will make of you tomorrow.

Only God could say what this new spirit

gradually forming within you will be.

Give Our Lord the benefit of believing

that his hand is leading you,

and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself (and the world)

in suspense and incomplete.

As we close 2020 and move into 2021 give God the benefit of the doubt, believing that God's hand is leading you and all of us to where we need to be in Jesus' name, amen!