

THE FACE OF JESUS

a sermon by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno for Dec. 26, 2021

based on Luke 2:28-40

The most carefree two years of my life were spent in Eugene, Oregon, doing graduate study in film and literature at the University of Oregon. I had spent five months a couple of years before that teaching in Rome, so I gravitated to Italian cinema quite naturally.

I enjoy the films of Federico Fellini. *La Dolce Vita* ("The Sweet Life") begins with a helicopter flying slowly through the sky above the city of Rome.

Hanging from the helicopter in a kind of halter is a life-size statue of a bearded man dressed in robes with his arms outstretched so that he looks almost as if he's flying by himself. It flies over a field where some men are working in tractors and the fly-over causes a good deal of excitement. They wave their hats and yell and then one of them recognizes the statue and shouts in Italian, "Hey, it's Jesus!"

Then a number of the men start running along under the thing, waving and calling to it. But the helicopter keeps on going, and after a while it reaches the outskirts of Rome where it passes over a building, on the roof of which there is a swimming pool surrounded by a number of girls in bikinis, basking in the Italian sun. Of course they look up, too, and start waving – this time we see that the copter is piloted by a couple of young men and they make a second pass over the pool and we see that over the roar of the engine they try mightily to get the phone numbers of the girls, explaining that they need to deliver the statue to the Vatican but that they would be happy to fly right back.

Now during this exchange, the 1970s college audience I was sitting with laughed raucously at the incongruity of the whole thing – profane Italian men, bosomy Italian women, and poor Jesus hanging there like an out-sized religious pendant – so easy to make light of. Jesus -- all stone, the Italians very fleshly, as full of life as any human beings have ever been.

Jesus was clearly getting the short end of the stick, but Fellini, wasn't done with us yet.

The helicopter continues on its way and the next thing that comes into view is the majestic dome of St. Peter's, and for the first time the camera begins to zoom in quite slowly on the statue itself with its arms stretched out, until for a moment the screen is filled with just the face of Jesus. At that moment there was not a peep from the audience – the derisive laughter was all gone – there was just something about that face.

For a few prolonged seconds that face filled the screen and made American young people silent – It was a face that was at once iconic and transfixing.

It made us completely still.
The face of Jesus.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had laid eyes on the Lord's Christ.

The old man, Simeon, looked down into a bundle held in the arms of a very young woman. All he could see was the face of this child because the babe was so heavily swaddled. But the face of the sleeping child was all he needed to see. There was just something about it. Something ironically larger. It pointed to a future.

Of course, the birth of every child points to fresh possibility, but there was a newness like no other in this face.

This piece of scripture has long been known as *The Song of Simeon (the Nunc Dimittis)* "Let now thy servant depart in peace for my eyes have seen thy salvation."

At bottom this story of the recognition of Jesus by Simeon is about the wish to live long enough to complete one's purpose -- the wish to live long enough to experience what one is particularly positioned to experience, to accomplish what one is meant to accomplish, comprehend what one has to comprehend, to make peace with what one has to make peace with, all in order to die peacefully.

Madeleine L'Engle once wrote the following -- "How remarkable, how beyond the bounds of ordinary possibility, that two old people should see a small baby and recognize that he was the Light of the World! Was it perhaps because they were so old, so near to the Beyond, that they were able to see what people, caught up in the cares of life, could not see?" Who knows?

Conversely, how sad to think a person could get to the end of his or her life and feel it had all been wasted.

The mythologist, Joseph Campbell, said once that the greatest let-down in life would be "to climb to the top of the ladder and find that it is propped against the wrong wall."

I used to think this was a kind of humorous, until I started listening to certain fairly young members of Congress who are on the record saying that frankly, they don't care at all how history will judge them.

Well, there is no doubt in my mind that besides being questioned by the January 6th committee, they will all be questioned by their grandchildren about their values in the

coming decades; about their behavior, and their judgment, and their disregard for our democracy, plus, their own family name.

In 1840 a young man, Henry David Thoreau, went to live in the woods surrounding Walden Pond in Concord Massachusetts. He gave up a comfortable life and took up what many thought a non-productive, meaningless existence. His defense was a book called, simply, *Walden*.

In it he makes the following statement: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately; to front only the essential facts of life and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

He was talking about living intentionally, not haphazardly. It was Thoreau who also said, "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." You can't always see that desperation in a person. I mean, most people go along putting one foot in front of another, doing their work day-in, and day-out because they feel they have no other choice. They do this until sometimes they just can't anymore, and then even they are often surprised when they hit a wall.

With that as backdrop, consider what Simeon had to say about this little baby. That he will grow up to be someone who will "reveal the secrets in a person's deepest heart."

Some unhappy people live long enough to come face to face with the vacuum in their soul. Others simply do not. Perhaps it is a form of mercy when they don't see it. But maybe it can be a form of grace when they do.

What's it all about, the living of this life? Let me put it another way -- why do we live as long as we do?

Consider this -- I read once that the average mouse lives about 2 years; the average canary, 15, the average fruit bat, 50. Yet all three are about the same size and weight and all are almost identical, genetically. Why such disparate life spans?

Simeon and Anna may have lived well into their 80s. What must a person do to feel he's lived a full life? What must she see in order to die in peace? Maybe it's enough to know that our children, and perhaps our grandchildren, are making out okay? Perhaps there's something about that two generation spread.

Maybe that's why we live as long as we do. If we are lucky, we learn from our grandchildren what we missed learning from our children, just as our grandchildren often learn from their grandparents what they miss picking up from *their* parents.

There is another interesting detail in the story this morning ... Simeon warned Mary that eventually a sword would pierce her heart.

Well, that's not a bit uncommon. The wonderful novelist, Barbara Kingsolver said that to have a child is to have your heart go running around outside your body.

Yes, a sword almost always pierces a mother's heart as she watches her child struggle and grow. But Jesus' mother had to bear way more than most – to think of her standing helpless at the foot of the cross looking up at her child's face there. It's heartbreaking.

I mentioned congressman somewhat disparagingly earlier in this sermon. Let me balance that with the story of someone who is nearly forgotten but who served in the United States Senate with real distinction.

A generation ago, Paul Tsongas, U.S. Senator from Massachusetts, shocked the country by announcing his retirement from the Senate. He decided that he would not stand for re-election.

Now. Tsongas was a young man. He was not retiring due to age. Nor was he retiring because of scandal. He was very well thought of. In fact, he was a rising star, an overwhelming favorite for re-election. Tsongas was frequently mentioned as a candidate for President. What happened?

A few weeks before the announcement he had discovered a lump while showering. It was found to be a slow growing form of lymphoma; something that in time his doctors were to tell him was not curable, but was quite treatable. He had no reason to believe he wouldn't live quite a lot longer and they said it wouldn't affect his physical abilities.

The illness did not force him out of the Senate, but it did force him to think about his life in ways he'd never thought about it before.

Tsongas had always been a very goal oriented person. He had wanted to go to the best college, the best law school, get into congress, the senate, and aim for higher office. He was not someone who lived for today. His ambition would not let him do that. So, he was always projecting himself forward. Happiness for him always lay somewhere further down the road.

It was while he was waiting for his doctor's report that he came face to face for the first time with his own mortality and the fact that for longer than he could remember he had been thoughtless about living day to day.

Interestingly, the time he spent thinking reflectively between his diagnosis and his prognosis was all that was necessary for Paul Tsongas to reorder his priorities.

He decided that what he wanted most in life -- what he would not give up if he could not have everything he wanted, was being with his family – specifically, watching his kids grow up. He would rather do that than shape his country's laws, or go down in the history books.

After his decision, a friend wrote to congratulate him on having his priorities straight. The friend reminded him of the saying: "Nobody on his death bed ever said, 'I wish I had spent more time on my business.'"

Some called his disease a tragedy for his state. Tsongas came to see it as a personal gift;

It was Socrates who said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." Our lives cry out to be examined, and they cry out all the louder the more we go along. That seems to be the way our maker set it up.

Rabbi Harold Kushner once said that life is like receiving a pound of Jamaica Blue Mountain coffee beans at Christmas. I priced it this week and the stuff costs \$30.00 a pound for the cheap grade up to \$130 a pound for the premium.

Kushner says, at first you might drink it liberally; you make it for everyone you know who loves coffee, but after a little while you realize how fast it's going and begin to ration it. You stretch it; you savor it, down to the last bean in the bag.

So it is with life; when we are young it seems like it will last forever. We can't imagine anything else. We eat whatever we want, and in any amount. We take entry-level jobs that pay next to nothing. We spend time with people we have no intention of marrying. That's perfectly natural; we are just getting a foothold in the world.

But one day we begin to wonder if maybe more time has passed than is ahead for us. That can be a wake up call. We become pickier about what we do and about who we do it with. We become careful about what we buy. We quit asking the young person's question, "How high will I rise, how far will I get? "

We begin to ask, "What will I have accomplished when it is all over?" "What difference will it be whether I was here or not?"

Now, I know that sounds a little dramatic. Let me put it in a more pragmatic context by quoting the author, Mary Pipher, as I close. This is from a piece she wrote a couple of years ago called, *The Joy of Being a Woman in Her 70s*. Let me add that I think there is plenty here for men, too.

By our 70s, we've had decades to develop resilience. Many of us have learned that happiness is a skill and a choice. We don't need to look at our horoscopes to know how our day will go. We know how to create a good day.

We have learned to look every day for humor, love and beauty. We've acquired an aptitude for appreciating life. Gratitude is not a virtue but a survival skill, and our capacity for it grows with our suffering. That is why it is the least privileged, not the most, who excel in appreciating the smallest of offerings.

Many women flourish as we learn how to make everything workable. Yes, everything. As we walk out of a friend's funeral, we can smell wood smoke in the air and taste snowflakes on our tongues.

Our happiness is built by attitude and intention. Attitude is not everything, but it's almost everything. I visited the jazz great Jane Jarvis when she was old, crippled and living in a tiny apartment with a window facing a brick wall. I asked if she was happy and she replied, "I have everything I need to be happy right between my ears."

We may not have control, but we have choices. With intention and focused attention, we can always find a forward path. We discover what we are looking for. If we look for evidence of love in the universe, we will find it. If we seek beauty, it will spill into our lives any moment we wish. If we search for events to appreciate, we discover them to be abundant.

There is an amazing calculus in old age. As much is taken away, we find more to love and appreciate. We experience bliss on a regular basis. As one friend said: "When I was young I needed sexual ecstasy or a hike to the top of a mountain to experience bliss. Now I can feel it when I look at a caterpillar on my garden path."

Older women have learned the importance of reasonable expectations. We know that all our desires will not be fulfilled, that the world isn't organized around pleasing us and that others, especially our children, are not waiting for our opinions and judgments.

*We know that the joys and sorrows of life are as mixed together as salt and water in the sea. We don't expect perfection or even relief from suffering. A good book, a piece of homemade pie or a call from a friend can make us happy. As my aunt Grace, who lived in the Ozarks, put it, "I get what I want, but I know **what** to want." ...*

By the time we are 70, we have all had more tragedy and more bliss in our lives than we could have foreseen. If we are wise, we realize that we are but one drop in the great river we call life and that it has been a miracle and a privilege to be alive.

Maybe it was Anna, not Simeon, who recognized something of the eternal in the tiny face of Jesus. Maybe she got what she wanted in life because she knew what was worth wanting.

Amen