

Christmas Day 2011

For some of us Christmas is just about over. We got up this morning. We put on the Christmas music. We plugged in the Christmas tree. We opened our presents. We've had our divinity, our chocolate fudge before breakfast. We ate our pancakes, our traditional Christmas coffee cake, or whatever. We reluctantly got dressed, or maybe we didn't, and we came to church. We're going to sing a few more carols and then it will be over. Except for the mess back home.

For most of us Christmas isn't like it used to be. I know exactly when Christmas stopped being a time of magic for me. I remember the year I was 11, coming down the stairs on Christmas morning and seeing the unwrapped presents, the ones that appeared in the middle of the night, arrayed around the Christmas tree. I could see a Barbie camper, a Barbie tent and a pool. And, I thought, how cool. Until I realized, to my dismay, that the presents weren't for me. They were for my

four-year-old sister.

I had to come to grips with the fact that I was growing up. I was getting too old for Barbie. I tried to hide my disappointment, my disillusionment. But I couldn't help but have this sinking feeling that I was getting too old for Christmas. All those years that I thumbed through the JC Penney catalog, marking the pages and turning down the corners: they were over. The wish lists I made that were impossibly long, the expectations that were impossibly high: they were unfulfilled. Even though I'd try to drag out the unwrapping as long as possible, holding on to the hope of getting everything I wanted, I never had the perfect Christmas, at least, not the kind that comes with ribbons, tags, boxes and bags.

I'd like to say that now that I'm all grown up, that I don't have any disappointments at Christmas. Oh, I don't care so much about the presents and what's inside them. I bought

most of them, anyway. But I'm afraid that a part of me still longs for perfection. And I suspect a part of you does, too.

This Christmas will be different, we say. This year, I won't sweat the small stuff, I won't overspend, I won't overeat. This year, the family will all be together. This year, everyone will get along. This year, no one will be in the hospital or in rehab or in divorce court. This year, my car will start, my house will be clean, my shopping will be done by Halloween. This year, things will be perfect.

When Advent begins each year, we have such great expectations. Only problem is that they're usually the wrong ones. Old Simeon had it right, but we hardly know who he was. Most Christmases go by and we don't mention him at all. We talk about shepherds, sheep, angels, donkeys, magi and Saviors. There are so many characters in this story that we seldom have time for Simeon, the old prophet who held the baby Jesus in his arms, when Mary and Joseph brought him to the temple for

the presentation when he was a month old. Christmas falls on a Sunday, so I guess this is the year to make the time. Simeon reminds me a little of me, a little of you. You know: getting older, longing for better days, looking for consolation, and waiting. Simeon had been waiting as long as some of you, perhaps longer.

But Simeon wasn't waiting for the perfect tree or the perfect gift, the perfect family, the perfect life. Simeon was going for the gold. He was waiting to see the salvation of God.

Simeon had something going for him. He had the Holy Spirit resting on him. God had promised him that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Picture it. The old man in the temple, waiting for God. And who shows up, but a month-old baby. You can just imagine Simeon's face lighting up. You can see him shuffling over to the parents, wanting to get a closer look at this new life, wanting a chance to hold this baby, because somehow in this baby there was hope, in this

little person, there was life, in this life there was salvation. In Jesus, the Messiah had come, God was near. And Simeon didn't have to wait any longer.

Or did he? Come on, now. Simeon was looking at a baby. We call that baby Emmanuel, God with us. But that baby still had to escape to Egypt, return to Nazareth, grow up, and get wisdom. That baby had to be baptized in the River Jordan by John, had to be tested in the wilderness, had to call his disciples, had to heal and teach the people, had to rouse the religious authorities, had to become a threat to the political order, had to carry a cross to Calvary, had to die and lie in the tomb for three days, had to appear to the women, to Peter, to the apostles, had to pass on the Holy Spirit—all this before any of the rest of us could see the salvation of God!

Simeon might have been old, but his eyesight must have been far better than ours, because he didn't see a baby, he saw God's promise of salvation. He didn't see the fulfillment of

that promise, but he saw its future. And that, my friends, is one of the very best graces of aging. As our eyesight begins to fail us, our insight strengthens and deepens. As our bodies burden us more and more, our spirits start to set us free.

Simeon knew this, and so he said: “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace.” Now these are the words that were used when a slave was set free. Simeon was set free, set free from waiting, set free from disease and pain, sin and death, set free for life. “My eyes have seen your salvation,” he said. And so can we, when the former things have passed away, youthful strivings have ceased, when the middle-aged anxieties begin to fade, when old regrets are forgotten, and old hurts forgiven. Because only after clearing away all these lesser distractions of our inner life, do our souls come of age.

No matter our age, we are all a year older this year. And we, like Simeon, go for the gold this Christmas morning. We don't care about the gifts under the tree. We have bigger

expectations. But we are wiser now, and we know that gifts come in strange packages. We know that oftentimes, they will need time, even our whole life-time, to grow on us, to grow in us. Like Simeon, we have learned to see the tree in the seed, the flower in the bulb, and the savior in a manger. And so, we keep our great expectations for this Christmas, but they are different now. This year, the rulers will be righteous. This year, the nations will do justice. This year, the poor will have plenty. This year, the children will have hope. This year, all people will live in peace. Because this year, Christ will come again.

Only if the Holy Spirit rests upon us, can we believe this. Only when we have lived long enough, suffered patiently enough, loved unconditionally enough, grown wise enough, can we see what Simeon could see. All appearances to the contrary, Christ is coming and is always coming. God didn't wait for the perfect Christmas. Why should we? So let's end this season the way we began it, with Madeleine L'Engle's wonderful poem:

God did not wait till the world was ready,
till...nations were at peace.
God came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.
God did not wait for the perfect time.
God came when the need was great.
God dined with sinners in all their grim,
turned water into wine.
God did not wait till hearts were pure.
In joy God came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
God came,
and God's Light would not go out.
God came to a world which did not mesh
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.
We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
God came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!