

“THE DEEP FLAME OF EXPECTANCY”

He was 97 years old and the pianist for Sunday School. Although the tunes were sometimes a little slow, you could sing to his accompaniment. He was there every Sunday and most of the mid-week times as well. Some people were put off by him. Some would not go near him, but my husband, Dana, made friends with him quickly. He was always a respecter of age and the gentleman must have known that as he took Dana under his wing and gave him advice on occasion. The advice that Dana quoted many times was “people don’t throw rocks at trees that are not bearing fruit.” Think about that for a moment. In his own way, he was affirming what the young preacher was doing even though there might have been some who were critical. What a gift that was – it served Dana well in his ministry. I can still remember his stature, his nimble hands, his curious smile and his furrowed brow. He must have made an impression on me as well.

She was ahead of her time, but was one of the original Green Team members, I think. She gathered plastic wear, sterilized it and re-used it all the time. A woman very knowledgeable about the community and well read – she had a lot to share but not many would listen.

She had been a child of the before-depression years – a child who in her middle and late years, came to an enlightened (for her) understanding of peace and justice. By the time I met her in her very late years, she was beginning to give – in to some of her fears. They took strange forms – little men in tunnels under her house made noise and kept her up all night. Therefore, she hardly ever realized what time it was and would call sometimes at 3:00 in the morning to share something she had been reading that she thought I’d like to hear. Normally I would have received it well, but that mid-early-morning hour caught me off guard more than once. But she supported everything her local congregation did for outreach and helped to keep us focused as a regional CWF on what was important to outreach as well. I look back now and am grateful.

I learned a lot through direct and indirect experience with each of these people. Sadly, I don't think I ever thanked them. So today, I want to thank them for their love and dedication to the church and their many kindnesses shared with me. I'm hopeful that in that great cloud of witnesses someone will hear my gratitude and share it with them.

I don't know that I'm so different from others who come to church, see people every week, say hello, maybe even learn something in observation – but we never take the time to further that relationship. That's the way our world is. We're too busy, too tired, too frustrated, too concerned with self to reach the outside people in our sphere of influence. Have you ever wondered how different your life might be if you did?

The lives of Mary and Joseph were changed by their brief, yet meaningful encounter with two people who were considered prophet and prophetess in the temple. They were always at the church. People really didn't even know how old Anna was – she had just always been there at least in the memory of those now at the temple. But she took the risk to go and talk to that young couple with the baby. She found a satisfaction in that as she spoke about those looking for redemption in Jerusalem. Joseph and Mary were amazed and bewildered, but I think maybe appreciative that someone took the time to comment to them about their baby. It was a hint of things to come; a second phase in understanding just how their baby was going to change the world.

Simeon also found something of a completion when he saw the baby. His statement was bewildering but again made the young couple understand that others were noticing the gift of their child. He spoke of those who had been looking for the consolation of Israel. Both of these statements referred to an Isaiah prophecy that promises final salvation for God's people.

Anna and Simeon are examples of regular people who are very religious and faithful; people who have done nothing particularly extraordinary but people who have the "flame of expectancy" burning in them. For most of their lives, Anna and Simeon had lived expecting the savior. They had been faithful in their religious practice both inside and outside the walls of the temple. Now the savior

had been born and they recognized it. They each went to the couple and shared their wisdom. What a gift, people at their church understood the importance of the ceremony of dedication and knew what it was going to mean for the child and Mary and Joseph. They also knew the church because they had been around for a while and they understood things and implications that others might not even pick up on.

Why is this brief story of the temple visit of devoutly religious people meaningful to us today? Because it gives us a shining example of people who have “the deep flame of expectancy” alive in their hearts. Look around you and in your own heart – do you see it? Do you feel it?

This congregation is gifted with shining examples of that flame. It’s just that you and I may not realize it because we haven’t given ourselves the opportunity.

There are faithful people in this congregation who know the church. They understand things and implications that others might not even pick up on. They live desiring the influence of the spirit to be felt in this congregation, our community and the world. And they live looking for a sense of wholeness that they hope to find in their service to the church. The trouble is too often they may think or even say..... “I’ve done my thing in the church, it’s time for those younger people to step up and take responsibility”. And at Crestwood, that happens. We have a fine rotation in leadership and there are “younger” people who are skilled and committed leaders who say yes and give of their time, talent and resources. So, that’s not the issue – the issue is what happens to the dedication, commitment and flame of expectancy of those who step aside. In the months and years to come, I hope to help us examine that issue. I want us to set up opportunities for everyone to be able to serve – no matter their age, mobility or ability to get into the church building. The facts are – those in the nursing homes, their own homes or other living facilities still have much to give – much to share as the flame glows in their lives as do others who are in their “retiring” years. There is a new conversation going on in our General Church through the former Board of Church extension, now Hope Partnership. This new

emphasis provides opportunities for people advancing in age to come together to talk and encourage one another in how they might live out their faith in this third phase of their lives. The goals for these introductory conversations are: 1) To begin listening for our individual song in the absence of whatever identity defined us for so long(our jobs, another life situation like parenting or caregiving). 2) To hear our songs by welcoming the divine Stranger who is within ourselves and others and 3) To taste the abundant life that is possible through the nourishment of a new way of being.

In the next few months, there will be more publicity about this opportunity for us to join the conversation that the General Church is offering. I hope you will watch for that opportunity. I hope that you will find that even hearing about it begins to fan that “flame of expectancy”.

Why? In the words of David Watermulder... “ Because..... Such is the magnitude of Christ that his life and sacrifice capture the whole essence of life for us.” The whole essence of life. Who would have thought – “in this sophisticated age of gimmickry and technology, of science that takes us to the worlds of outer space and psychology that proves worlds within us, of urbane people who look at monstrous atrocities on television, and of leaders who hold within their grasp enough expertise to change the course of history or to stop it altogether – that in such an advanced age, the most startling, promising, earth-shaking event still focuses on the redemptive suffering that God poured out in Christ?”

We think that because we believe and together we need to find new ways for the whole church from children to those advanced in age to experience over and over the deep flame of expectancy. It is the whole essence of life. Anna and Simeon spoke to a young devout couple who had come to go through the ritual that had caused them to bring their son to be dedicated. Today, I speak to you who have come to fulfill this ritual of your faith. As we gather around the table together, let us ponder what that deep flame of expectancy holds for our lives. Will it be playing the piano at age 97 or leading by example in a trend which will save the planet for our grandchildren or living into what is a new understanding of peace and justice? OR?????????????.....

