

**“In Praise of Slowness”**

**Luke 2.22–40**

**The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 1 January 2006**

Late last week, I received an email from the *Rocky Mountain Bullhorn* saying that they were collecting new year’s resolutions from community leaders, and they asked if I’d participate. Frankly, I’m not big on new year’s resolutions, because I find them too easy to abandon. But, I did write back to the editor with an *intention* – not a resolution, mind you!

And it has something to do with the lectionary text this Christmastide morning as well. This song of Simeon is a canticle often referred to as the *Nunc Dimittis*, and it’s been set to music by many composers. It’s really kind of an oddity that Simeon, in old age, would be led by the Spirit to the temple. He had been waiting patiently for a very long time for “the consolation of Israel,” a time of comforting after a time of affliction. It isn’t an accident that it’s two older people who have the patience to wait, to observe, to understand, and to act.

Before I went to divinity school, I was a lay Caring Minister at First Congregational UCC in Boulder, and it was a formative experience for me. For several years, I was paired with an extraordinary elderly man named Roy Brammell. Roy was the founding dean of the School of Education at the University of Connecticut, of all places. He was in his 90s, and his wife had died, and I spent time with him, working through some of his grief, but mostly listening, talking, and developing a relationship. One of the gifts of that relationship was teaching an energetic 30-something how to slow down and match the pace of a 90-something. It was a real awakening to know that every week or two, I would be called upon to just slow down and show up. That was a tremendously important relationship for me, one that led to me doing what I’m doing right now.

What would you miss if you went through life living at a *prestissimo* tempo, rather than *andante*? What are you able to see when you’re barreling down I-25 at 80 miles an hour, as compared to what you can observe when you’re walking along the Spring Creek trail or hiking up to Arthur’s Rock? Most of us really do live our lives at a breakneck pace, and it shows up in our physical, mental, and spiritual health.

One of the best books I read in 2005 is called *In Praise of Slowness: Challenging the Cult of Speed* by Canadian journalist Carl Honoré. Announcing that a “slow revolution is taking place,” he documents slow movements in urban design, in raising unhurried children, and in the way the cult of speed affects our physical and mental health. Honoré writes at length about the slow food movement, which encourages people to prepare a nice meal and share it with friends and family, enjoying conversation and companionship.

So, back to my new year’s intention. This is what I wrote to the *Bullhorn*: “One of my intentions for the new year is to slow down the pace of my life so that I can enjoy my relationship with my family and be more present with them, others, and with God.” I don’t know if this is true for you, but it’s just too easy for me to fall into the trap of thinking I can get it all done...now, and if I don’t then I must be doing something wrong. And then I begin to accelerate my pace until everything seems urgent. Sometimes it’s right and appropriate to rush, but at times it results in me being less present to God, to myself, and to others than is desirable.

Henri Nouwen wrote in a letter to his nephew, Marc, “If I were to let my life be taken over by what is urgent, I might very well never get around to what is essential. It’s so easy to spend your whole time being preoccupied with urgent matters and never starting to

live, really to live.”<sup>1</sup> When do you let your life get taken over by the urgent, neglecting what is truly essential?

If we take time to observe, to be present, to be aware, to be at peace, then we will begin to notice essential things that might otherwise escape us. If Simeon were chatting on his cell phone, checking his Palm Pilot for his next appointment, and reading a string of emails, he might not have noticed that he was being led by the Spirit to go to the Temple, where Anna also understood through waiting that Jesus was the fulfillment of prophecy. The waiting of Advent has given way to the fulfillment of Christmas.



The scene at the Temple really places Jesus squarely in the context of first-century Judaism. If anyone doubts the Jewishness of Jesus, I’d suggest reading the second chapter of Luke thoroughly. But, then there is a twist.

Simeon prophesies that not only is Jesus to be a glory to Israel, but also a light of revelation to the Gentiles. In other words, God’s salvation that had come to the chosen people, was now being extended beyond the ethnic bounds of one particular people to include all of us.

Think about that for a minute... What if non-Jews had never heard about Jesus? Those of you who have Mediterranean heritage might be worshipping Zeus and Hera; people of African heritage might practice a form of animism; Asian-Americans among us might be Buddhist; and I might be worshipping trees or Thor. But, Christianity did spread beyond its Jewish roots. It spread through the Jewish diaspora into Europe and northern Africa, and after centuries of persecution it was then co-opted by the Roman Empire. With over a billion adherents, Christianity is the world’s largest religion. So, there you have it: Jesus is a light to the Gentiles.

How does that light shine for you? How does that light emanate and shine *through* you? When was the last time you looked deeply at yourself to see the divine spark, the light of Christ within you? It takes patience, time, and slowing down in order to notice the small things, the essential things that happen within our lives.

In this new year, may you have moments of slowness and silence. May you spend time with those you love. May you see the Christ-light within you and among others. May you see the essential, not simply the urgent. And may you know deep peace.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Letters to Marc about Jesus*. (SF: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p.1.