

What's new?

Luke 2:22-40

January 1, 2012

“So, what's new?”

Don't you just hate that question? Or maybe you don't. Maybe you're good at the art of making meaningless conversation!

“So, what's new?”

“Oh, not much. What's new with you?”

“Not much.”

And then the real conversation starts, if there's going to be any real conversation.

But me, I'm too much of a literalist. I take the question at face value. When somebody asks me, “What's new?,” I have to think about it, really think about it! What is new? I hate that question, because, most of the time, I can't think of anything terribly interesting or meaningful to say.

Because, most of the time, not much is new. Certainly everything is new. Every day is a new day. Every moment is a new moment. But even though this day may indeed be new, it's usually very much like the day it follows and like the day before that and the day before that.

Day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year, I face pretty much the same set of responsibilities and tasks, the same frustrations and the same disappointments, the same things that bring me some measure of satisfaction and pleasure, and the same things that trouble my spirit and haunt my prayers. What's new? Not much.

There are wars -- wars in Afghanistan and Syria and Somalia -- but there are always wars. Human beings, bad and good alike, always seem to find reason to resort to violence to accomplish their objectives.

There is poverty, but there is always poverty. There is a great divide, a growing divide, an inexcusable divide between rich people and poor people, not just in third world countries, but in first world countries, too, but there is little ability or will to do anything about it, because the poor lack the ability to do anything about it and the rich lack the will to do anything about it as long as they're rich.

There is sin, but there is always sin. In spite of our best intentions, in spite of our most sincere resolutions, we continue to be pushed around, and push other people around, out of greed or pride or selfishness or envy or loneliness or fear. So, what's new? Not much.

Do you really think anything will be new and different in the year ahead? Do you really think there will be an end to war or an end to poverty or an end to sin? We will elect a new president, but whether we reelect the present one or elect a different one, will the way things work or the way things are, really change? Do you really think anything will be new for you in the year ahead? Do you really expect any breakthroughs in a long-distant relationship, any release from constant worries about making ends meet, any experience of God calling you to new way of being?

What's new? Not much.

Simeon and Anna could have answered that way. Anna had been going to the Temple, fasting and praying, day after day, night after night, for who knows how long. Decades? Forty, fifty, sixty years?

For Anna and for Simeon and for all the Jewish people, life was pretty much the same, year after year and generation after generation. They were waiting, still waiting, for God to come and set them free. Waiting, still waiting for God to come and restore their dignity. Waiting, still waiting for God to come and bring peace to the land.

They were waiting, still waiting for something new. But, in the meanwhile, over the course of their own now long lives and over the course of the lives of their fathers and mothers and their grandparents and their grandparents' grandparents, little had changed, nothing was new. But, to their credit, they were waiting, still waiting; praying, still praying; hoping, still hoping. And hoping and praying and waiting are the emblems of a genuine faith.

And then, they were waiting no more ...

Simeon took the child, the child Jesus, in his arms and gave thanks to God:

*Now, Lord, you have kept your promise,
and you may let your servant go in peace ...*

Now! Today! In this moment! On this day, in this moment, something is new!

What was new? Light. With his own eyes, Simeon saw light. In the face, in the eyes, in the being of the baby he held in his arms, Simeon saw the light God sent into the world, the light God sent into the world for the sake of all peoples, the light that would show the way, God's way, to the Gentiles, and bring glory to Israel.

This light would show God's way, the way to life, to way to freedom, the way to peace, to all people.

And this light would bring glory to Israel, not the glory of being better and greater than all other people, than all other nations, but the glory that from Israel, from humble Israel, from humbled Israel, from a nondescript town in Israel, from a peasant woman in Israel, came God's salvation for all peoples, God's salvation for all humanity.

*Now, Lord, you have kept your promise,
and you may let your servant go in peace ...*

It's a wonderful declaration, a powerful witness to the fullness of what is new. Now Simeon can let go. Now Simeon can take his leave. The waiting is over. God's promise has been kept.

But it's more than that. The language Simeon uses is of master and slave. "Now, you, my master, are releasing your slave, setting your slave free ... into peace! Into shalom!"

But, remember, too, when Jewish people speak of the "servant of God" or the "slave of the divine master," they are speaking of more than a single individual. They are speaking of their people as a whole, the people of Israel as a collective unit. So Simeon is not merely saying: "Thanks, God, for keeping your promise to me, for letting me see your promised Messiah. You can let me go now. Now I'm ready to die."

No, Simeon is saying: "Thank you, God, for keeping your promise, now, to all your people! Thank you for releasing us from our captivity! Thank you for setting us free! Thank you for leading us, now, into your peace!"

What's new? Everything! Everything is new because the light has come. Everything is new because the light shines in the darkness.

What's new for us? Everything, because the light has come. We aren't waiting. The light has come. The light has come; the light is shining in the darkness.

There is still darkness. There is still darkness everywhere we look. There is darkness in our world, the darkness of violence and ignorance and prejudice and apathy. There is darkness in our own souls, the darkness of doubt and fear and selfishness and carelessness. But the light shines in the darkness and the darkness will never put it out!

The light shines in the darkness! "With my own eyes I have seen it," Simeon testified. Do you see it? Do you see the light that shines in the darkness? Do you see Jesus?

That's our job -- to testify to the light we see. Our job is to see the light, to follow the light, to walk in the light, to witness to the light, to reflect the light, to bear the light into the world. The light of Jesus is born in us. The light of Jesus is borne by us.

When we are light-bearers, when we are truth-tellers, when we are peace-makers, we prove the truth of Simeon's exclamation:

*Now, Lord, you have kept your promise,
and you may let your servant go in peace ...*

Now, Lord, you may let your servants live in peace. Now, Lord, things do not have to remain as they always have been. Things do not have to be done as they have always been done. Now, Lord, all things can be made new. Now, Lord, all things are being made new!

So ... what's new?