

Recognizing God

Epiphany 5 (A)

Written by Barbara Toman

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"For these eyes of mine have seen the Savior, whom you have prepared for all the world to see. A light to enlighten the nations/And the glory of your people Israel."

The canticle we read this morning, "The Song of Simeon," is especially appropriate this Sunday. The words come from a short passage in Luke's Gospel. The story takes place 40 days after Jesus's birth, when Mary and Joseph — following Jewish law — take their infant son to be presented in the Temple. The church observes the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus — which is also called "Candlemas" — on Feb. 2: forty days after Christmas. So Candlemas was last Thursday.

Luke's Gospel tells us that Simeon was a devout man on whom the Holy Spirit rested. And the Spirit had revealed to him that he would not see death until he had seen the Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon goes to the Temple on the same day that Mary and Joseph arrive with Jesus.

When Simeon sees the infant Jesus, he realizes that he is seeing the Messiah. He is seeing Emmanuel, God with us. He is seeing God. And Simeon takes God into his arms and offers the hymn of praise we read today.

Simeon recognizes God, as an infant nestled in his mother's arms. The question I'd like us to ponder today is, how do *we* recognize God? We read, we pray, that God is in us and all around us. But how do we recognize God?

We each have our own lenses. I see God mostly powerfully in the faces of the guests I serve at the Landing. If you're not familiar with the Landing, it's a day shelter for unhoused people in Rochester. It was founded several years ago with the idea that "everybody needs a soft place to land." It's where people can find respite from the elements, can eat food, take a shower and do laundry, get basic medical care. Our own Casey Caldwell is the medical director, and other Calvary members volunteer there. And of course, we have a box in Brackenridge Hall for donations to the Landing.

I can't explain why I decided to volunteer at the Landing, why I had the epiphany awhile back that I absolutely needed to do so. I know that the feeling was with me for months and that I couldn't be settled in mind or spirit until I did. I know that I was drawn to the Landing's approach of meeting people where they're at, without judgment. I know that home and hearth have always been very important to me and somehow, in some way, I needed to share that feeling with others.

So, on a cold day in January last year, I went. I found myself, in the Landing's previous location — the old Silver Lake Fire Station — in an enormous room, with a television blaring on the wall. There were people, mostly men but a few women, walking around or sitting at long tables. Some of the tables had heaps of blankets on top of them or under them. After a while, I realized there were people under those blankets, sleeping.

My job was to work the snack stand — which took me right back to the high school football games of my youth. The first thing I learned was that we refer to the people as guests — because that's what they are. Our guests. And, as I looked into the face of the very first guest I served, I knew — I just knew — that I

was looking at Jesus. I looked into his eyes, I smiled and said, "Hi. What can I get for you?" And suddenly, I was looking at Jesus.

And not just then. It happened, over and over, every time I poured a cup of coffee or handed out a granola bar or made a bowl of Cheerios with milk. Jesus was there, in the eyes of every person I served. I was seeing God in that place. I still do. And that's what keeps me going back.

I'll be honest. It's easier to recognize God in some guests more than others. There's the man who, I'm sure due to some disorder, rejects a glass of milk if it isn't poured just so, and demands another. With several napkins. Just so.

But last winter, there was also a man who sat at a table staring vacantly at the television. I have never seen such sadness as I saw in his eyes. What had brought him to this place in life? He would sit without moving, except when he quietly approached the snack bar. I knew he wanted a cup of coffee, four sugars and two creams. If I got confused — as I would all too easily, if someone switched the coffee and the hot water urns — and I poured him a cup of hot water by mistake, I would say, "Argh! Not again! What is *wrong* with me?" For just a moment, the sadness in his eyes would float away, and he would give me a tiny smile.

When I started volunteering at the new shelter location, I didn't see this man at first. I was worried about him. But just last Monday, I realized that the man who was asking me for a granola bar and some fruit snacks was that man. He looks better. More alive, somehow.

Homelessness is, of course, complex — tied up in issues of mental health, addiction, housing costs, racism. I know I can't fix the problem. And that is strangely liberating, on a personal level. As a volunteer, I don't have to solve the problem. All I have to do, all I *can* do, is serve. And know that God is present, with a love more powerful than anything I can summon.

Seeing God changes us. In this morning's first lesson, God reveals to the prophet Isaiah that, when we live into God's vision for us — when we share bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into our houses — "then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly."

Likewise, in today's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that they are the light of the world and that they should let their light shine before others. We are all of us called to this work: to let that light, our light, God's light, shine before others.

And to seek God's presence in every face we meet. It gets easier over time. Slowing down, paying attention to those tugs on our hearts and our minds — help us to recognize God's presence in all people and in all creation.

Simeon longed to see God. May we recognize and honor that holy longing within ourselves — that sacred emptiness inside us that cries out for connection with the God who creates, redeems and sustains. May the light of God break forth like the dawn and shine before all the world. Amen.

--Barbara Toman