

**Light on Aging II ~ Anna Wisdom**  
Reflection on Luke 2:36-38 & Proverbs 9:1-12  
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Trinity United Ottawa  
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Do you remember Anna? We meet this old woman of golden wisdom just once, briefly, in Luke. She is the only woman in the Gospels who is called ‘Prophet.’ This 84 year old widow, who spends her days and nights in prayer in the Temple, is the first to identify the baby Jesus as Israel’s liberator. She could see beyond the traditional expectation that the Messiah would come clothed in outward power. She perceives the momentous eternal significance of one particular moment in time. She proclaims what only her wise old eyes can see - the hope God gives in this babe.

Listen to this reading of Luke 2:36-38 from Woman Word...

Do you know Sophia? She is the voice of the Holy Spirit as Wisdom throughout the Older Testament. She shares her sage advice in Proverbs, inviting us to taste wisdom. Are we old enough to sit down and digest it?

Hear what Sophia offers, in this reading of Proverbs 9:1-12 from The Message...

In Anna, as in other elderly biblical figures, we link old age to Wisdom, that Gift of the Holy Spirit personified by the voice of Sophia in Proverbs, inviting us hospitably to dinner, so that we might consume her words of sage advice, and satisfy our confusion about life.

But what is wisdom, really? An ability to see and say what others do not yet see. Knowledge and advice that is born of experience and reflection on life. Perspective, aged like fine wine over much time, that sheds light on the path ahead that others may see and follow. The poet Joubert says: “the evening of a well spent life brings its lamps with it.” Solomon says: “The wise know the things of old and infer the things to come.”

In “One Foot in Eden: A Celtic View of the Stages of Life” Philip Newell writes about how aging offers us spiritual opportunities to grow in wisdom. He notes that Anna was released by widowhood and age from the responsibilities and active tasks expected of a wife. Freed to find her vocation in prayer. Allowed in her old age to spend swaths of her time in stillness and reflection. So she learned to see deeply - “to glimpse the presence of the invisible in the midst of the visible.”

Our eyes are rarely opened to Wisdom’s insight when we are moving at high speed. If wisdom strikes when life is speeding by, it is usually to bring us to an abrupt halt. In all religions and cultures, spiritual sight is associated with stillness, silence, Sabbath time and practised prayer or meditation. Wise learning requires that we stop and reflect - asking ourselves and each other questions about the meaning of life’s events, before we mindlessly repeat or pass on unwise patterns. Wisdom seems to keep company with a contemplative pace of life, that is rarely encouraged today, but to the elderly. I think we need a bumper sticker that reads: ‘Slow down and see God. Speed up and you’ll see God too soon!’

It is the mixed blessing of age that usually forces us to slow down. Lessening physical mobility - and even declining mental agility - makes us gear down until we focus on today, and the present moment. Deprived of many of the activities and responsibilities that overflowed our daylight hours with action and planning, aging humans are eventually confronted with ‘all the time in the world’ to sit empty before God. And thus perhaps to be filled with Wisdom, by the grace of God.

Throughout our lives, wisdom is always inviting us to a banquet of sagacity. But how often do we want to listen to the wise advice of experience - our own or others’? Why would we fit that old lady into our busy schedule? Check your calendar or your Blackberry: where does it say ‘Stop & pray’ or ‘Listen & reflect’ or ‘Enjoy and give thanks’? Maybe not till you scroll ahead several years to retirement? It’s often only when we let go of the busy responsibilities and self importance of the middle years, says Newell, that we are released to *be* again, rather than feeling we

always have to be *doing*.

In slowing down for age, there can be release and restfulness, a rediscovery of playfulness, and a willingness to laugh again, at ourselves and life. Newell quotes Ecclesiastes. “Whoever loves wisdom loves life.” Doesn’t it take age to stop us from taking ourselves too seriously? To hone our ability to laugh off our aches and pains, our petty personal struggles and practical preoccupations?

I was sitting with Ted W. the other day. His spiritual insight, honed by near blindness and the complications of diabetes, is not to let negatives into his vocabulary. “I’ve got a bad toe. But I’ve got a toe... My dialysis is no fun. I get all bruised up. But I roll with the punches. Otherwise, you’d be doing my funeral. And I’m not gonna let you do that!” he laughs.

Joan M. with an attitude practised over a lifetime of giving thanks in prayer, seems to have superceded the sadness of her dementia with a storehouse of happy memories. Her crinkly eyes smile when she tells me “I’m happy with my memories. There have been so many good times!” Knowing that her life has included some sad and difficult struggles, I ask about the bad times. Her wise response: “Oh, I don’t think about those!”

That’s wisdom for all of us who may know the bones of our guilt and regrets or work over the gristle of our worries too often. With practise and prayer, we can choose what we think about - training our still-plastic brains to feed regularly on the memories that are nourishing and sweet.

Flo T., sitting pretty at 101 in her comfortable Seniors residence, offers others her lived and learned wisdom. “I try to tell them around here: ‘You don’t have to get old...You can just enjoy every day.’” Which she does...including lots of lovely naps. - Don’t wait till you’re old to get enough rest. Wisdom so often comes to feed our dreams with creativity, when we slow down and sleep.

Each time I watch that NFB film, 'Company of Strangers' I notice that it almost puts me to sleep. I feel frustrated at first by the real life elderly pace of the movie. The camera only moves as fast as the oldest lady can go. There is not a lot of action. But then I start to drink in the beautiful scenery and I don't want the scene to change. I find myself enjoying the thoughtful silences that open up into ordinary, real, wisdom-filled conversations - quite like meditation opens into the voice of God. It takes time. We can't hurry revelation or wisdom. So it's when we grow old and get to slow down, that we really reap the golden harvest. When we younger folks get to spend time with the elders, we discover how good it is to sit down at the Wisdom Banquet of the well-aged. - It's enough to make us look forward to growing sage.

I like the wisdom words of the spiritual poet Tagore:

"I have scaled the peak and found no shelter in fame's bleak and barren height.  
Lead me, my Guide, before the light fades, into the valley of quiet  
where life's harvest mellows into golden wisdom."

and finally, from Walt Whitman:

"As life wanes, and the turbulent passions calm,  
then for the teeming, quietest, happiest days of all!"

# VU 506 Take My Life and Let it Be.