

Just after University, I read *Pillars of the Earth* by Ken Follett, which, among many others things outlines the building of a fictional gothic cathedral over a period of 30 years during a period of civil war in 12th century England.

I remember being taken with the idea that so many who were present at the beginning of the project would not live to see its completion.

It's not a major cathedral, and in fact there were some medieval, such as the Cathedral in Winchester England which was built from scratch in 20 years, but comparatively, this timeline is rather short.

Construction at Canterbury Cathedral lasted 343 years which several French cathedrals Amiens, Beauvais, Bourges, and Lyon, each lasted more than three centuries

For comparison's sake, it was on February 6, 1905, the Board of Metropolitan Methodist Church approved the purchase of lots 19-25 in Block No. 344, City of Regina (not to exceed \$4000.00). September 22, 1907 services of dedication were held.

A contemporary example might be Sagrada Família in Barcelona began on March 18, 1882, expected to be completed sometime in the 2030s.

Just before Christmas, I completed *Overstory* the Pulitzer prize winning novel by Richard Powers. This sweeping story of humans learning to see the world from the perspective of trees offers up a whole new perspective on timeline, speaking of the task of an American Chestnut taking 3 human generations to grow to a landmark size, or Forests that have developed their systems of interconnectivity over millennia.

The world's oldest recorded tree is a 9,550-year-old spruce in the Dalarna province of Sweden.

Pando (Latin for *I spread*) is a clonal colony of aspen in South Central Utah which is considered to be a single living organism, is likely around 14,000 years old, although some hypothesis it could be much much more!

There is a Limber Pine Tree on Whirlpool in Cline River Alberta which could be 1200+ years old.

Incidentally, the Popoff Tree, a Plains Cottonwood crossed with black or basalm polar, located in the North Saskatchewan River Valley is considered, at 160, to be the oldest tree in this Province.

In *Follow Me to Freedom* author Shane Claiborne discusses with long time civil rights activist John Perkins the timeline of community change. Perkins who lives and works in Jackson, Mississippi, estimated that after about 12 years of community development work in a particular neighbourhood, that then, positive change really begins to take root and grow!

Our Lectionary reading today, offers the story of Jesus being presented at the Temple in Jerusalem.

Jewish custom dictated that 40 days after a firstborn's birth, they would be taken to the Temple in Jerusalem (about 10km away). The parents would make an offering, a lamb if they could afford it, if not, which in the text seems to be the case for Mary and Joseph, a pair of pigeons, or two turtle doves.

Yes, that, not the turtle dove Christmas Ornaments that play a role in the rather touching final scene of *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York* is why they are included in the 12 days of Christmas.

While there, readers are introduced to two very compelling characters who get limited coverage in the average telling of the nativity.

Simeon, sometimes called *Theodochos*, which in Greek means *God-Receiver*, and Anna, the prophet!

Simeon, the story states has been told by the Spirit that he will not die until he beholds the chosen one of God, the Christ, the Messiah (remember please that the notion that Messiah is a singular figure is still centuries away when this text is written).

Anna the prophet is an elder in the community at 84 years old, fasting and praying in the temple, she too, comes to see the child and, like Simeon, cannot keep silent!

Incidentally, not keeping silent is the key phrase from our Hebrew reading, from the prophet Isaiah!

*For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,
until her vindication shines out like the dawn,
and her salvation like a burning torch.*

Anna and Simeon represent this interesting connection between hope and memory.

They play this important bridging role in the narrative, holding communal memory of their people.

Jesus' eventual public ministry is sewn through with exclamations from the Hebrew Prophets, both with direct references and quotes, but also with that intangible, but immediately recognizable element that Walter Brueggeman names as the prophetic imagination.

I wonder how you understand the connection between memory and hope.

I wonder how you understand the connection between memory and nostalgia.

I wonder what old promises are being made new today?

I think of the words of elders in the writings around TRC and Treaty Justice for whom memory and hope for the future have a dynamic interplay.

The same with civil rights icons in the US.

Bryan Stevenson, renowned lawyer and death-penalty abolitionist, and author of *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* describes being invited to meet Rosa Parks. She would regularly visit in Detroit with two friends, Ms Johnnie Carr, the driving force behind the Montgomery bus boycott, and Virginia Durr, whose late husband had been lawyer for both Parks and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Stevenson knew Carr who invited him to come along to one of these visits, with the proviso, that he just listen and absorb, which Stevenson was happy to do:

"Rosa Parks turned to me sweetly and asked, 'Now, Bryan, tell me who you are and what you're doing.'

I looked at Ms. Carr to see if I had permission to speak, and she smiled and nodded at me. I then gave Ms. Parks my rap.

'Yes, ma'am. Well, I have a law project called the Equal Justice Initiative, and we're trying to help people on death row. We're trying to stop the death penalty, actually. We're trying to do something about prison conditions and excessive punishment. We want to free people who've been wrongly convicted. We want to end unfair sentences in criminal cases and stop racial bias in criminal justice...

Ms. Parks leaned back smiling. 'Ooooh, honey, all that's going to make you tired, tired, tired.' We all laughed. I looked down, a little embarrassed.

Then Ms. Carr leaned forward and put her finger in my face and talked o me just like my grandmother used to talk to me.

She said, 'That's why you've got to be brave, brave, brave.'

All three women nodded in silent agreement.

The trees that create home for thousands of species over the course of many human lifetimes, the architects who begin working on buildings whose completion they will never see, Rosa Parks, and Ms Johnnie Carr, and of course Anna and Simeon, have me thinking about what it means to work for that which we may never see in culmination.

Elders speak of thinking seven generations away and acting accordingly.

I am intrigued by the ability to not slip into acquiescence and apathy.

Holding dreams that are so big that they won't be fully achieved in a lifetime, but not being resigned by the continuance of injustice.

Being instead so convinced of the need to work with faithfulness in the time given.

Salvadorean Archbishop Óscar Romero worked for justice in the face of institutional cruelty and died never seeing it fulfilled.

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for God's grace to enter.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

Advent is a season of longing.

A season of dreams in what could be but is not yet.

Christmas Day presents the danger of arrival.

The child is born and laid in a manger.

It seems like all is accomplished.

But the rest of Luke Chapter 2 point to something important.

Anna and Simeon remind that the child's arrival is the dawn of that which is hoped for,

Not its culmination

The great Christmas Carol *O Holy Night* which was written for the rededication of a church which had been renovated was soon banned for its revolutionary undertone (and for the fact that it was written by a French Jewish Socialist wine merchant).

When it was translated and brought to the US by a Unitarian Minister it became a rallying point for the Christian Abolitionist movement, especially in its third verse...

And in his name all oppression shall cease

Anna and Simeon keep our Advent weary eyes pointed to the horizon, committed to the immensity of work that may be seven generations out.

May hope and memory mingle to ignite your imagination

May the dangerous promise of Christmas encourage and motivate.

With gratitude of the Annas and Simeons of our world and communities

In the church and beyond

Those who dream will not keep silent.

Thanks be to God.