

“Unexplainable Longing”

The flutter of wings caught my eye a few days ago as I was looking out the kitchen window. And I certainly was grateful for its gift of beauty. It was Christmas Eve morning and I was frustrated that of all days, this was the day that the flu bug had descended. It didn't suit my plans – AT ALL. To be honest, I'm never very accepting or tolerant of not feeling well. I don't "do well" when I'm sick. Besides feeling physically crummy, I soon start in with ruminations about the purpose of my existence. I begin to question why anyone would love me anyway, especially when I face myself in the mirror looking pale and unkept...and what about all the undone projects that I know for certain that I'll *never, ever* feel well enough to face again? In other words...I'm not a good patient! I'm sobered by my morale-shaking response to a 2-3 day bug when I consider the very serious illnesses that so many of our friends and family members experience.

But the flutter of wings...pure white wings... On the farm we host many birds. We may not have a wide variety of birds, but we certainly have numbers! We have flocks of starlings that chatter in the trees and fly en masse from one rooftop to another. Sparrows are found all year round, picking at spilled kernels of grain. And of course, we have pigeons! On Christmas Eve, however, it was a different bird that flew across the barnyard and landed on -of all places - the roof of one of the cars- a strange landing for a good sized bird. At first, I thought it was a pigeon, but as it flew away the beat of its wings seemed different – more like that of a mourning dove...so I thought – wow, a beautiful white dove – just like from a Christmas card, the dove of peace...and I was grateful for this gift.

On Christmas Day, Martin and I were outside as the men readied for calf chores. (I was hoping that a little sunshine and fresh air would help the queasiness of my stomach...by this time I was really sure that I was of little value in the life of our family! Christmas Day and not able to fix or face food!) Again, the flutter of white wings caught my eye. Together, we watched this solitary bird fly circles over the barnyard. Martin noted that he had seen the bird sitting alone on the calf barn roof. At the same time, a flock of pigeons rose from the silos and flew toward the heifer barn. The white bird remained alone and settled down on the roof of the garage. We wondered about this bird. Had it been a dove that recently released from a recent wedding or some such function? My heart, while lifted by the bird's beauty, ached at what appeared to be its unease and uncertainty, its longing for something other than how things were.

Longing...it's one of my most beloved words. It's a beloved word, because I am so well acquainted with that which it describes. It is a sense of longing, of yearning that often accompanies me through my days. You might ask, a longing and yearning for what? I can answer best this way... as the white dove circling the barnyard, alone on the rooftop...an image as response for that which I'm not able to find words to share with you. Longing,

yearning...the way God comes to me, the way I've come to only understand in a small way that the Spirit of God stirs within me.

We've gathered on another stormy Sunday night for worship – the last Sunday of the year. I can't help but wonder if many of us may not be keenly aware of a sense of restlessness and longing in these strangely “in-between days.” We've been through a tumultuous holiday season – emotionally involved with a presidential election, a now declared recession and all the while Thanksgiving and Christmas preparations, at the same time attending to the memories and emotions which the holidays evoke.

Now, we stand at the cusp of the New Year 2009 with nothing to distract us from the uncertainties that lie ahead. Here we are...in the darkest, coldest (wettest) days of winter. We know those that have had the harshest of holidays – the loss of homes to financial struggle or to fire or flood. We stand alongside of loved ones for whom the festive gatherings pointed out again (or for the very first time) those whose earthly lives have ended. We share our lives with those who can't help but wonder if this was the last holiday season to celebrate. It's a season, a time, which we share –in our own spaces – all these thoughts and emotions. Individually and collectively, we're a bit off balance. Joining as a community gathered for worship allows us to pay attention to this “unexpected” gift of our holiday season – the recognition of what often seem the “unexplainable longings” of our lives.

This evening's Gospel text finds us already 40 days following Jesus' birth. Jesus had been circumcised and named, “on the 8th day.” Now, it's time for the ritual purification of Mary according to the Law of Moses. After bearing a male child a woman was considered “unclean” for 7 days followed by 33 days of blood purification. (If a daughter was born, the mother's time of purification was 66 days!) Also, Jesus was to be presented to the Lord as the firstborn son – “designated as holy to the Lord.”

Mary and Joseph and infant Jesus make their way to the temple – a place filled with activity, a hubbub of humanity. Unbeknownst to Joseph and Mary are two old people who on this same day are also making their way to the temple. We read first of Simeon - whom we generally assume to be an old man – even though we're simply told that it had been revealed to him that he wouldn't see death before he had seen the Lord's anointed. He was “looking forward to the consolation of Israel.” He was waiting, watching, longing...

And so it is that on this ordinary day- one, that had most likely started out like all the other days – that Simeon trusted the promptings of the Spirit and made his way to the temple. “Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple.” Imagine Simeon coming into these great halls and thinking, “now what?” Yet, “when the parents brought in the child Jesus...” Simeon *recognized* Jesus. Simeon recognized that which he had never

seen before...how could this be...?? **He recognized Jesus through the eyes of the deepest longings of his heart.**

And then we read of Anna, a widow woman for the greater part of her life. Her marriage had only lasted seven years – and then came the death of her husband. What yearnings and longings must have been part of her “everydays” in the following years? We’re told that she was a prophet – a prophet; one, I would suggest, who is aware of the world’s deepest longings. Anna spent her days in worship – fasting and prayer, yet “*at that moment she came,*” she came to where this particular young family was preparing their simple sacrifice of two young pigeons.

In the midst of all the activity, in the presence of all other distractions– Anna *recognized* Jesus – God with us...the true consolation of the “hopes and fears of all the years,” Anna came “at that moment” to help others “see” that God is with us. She began speaking about Jesus “to all who were looking.” She began speaking to all who were looking for the Presence who brings the Light of perfect Love to our greatest longings and most unexplainable yearnings. Simeon and Anna were drawn to Jesus. How were they able to do this? **They had been living in a spirit of expectation, aware of the longings of their hearts.**

It was many years ago that I learned a centering word from St. Augustine...a word that I forget all too frequently, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee, O Lord.” Restlessness and longing; they are interesting words to place alongside of one another. Restlessness speaks to me of agitation, of unrest, of dissatisfaction – it may be in part physical as well as emotional and spiritual. Restlessness is a great teacher if we pay attention. How true...IF I pay attention, it is when I’m most dissatisfied and restless that I discover that I’ve lost my center in the things of God and am wandering down paths of envy, mistrust... good old discontent. Restlessness, when held up in the light of Christ, for me, usually has its roots in that which is other than the ways of God. In contrast, longing is a deeper, strangely calming tug on the heart.

For me, this last week of the year brings some restlessness and an awareness of longing...and great yearning. A longing and yearning to be about that which is of the kingdom of God, a deep desire to more fully grasp the ways of Jesus...and to share in them, a desire to more fully invite the life of Jesus into the life that I live and know. When I tend to this deep yearning... restlessness strangely slips away.

- In this last week of 2008, think about the restless places of our hearts. Let’s remember that although this is the end of another year on the Roman calendar,

we've already stepped into the new church year – around which we truly order our lives!

- May we allow the Spirit to guide us to a place of our greatest longings.
- May we celebrate that like Simeon & Anna that we, too, have been given the gift of longing and yearning...so that we might recognize Jesus.
- What could it mean for us to present the “hopes and fears of all of *our* years” to Christ’s healing presence?
- We celebrate the Christ child – now born, now “from heaven to earth come down.” That which we long for, which we yearn for...what we always wanted... has come... GOD WITH US!

The best Christmas gift

By Carol Penner

Read by Bernie

Christ comes as a gift into your life,
but he doesn't come
wrapped in shiny paper and ribbons
and you can't say
"Isn't that nice,"
as you quickly slide him under the bed
or store him in a dark closet,
thinking that someday you'll find a place to put him.
Christ is a gift that you can't
pack away neatly in a box,
bringing him out for special holidays
like Christmas or Easter.
There isn't a place in the house
where you can put him and leave him;
this gift is always at your side.
The gift of Christ
is one of those noisy Christmas gifts,
whispering in the night,
crying out during the day at unexpected times.
"Do you love me?" he whispers.
"Feed my sheep!" he cries.
Where do you put this gift?
In your heart. In your mind. In your soul.
Pretty soon this gift
has taken over your life.
"I had no idea how time consuming this gift would be," you'll say,
and sometimes you'll wonder
about the "No return" policy.
But mostly, you will fall in love with the gift of Christ.

You will lose yourself in this gift.
You will find yourself in this gift.
About this gift you will say
from the deepest part of your soul,
"Thank you . . . this is just what I always wanted."

Carol Penner wrote this poem on Christmas Eve 2005. She is pastor of The First Mennonite Church, Vineland, Ont.