

God with Us in the New Year 2012

There are two things you do in life.

First, you build your life.

You build a container.

You form an identity.

You build a home, relationships, friends, community, security.

You create a platform for your life.

You gain your voice.

I am a husband, a father, a grandfather, a brother.

I am a friend.

I am a Christian.

I am a pastor.

I am a teacher.

I am a Rotarian.

I am a curler.

That is who I am.

Those are the roles that I have chosen to define my identity.

This is the container that I have spent the first half of my life building.

But I am not done living. There is more yet to do.

The second task of life is to fill the container.

I already have my roles. I don't really need new roles.

I need to fill my roles with depth, integrity, maturity.

In Paul's words, second-half-of-life wisdom is about "discerning the spirits".

It is about what qualities you want reflected in your life.

The first half of life is the "survival dance," the second half the "sacred dance."

I am not talking about upward mobility.

I am not talking about progress.

I am talking about depth, integrity, maturity.

Yes, I am a husband. I have been so for thirty years.

But what kind of husband am I going to be?

With what am I going to fill my husbanding container?

I want to be the kind of husband that is all about dependability.

I want my wife to be supremely confident that she can count on me.

I want my husbanding to be about the honest sharing of feelings, both positive and negative.

I want to be a husband who can both comfort and challenge my wife, and have the wisdom to know when to do which.

I want to be an equal partner in all aspects of life.

I want to be a husband who is invested.

That is what I'm trying to pour into my husbanding.

As a husband, I journey toward depth, integrity, maturity.

In your sacred dance, what are you pouring into your spousal work?

With what am I going to fill my friendships?

I have friends. I am a friend.

What kind of friend do I want to be?

I want to be a person who will help another at a moment's notice.

I want to be a friend with whom it is easy to talk and laugh and cry.

I want to be a friend who enjoys adventures and new experiences.

I want to be a person who highly values social time together.

I want others to spend time with me because I enjoy life.

I want to spend time with others because they are unique and special.

That's what I want to pour into my friendships.

With what are you seeking to fill your friendship container?

What kind of curler am I going to be?

I don't mean what kind of shots I can make, or not.

I mean, what values will be reflected in my identity as a curler?

I want to be about good sportsmanship.

I want the grace to receive good shots and bad shots in the same way.

I want to spend time drinking a cup of coffee before a game and a beer after.

I want to greet other curlers by name and initiate conversation with them.

I want others to see me as someone who laughs and enjoys the game.

That's what I'm trying to pour into my curling game.

Two tasks in life: to build and to fill.

To survive and to live in a godly way.

To form an identity and then to mold it along godly values.

To create your life and then to live it.

I'm suggesting, friends, that you spend the new year focused not on survival but on spiritual maturity.

You don't move that way on your own accord.

It's not purely a matter of free choice.

You are led by grace.

But when you walk that journey, you are called, you are chosen.

You have heard the deep invitation to "the something more" of life, and you set out to find it both by grace and daring.

Setting out is always a leap of faith, a risk in the deepest sense of the word, and a great adventure.

The new is always by definition unfamiliar and untested.

So God, life, destiny, suffering have to give us a push, usually a big one, or we often will not go.

Most of us are never told that we can set out from the known and familiar to take on a further journey.

In the first half of life, we have to build our lives, but then it is time for the something more.

Then it is time to fill the container of our lives.

The Scriptures are travel tips for the journey.

The Bible is God's roadside assistance program.

If you're ready for the next step, and be about more than survival, if you want depth and integrity and maturity to characterize your life, the Bible is the place to turn.

I love Simeon.

The old can see what the young cannot.

Here was a man firmly in the second task of life.

Here was a man of deep spiritual maturity.

He didn't need to make himself; he already knew who he was.

He was a man on a journey for the something more.

The way Luke tells it, Simeon was "righteous and devout."

He always tried to do the right thing.

He always tried to do the godly thing.

Luke says that he "looked forward to the consolation if Israel."

I think that means he wanted what the people of Israel hoped for, longed for:

A Messiah, a Savior.

That's what he poured into his life.
That's the spirit that animated his living.

In St. Luke's account, it is now forty days after Jesus' birth.
After eight days, Jesus had been circumcised and named in accordance with Jewish law.
Now, thirty-two days later, his parents are again performing their duty as pious Jews by returning to the Temple.
This time in order to offer a sacrifice and to consecrate their child to God.

They must have been in a solemn mood that day, full of reverence and expectancy, the way many young parents are in our congregation when their first child is to be baptized. It's not hard to imagine, therefore, the quiet procession they must have made to the great Temple, their awe at entering its holy courts, their nervousness as they prepared to sacrifice according to the law.

Simeon sees the young couple and the baby entering the Temple.
He knew in his heart that his prayers had been answered.
The Savior had now arrived.
So what does this old man do?
He takes the baby in his arms and sings a thanksgiving to God.
"Lord, now you let your servant go in peace; your word has been fulfilled. My own eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the sight of every people: a light to reveal you to the nations and the glory of your people Israel."

Simeon perceives, you see, that in the Christ-child God has kept God's promises. In this baby, God has acted once and for all to address the longing for life and spirit.

And so we continue singing Simeon's song, all these many years after the events St. Luke records, simply because it tells of God's great love for us, a love that even death cannot destroy. For, like Simeon, we also need to hear and see and touch and feel God's promise, the promise that God will be with us and for us forever, the promise announced in the birth of that innocent babe.

Put that in your stocking, brothers and sisters.

Fill your container of life with that truth, as you journey toward depth and wholeness, as you seek maturity, as you dance the sacred dance.

I wish for you and yours not simply a "merry" Christmas, but also a "blessed" one. A Christmas that is so infused by God's promise of presence and peace that you can leave worship to go out into the world with confidence, neither denying the harsh realities of this life nor being deterred by them, but rather facing whatever comes your way in the coming week and year with courage and hope.

"Lord, now you let your servant go in peace; your word has been fulfilled. My own eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the sight of every people: a light to reveal you to the nations and the glory of your people Israel."