

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from January 4, 2009

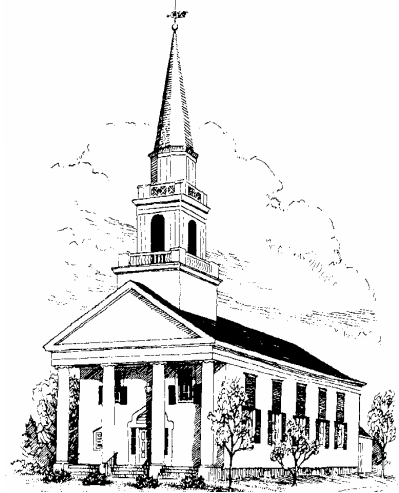
Rev. Ann M. Aaberg

“Short List”

Scriptures:

Psalm 148

Luke 2:22-40



Did you hear we're on the list? Mystic is on the list. Specifically, it's the Mystic Seaport that's on the list. The list of *1,000 Places to See Before You Die*—that list. My daughter loves to travel and, while in college, she was fortunate to spend a semester abroad in Rome and so saw a lot of Western Europe while she was there, probably several spots on that *1,000 Places* list. This past summer, she visited Sydney, Australia and, between the Opera House and the Sydney Harbor Bridge, she saw even more places on that list. Her boyfriend shares her travel bug now and is also a sports fan, so for Christmas we gave him a book with yet another list: *Ten Things all Sports Fans Should Do before They Die*.

This is the time of year when we come up with lists, new priorities for the new year, or maybe the same priorities we never seem to get around to from year to year. (I guess they're not really priorities then.) Well, I learned this week that a lot of people make their business out of compiling and publishing lists—specifically, lists of things to do or see or experience before you die. I found this out by searching book titles on Amazon.com with the key words “before you die” and it produced over 5,000 titles.

Some highlights for you: 1000 recordings to hear, 1000 movies to see, 1001 paintings to see, gardens you must see, foods you must taste, natural wonders you must see (1001 of them, too), books you must read (uh-oh, I'm in trouble), wines to taste, places to dive, walks to take, birds to see, historic sites, places you must skate, only 300 beers to try, here's one for some of you—places to sail, golf holes you must play, fish to catch (only 50 of those), islands to escape to... Oh, and 5 secrets you must discover before you die, 101 things to buy, and the one I find most intriguing: 101 things *not* to do before you die.

None of these compare with holding the Christ Child. Taking the baby Jesus in your arms from the arms of his parents and realizing who it is. Simeon of Jerusalem, a righteous and devout man, upon whom the Holy Spirit rested and to whom the Holy Spirit revealed that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah, takes Jesus in his arms and praising God, says, “Master, now I can die in peace. My eyes have seen your salvation.”

Most of you know by now that I was born and bred a Red Sox fan. Both of my parents listened to the games on the radio, watched them on TV, took us kids to Boston on vacation to

Fenway Park. But my Dad and any Red Sox fan who lived between 1918 and 2004 never saw their team win a World Series. Every September, at the end of the regular season, my Dad would say, “Well, maybe next year.” Along with the cheers and elation in that glorious October, there were many tears shed for the fathers and uncles and grandpas and grandmas and moms who missed it. I cried tears of nostalgia, too, but this morning, when I begin to take in the magnitude of Simeon’s experience in the temple, and what it meant in his life, all else becomes embarrassingly trivial.

Simeon and his people Israel had been waiting for the Messiah since Abraham. Our scripture says he was looking forward to the consolation of Israel. I wonder as the years went by for him and for Anna if they ever thought twice, ever doubted the promise of God.

We’ve been waiting a long time for Christ to return. At least, in our human terms, 2000 years is a long time. Although we know that Christ is with us—we in him and he in us—many spiritual writers point to an underlying yearning all humans carry around, an unidentifiable longing that we have. One author calls it “holy longing”—that thing that’s always missing in us when we are not in close relationship with God.

Now, many of us mistake that holy longing for all kinds of things. We try to quench it with excess food or shopping sprees or working too much. We try to fill ourselves up with what the advertisers promise, forgetting that we are *spiritual* beings located in physical bodies, in need of relationship with each other and with God.

And, although, there is absolutely nothing wrong with trying to live our God-given gifts of our human lives to the fullest, experiencing all God’s creation has to offer, from wondrous places to exotic foods, our culture seems to have placed on us some kind of have-it-all pressure that leaves us feeling inadequate, inexperienced and unfulfilled unless we’re out there constantly instead of in here. And knowing our time on this earth is limited, the pressure is even greater to accomplish, advance and achieve before our time is up.

We read that Anna spent all her days in the temple, never left it, fasting and praying night and day until she was of great age. Unless we’re contemplating joining a monastery, that is not practical for us. We need to search for other ways to satisfy our holy longing, and the ancients have given us many. We can try silence, prayer, devotional reading, quiet walks, journal writing, safe fasting on occasion, AND looking for God in each person we encounter, noticing the work of the Holy Spirit in the events and opportunities which come our way, checking in with God all along the way for guidance and attempting some holy conversations. Jesus said, “Listen, I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.”

William Sloane Coffin wrote:

The more we do God’s will, the less unfinished business we leave behind us when we die. If our lives exemplify personal charity and the pursuit of social justice, then death will not be the enemy, but rather the friendly angel leading us on to the One whose highest hope is to be able to say to each and every one of us, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of the Master.”

If you've ever been handed a new baby to hold, no matter whose it is, you know the feeling of awe and wonder at the promise it holds. If you've ever sat at the side of a person near the end of his life, you know how the trappings of this world fade to unimportance as we comprehend the significance of this spiritual being about to leave us and go on to God. Simeon in the Jerusalem temple took the baby Jesus in his arms and all at once knew the promise he held and knew his own life had now reached completion.

As we approach the Communion table this morning, we have been given a glorious gift of both promise and an answer to our holy longing. Here we feed our spiritual beings in communion with each other and with God in remembrance of Christ's physical body and brief life, its brokenness and death, and his overcoming death through his Resurrection. We won't find this on any one of those lists, but if seeking Christ is our goal, this is the place to be. Amen.

