

Nunc dimittis

Category: Prayer

written by Christine Parkhurst | October 1, 2016

My father, a pathologist, was diagnosed with late-stage gastric cancer soon after I was married. He knew exactly what the diagnosis meant, but he enjoyed life for another two years. Then he stopped responding to treatment and began to decline over the winter. He and my mother were happy to learn I was pregnant with their first grandchild, due in June.

Ten days after Liz was born at the end of May, we rushed over to visit my parents, since my father was by then too weak to travel. Clearly he had waited to meet Liz. He held her in his arms, although he had to sit to do so, and he was thrilled. He asked us to come back soon.

As soon as we returned from this visit, I got a call from Dad's hospice team saying that he was dying, and it was time to come back home. The family arrived and found Dad in bed, not really conscious. We waited, and waited, and Dad continued to linger. Finally, after a week, my husband and brother had to go back to work. I stayed with my mother and my two-month-old colicky baby.

For another week, I strolled Liz around the streets of our old neighborhood. Finally, one afternoon as we strolled, I began to pray for Dad's release. The prayer that came into my head was the Nunc dimittis, from the Book of Common Prayer: "O Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word." We strolled for several hours while I recited the prayer in my head. It felt soothing.

That night, I kissed Dad goodnight, and saw that his face had changed. Late at night the house suddenly became very cold, and the furnace rattled on, although it was August. The hospice nurse came to tell me that Dad had died. Later, I looked up the origin of the prayer. I learned that the Nunc dimittis is the prayer that Simeon, a devout Jew, prayed in the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke. God had promised Simeon that he wouldn't die until he met the Messiah. He prayed the Nunc dimittis as he held baby Jesus in his arms, in the Temple.

I also found a number of famous paintings illustrating Simeon's story. When I look at Rembrandt's painting today, I see on Simeon's face the same look of satisfaction as my father's, looking at the grandchild he had waited for.

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