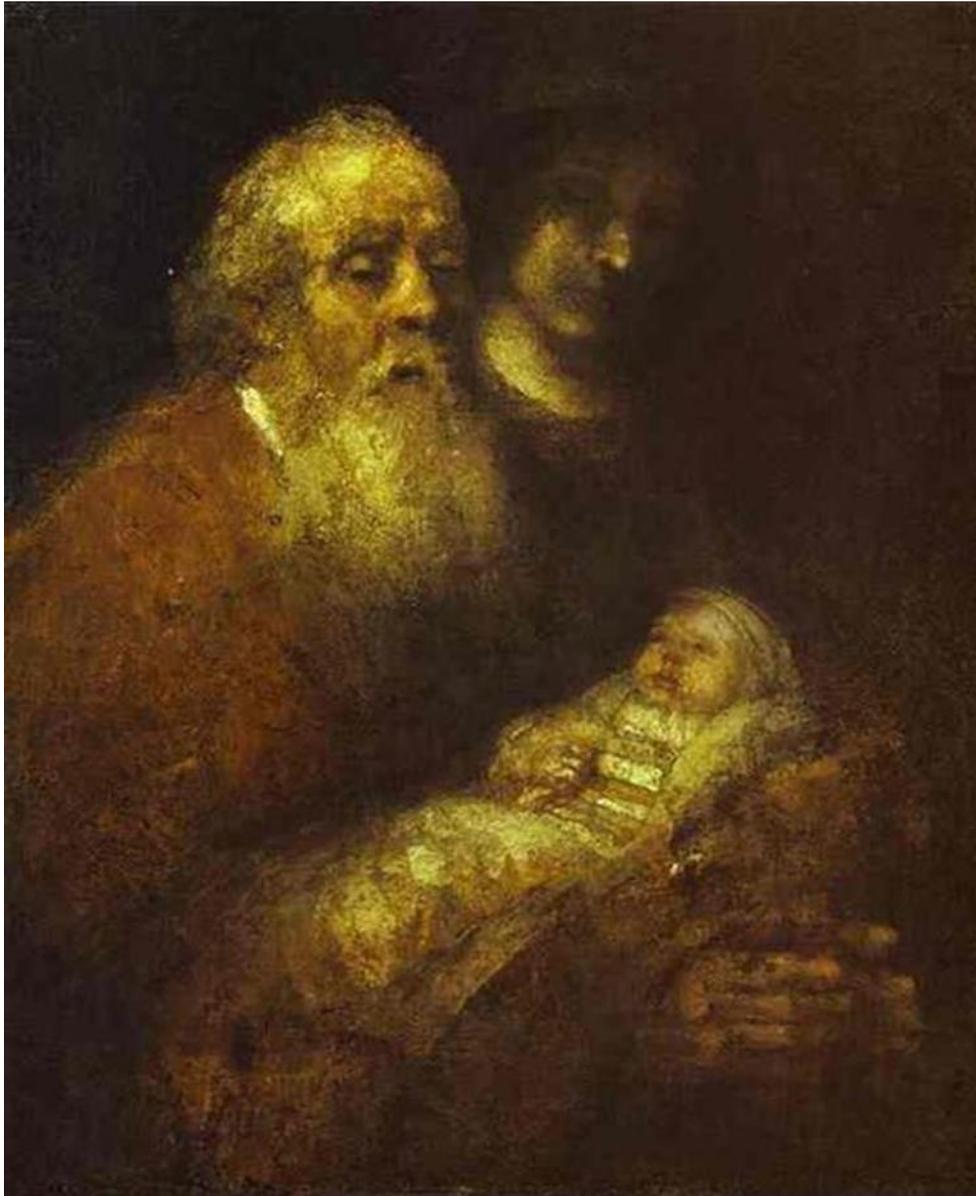


LETTING GO - 7



Rembrandt, Simeon in the Temple, 1669, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, Sweden

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As a young man in his prime Rembrandt had turned to the subject of Simeon in the Temple (Mauritshuis, The Hague, Netherlands), this earlier work looks like it is set in the scenery of a great opera, the figure group dwarfed by fantastical architecture. It is all very grand, but for me, emotionally stunted. At the end of his life he returned to the theme, carrying with him an old man's wisdom; a life reshaped by sadness, loneliness and loss.

It is said that the painting is in ruinous condition, having been 'restored' centuries ago and finished by another hand (the shadowy figure of Anna is a later addition) but it retains power, authenticity

and authority. Perhaps, when all is said and done, this material needs the 'end of life' perspective; perhaps this has to be the final canvas.

What we see before us is a man with unseeing eyes, who supports, rather than holds, a new born. His hands aren't wrapped around the child, but project, almost in an attitude of prayer. The canvas is so heavily worked (paint on paint on paint) that the facial definition is no longer clear, as if the body is at the point of dissolving, the mouth is half open and we sense the words forming, no more than a whisper, that we must strain to hear:

"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation." Luke 2:29-30

This is a painting born of patient waiting, this is not so much a scene of tenderness but of fulfilment, release and hope.

We may lament that the canvas is not as Rembrandt left it, but there's enough - enough to know that this man, apparently blind has seen salvation; that this life already turned towards God can let go of this world and fall into grace.

May we in our waiting sense this grace; and, at our parting, let go into His loving care.

Luke, in his gospel's description of the Ascension tells us that Jesus 'withdrew' from his disciples. No going up into the sky but just a simple stepping away and into what they could not see. It was a way of dying that can be witnessed in homes, hospitals and hospices today. The departing are going on their way. As their senses decline and they no longer respond as they once could – this 'letting-go' prepares them to withdraw from this life. There is longing for what has been. There is a desire to cling to what was grand and wonderful but that is not the end to which we journey in this life. We withdraw and as this life closes so another is born and the prayer is answered: Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.