

First Sunday of Christmas
Pastor Jim Cords
December 27, 2020

The holy gospel for today comes to us from the Gospel of Luke, the second chapter:

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for Him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took Him in his arms and praised God, saying:

"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all people:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel."

The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about Him.

The gospel of the Lord. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you that it is still Christmas, that You are still present, and we pray that as we continue to celebrate Your presence in us and with us, that You would strengthen our faith, that You would strengthen our witness, that You would fill us with hope, and that your light might shine in us and through us in the days ahead. Bless us this day as we look to Your word and find inspiration from Your Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name. Amen.

It is Christmas. I know some of you think that that was two days ago, but it is Christmas. You'll remember from the song "The Twelve Days of Christmas" that Christmas lasts for twelve days and so we call officially this the First Sunday after Christmas, or the First Sunday of Christmas, but the Christmas celebration lives on.

Now, I remember years in the past when I wanted Christmas to be over. I was tired. I was worn out. I needed to take a break from the holidays and all that it brought - the rush of the busy season, out shopping, and going to various parties. But this year, not so much and so maybe our desire for Christmas to be over is something different. As a matter of fact, maybe it has something to do with our desire for 2020 to be over. I saw this t-shirt that said, "Is whatever this is almost over? 2020." It's like we still don't really know what 2020 was. There were so many times in this year when we thought one thing only to discover another. So many times of confusing stories and uncertainty as to what we should do, how we could stay safe, what was really going on, and who did what.

What do we want to learn from this morning? Well, this morning provides us with an opportunity. It's one of the few opportunities in Scripture that we get to see some of what happened in the life of Jesus between the time he was born and the time he began his ministry. We only get a couple of glimpses. This morning, we get that glimpse through Simeon. Simeon was righteous and devout. Luke 2:25 tells us that he was waiting for the consolation of Israel. What is the consolation of Israel? What might that look like? What was Simeon expecting to happen? I think maybe we have at least a glimpse of that in our first lesson in the prophet Isaiah, chapter 61. It says this: "For He has clothed me with garments of salvation and has arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels." God has cleansed His people. He has clothed them with righteousness, which, by the way, also connotes this cleansing, this forgiveness from sin. It's interesting the contrast here in Isaiah 61 with Psalm 109:29 where the psalmist says, "May my accusers be clothed with disgrace and wrapped in shame as a cloak." Having God cleanse us and clothe us with righteousness over against being clothed with disgrace and shame.

God will come in the Christ to redeem, to restore His people, to lift them up, to reestablish them. We see that is the hope of Simeon. Now, how does that happen? Well, we learn in our gospel lesson today in Luke 2:27 that Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the temple in order to do for Him what was the custom, the law required. The Messiah, this child born of Mary and foretold to the shepherds needed to be under the law. Normally, the king rules. The king makes the law, but Jesus as Messiah is following the law, living under the law. We wonder why, maybe.

How does Simeon respond when he sees Jesus, and when he sees Joseph and Mary bringing Jesus to follow customs of the law and the anointing of this firstborn son? He says this in verse 29 "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace." This is known as "Nunc Dimittis" and it is this incredible hymn, one of three that we find in Luke in this story of the incarnation. In it, you can hear that just by seeing Jesus, just by seeing Mary and Joseph bringing Jesus to be dedicated, to be a given over to God as was the custom for the firstborn son, now Simeon believes it's done. It's finished. The promise of God that he would see the Lord's Christ before he died is fulfilled, just in that moment. Not much has happened yet and yet, there's a sense for Simeon that his life is now complete. The promise of God is now fulfilled for him and he can go on.

What is it that is in Simeon's faith that allows him to simply trust that the rest of the future will take care of itself? Because as I said, Jesus hasn't done anything yet. He's just basically come onto the scene. But what's going to happen? What is it that Simeon now trusts God will continue to do, as he rests in God's arms and joins him in the life after death? Well, Isaiah 62 says this, "The nations will see Your righteousness, and all kings Your Glory; You will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow." Called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow.

The whole identity of God's people changes in Jesus. Their fulfillment, their following through, or God's following through through them in the promise that they gave to Abraham, that they would be blessed to be a blessing is seen in these texts. Nations will see you and give glory to God. This hope of the Jewish people, these people who were awaiting the coming of the Messiah. Nations, not just the Jewish people, but nations will now see and the glory of God and the glory of the people Israel will be uplifted as nations see that God comes to them, that God loves them, and is with them. It's a beautiful image and in it, a new name, a new identity is given to God's people. Now I love the NIV version of Luke 2:30 and 31. This is what it says. Simeon's continuing to talk and he says this, "For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people." Simeon is saying as he looks at this baby Jesus with Joseph and Mary. He looks and he sees the salvation of God and then he testifies that it's happening in front of, so that it can be seen by all peoples, everywhere. I love that image. I have seen with my eyes and now it's being done, so that others might also see what God is doing. Luke tells us that God sent His Son, born of a woman, subject to the law.

So while Simeon can see that this promise is fulfilled in the arrival of Jesus, what the rest of us need to see, what the rest of the world needs to see is the Jesus is subject to the law as we see in the verse in Galatians. Verse 5 of Galatians 4 says God sent him to buy freedom for us. Jesus, under the law, is taking our place under the law so that we no longer need to be. Our condemnation is taken by Him and His glory is given to us. This Son of God made it possible, as we learn here in Galatians, for us to be children of God. Jesus didn't just come to explore the world that God created. He came that the fallen, struggling world would now receive life through Him, life that comes through forgiveness and reconciliation, life that is intended as we walk with God, and we, as children of God, are promised that inheritance. We are promised the same Holy Spirit that caused Mary to give birth to Jesus. That same Holy Spirit is now given to the children of God through our Lord, Jesus Christ. This verse in Galatians tells us that we actually now call God Abba, Father. Jesus came to make sure that the hostility between God and His creation would be taken away. Jesus came to make us right, to make the world right, and now He invites us to live in the fullness of that identity, that we have as children of God.

But there is a not-yet-ness here. There is an element in which this is not yet accomplished and so, not only do we need to understand Jesus, the Christ-child is, we need to understand now who we are as children of God in Christ are. That doesn't necessarily come easy. There's a wonderful line in CS Lewis's book, *The Chronicles of Narnia, The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* where Susan is asking about Aslan, the lion, the Christ figure in the book, "Aslan is a lion, the Lion, the great Lion. 'Oh,' said Susan, 'I thought he was a man. Is he quite safe?' 'Safe?' said Mr. Beaver, 'Who said anything about safe? Course he isn't safe, but he's good. He's the king, I tell you.'"

It's important that we understand that we are sinners and have fallen short and that we indeed deserve to be punished. The just reward for what we have done is punishment, for the wrongs we have done, and so we shouldn't feel safe, not in justice at least. Rather, we should feel safe in the transformation that happens because God is good, and God coming to us now sets us right with Him and now elevates us, so that we can be His witnesses in the world. We call God

Abba, Father, and as we live in the goodness of God, in the love in the forgiveness that God offers us, it can change how we handle the world that is around us. It can, in fact, change how we respond to the circumstances of this day, of this end of 2020. As we look ahead to the coming 2021, instead of being victims of circumstances, we now have an opportunity as children of God, as heirs of heaven, we now have an opportunity to impact the world for Jesus, to experience His grace and forgiveness, His strength and power, His restoration in relationship. We now bring that hope to a world that needs it desperately.

I don't necessarily feel very qualified, but God is and what Jesus has done in coming and what the Holy Spirit can do as He resides in us is make us able to accomplish abundantly far more than we might ask or imagine. So we live in this day with hope for tomorrow, knowing that the power of God is at work in us. That the power that brought Jesus to be with us and the power that raised Jesus from the dead, that same power is ours and we can live in that in this world. It is our hope as we cry Abba, Father. Perhaps Isaiah 62:1 speaks to that. It says "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, for Jerusalem's sake I will not remain quiet, till her righteousness shines out like the dawn, her salvation like a blazing torch." We are reminded in these words that we are light in the midst of darkness. In the words of Martin Luther King Jr., he said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that." In Luke, we're reminded what this is this that's happening in Jesus, what it is that Simeon realized was the promise that would unfold in Jesus the Christ, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel. We are not light for ourselves. We are light for the world. It is our hope and promise and so we recognize that we bring the light of Jesus into our families, into our community, and into our relationships, as we allow God's hope in us to be God's hope shared through us. God's light in the midst of our darkness, to be a light that we share, so that others can come out of darkness with us. Thanks be to God. Amen.