

Summit Presbyterian Church
Preached by Rev. Sue Cyre
1/1/12

Title: The Songs of Christmas: Song of Simeon
Text: Luke 2:21-38

The Song of Simeon is usually considered a Christmas song because of its proximity to the birth of Jesus. But, it's actually a New Year's song. It takes place 40 days after Jesus' birth.

We don't know exactly when Christmas was. But, if it was around our December 25, then this song of Simeon would have been in the New Year—a New Year's Song.

Simeon was probably an old man. God promised Simeon that he would see the "consolation of Israel"—the Messiah-- before he died. And the first line of the song is that Simeon has seen the Messiah and now is ready to depart in peace—to die.

Simeon's song is known as the Nunc Dimittis from the Latin of the first few words—Now Dismiss.

Simeon is a righteous and devout man who is eagerly awaiting God's Messiah. On this day, the Spirit leads Simeon to the temple and then out of all the people in the temple offering sacrifices, the Spirit leads Simeon to the baby Jesus.

Simeon lived his life waiting, hoping, looking for this day. The high-point of Simeon's life for which all the rest was lived—was this day when he would see the Messiah of God.

The other day Walling and I looked back on our lives and asked if we were to die tomorrow, what would we wish we had done or seen or said. Is there some place we'd like to travel or do or write or buy, or see. What is left undone? What is on our "bucket list?" I don't think that's depressing—it's "taking stock." It's deciding again, what is important.

Simeon would have said—what is left undone in my life, is that I'm waiting to see the Messiah. The goal of my life, the high point of my life is to see the Messiah.

According to a Gallup poll, the top four New Year's resolutions that people make are:

- 1) to improve personal finances
- 2) stop smoking
- 3) lose weight and
- 4) get more exercise.

All of those resolutions are good goals. We should be good stewards of the money God has given us. And health concerns are good. There is nothing wrong with those goals. But, they're so small.....

Simeon's desire was to see the Messiah. What is the most important goal of your life? What is undone that you want to do? What is most important to you?

Some of us have an "I have time, I'll get to the God-things later" attitude. But for Simeon, seeing the Messiah was the priority—not an add-on. It was the focus of his life. The text says he was "a righteous and devout man, looking for the consolation of Israel." He was seeking God. His energy and priority from day to day, every day that he lived, was "looking for the Consolation of Israel—the Messiah."

Jesus said, "where your treasure is your heart is also." What do we value, what's important—what are we seeking after in this New Year of 2012?

When Simeon had seen Jesus, he was ready to depart in peace—the desire of his heart had been fulfilled. God had answered his prayer and fulfilled his promise.

In the text, Mary and Joseph were probably still in Bethlehem after the birth of Jesus and they took him to Jerusalem to consecrate him to the Lord and offer the sacrifices according to the Law given by God to Moses.

Text says that on 8th day after Jesus' birth, he was circumcised. Then "after days of purification were completed" --that would have been 33 days according to the Law in Leviticus. So Mary and Joseph came to the temple to fulfill the Laws requirements.

According to Leviticus 12, after giving birth to a baby boy, the woman was unclean for 33 days. After that she was to take a one year old lamb to the priest for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or turtle dove for a sin offering. If she was too poor to bring a lamb, she could bring two young pigeons or turtledoves for the burnt offering.

Luke is telling us that Mary and Joseph were law abiding Jews. They also were too poor to bring the lamb for the sacrifice, so they brought a pair of doves. They could not afford a lamb to bring for the sacrifice. They brought the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, to be consecrated to God. This Lamb would be the final sacrifice for all --rich and poor alike. God has provided the sacrifice.

Luke doesn't include the story of the 3 Kings or Wise men coming to see Jesus. He doesn't tell about Mary and Joseph's flight into Egypt to escape Herod's deathly anger. Every Gospel author picks and chooses the parts that develop the points they are trying to make. Luke had a different emphasis than Matthew did who did include the story of the 3 magi.

Although Luke doesn't include mention of the wise men, they did come --Matthew's Gospel tells us that. Interestingly, it is assumed at this point in today's text that the 3 Kings—the 3 Wise men --had not come yet to Mary and Joseph bearing their gifts.

It is likely that Jesus was closer to 2 years old when the Wise men came to Mary and Joseph because after they came, Herod killed all the boys in Bethlehem 2 years old and

under. It may have been some time before the Wise men came to Mary and Joseph—even though we usually think of it as very close to the birth of Jesus.

If the Wise men had not come yet, it would explain why Mary and Joseph were too poor to offer the lamb as a sacrifice in this text today. But, once the Wise men came bearing gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh, Mary and Joseph would have had enough money for the trip to Egypt when the angel told them to flee there away from Herod.

God had not only told them to go to Egypt, he gave them the financial resources to make the trip and support themselves until they could return to their own country.

Mary and Joseph obeyed God's law to Moses. Jesus obeyed God's law. Jesus said in Matthew's Gospel, "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill."

Mary and Joseph were law abiding Jews. They brought Jesus up according to the law of God. Jesus often condemned the man-made laws but not God's laws.

As Mary and Joseph are fulfilling the laws requirements, God is fulfilling a promise made to Simeon.

This is only the second chapter of Luke and yet it is very clear that God's hand is moving in all the events. Some of the events are miraculous like the conception of Jesus and John the Baptist. Other events like the announcement to the shepherds is also clearly God's doing.

The star in the East. The wise men coming at a time when Mary and Joseph really needed that gold to travel to Egypt was not a coincidence or luck but God's careful and loving provision.

Other events like Simeon being led to the Temple on the day that Jesus would be presented to God the Father, may seem to the unbelieving eye as a coincidence, but it is clearly God's doing. It is the Spirit moving.

There are no coincidences in Scripture. There aren't any in our lives. God is moving and acting and fulfilling his will. If only we have eyes to see.

We don't know what the New Year will hold—definitely joys--probably some sorrows, most likely some disappointments and struggles and challenges. Whatever comes to us—it is sifted through God's love. God is at work.

Our lives are not based on happenstance or random circumstances or luck or fate, but on God's sovereign action in our lives. Paul wrote in Philippians, "He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus." God is working in us perfecting our faith—preparing us to dwell with him. All the events our lives are part of his working out his will in us and in the world.

If God is so attentive that he brings together circumstances so that an old man may see the baby Jesus before he dies, isn't he also being attentive to us. There are no coincidences—there is no bad luck or blind luck or dumb luck. God is at work. He keeps his promises and he delights to answer the prayers of those who want to see him and know him.

For those who are looking for the Messiah as Simeon was, God will reveal himself to you.

Jesus said, “seek first His kingdom and His righteousness and all these things shall be added to you.” —all these things are daily needs.

Jesus said, “ask and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened to you.” (Mt 7:7)

Simeon says that Jesus is a light of revelation to the Gentiles. Revelation means God's disclosure of himself and his will. Revelation is the pulling back of the curtain and we see into the holy of holies. Jesus is that Light of revelation to all people who are looking and seeking.

And he is the glory of all those who believe.

Notice also in this text that Simeon is prophesying that Jesus has come also to the Gentiles. He says, “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 for glory to your people Israel.”

Going to the Gentiles was not “a make lemonade out of lemons” moment because the Jews rejected Jesus. The Father's plan was always that Jesus would be a light for revelation to the Gentiles.

Then Simeon tells Mary—notice he just speaks to Mary—God has probably revealed to Simeon that Joseph will die before the crucifixion—Simeon tells Mary that Jesus is appointed by God for the fall and rise of many in Israel. In other words, those who believe — those who see the revelation and believe will be resurrected to life—that's the meaning of the “rising.” Those who do not believe the revelation will fall—forever.

Jesus is the Light of revelation—he is the light that reveals God and his will and his holiness. But John writes in his Gospel, “The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not comprehend it.”

“This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

The cross looms over the manger. A sword will pierce. Jesus' crucifixion was not an accident. It was part of the plan that was laid before the foundation of the world.

Notice too that Anna the prophetess is one of the first witnesses. The Shepherds are first. Then Anna. It says “she spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.” A woman is one of the first witnesses of Jesus’ birth. Women are the first witnesses of his resurrection.

Jesus has come. The falling and rising of Israel is upon us. Those with eyes will see. Some will reject, even kill to discredit, deny, destroy the Word. Anna and Simeon were fully committed to Christ. Waiting for him; announcing him; praising him. Anna never left the temple. Simeon was waiting for the consolation of Israel.

What do we want in the New Year? More exercise? Or more faith? Just like the treadmill...getting on it once for 20 min doesn’t do much. Repetition, commitment, perseverance are what produce change.

Growing in faith doesn’t happen when read the Bible once for 20 min or come to worship once and a while. It’s about Christ being our whole life commitment. It is about seeking him before all else.

I’ve been reading...slowly... Eric Mataxes’ biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. You remember he was the Lutheran pastor executed just before the end of the war by the Nazis. He was imprisoned for several years before being hanged.

He read Scripture and meditated on a verse 30 min a day. He had done that for years and years. When he was in prison, he continued to do it and it sustained him. He never lost faith. He was subject to depression often during his life, but he was never depressed in prison. All those verses he memorized and studied came back and filled his soul and drew him closer to God. He continued the routine, the discipline he had started years earlier.

It doesn’t work to ignore God or keep him on the edges until we are in trouble and need him. He wants us to seek him first in our lives, always.

What are we looking for in the New Year? Health? Wealth? New job? Meaning? Purpose? Are we looking for the “consolation of Israel”? The light of revelation? What is that our heart’s true desire?

Jesus is a light of revelation and that light will reveal God’s will and holiness and it will also reveal the thoughts of human hearts—it will reveal who we really are. Some people will come into the light and others will seek to destroy the light. We can’t be ambivalent to the light. The light shines –and when it shines all is revealed.

We receive communion this morning—which reminds us that in Christ, our thoughts are revealed. We can’t cover up at the communion table. At the Communion table the depth of God’s love is revealed and the depth of our sin is revealed. We can’t hide from the light when we receive the body and blood.

We have to acknowledge that our thoughts are not always pure; our deeds are contaminated by sin, and rebellion. We come to the table to allow the light to shine on our sin and cleanse it. We come to the table seeking the “consolation of Israel.”

As we look forward to 2012, let us allow Jesus to be the priority, the goal of our lives. Let us be as Simeon was, “looking for the Messiah”—always, everywhere—for he alone is the Light that shines in our darkness. Amen.