

Sermon – 12/31/17

“Holding Salvation in Our Arms”

Luke 2:22-40

First Sunday after Christmas

Davidson College Presbyterian Church – Davidson, NC

The Rev. John P. Ryan

It's hard to believe that it's already been a week since we celebrated the birth of Jesus. Now I don't know how you feel about when is the correct time to put up Christmas decorations, but I wonder how long have you had your Christmas decorations up? And more importantly, are they still up?

I am always amazed to see the number of Christmas trees sitting out on the curb, ready to be recycled, so quickly after Christmas day. It seems like once the presents are open and the Christmas meal eaten, all the merry making of the holiday season is gone and forgotten. Just as quick as we are to put up our decorations, we are also quick to take them down and move onto the next, best thing in our lives. I was in a big box store on December 26, checking out the discounted Christmas paraphernalia, and was not surprised to see Valentine Day decorations already out, but was shocked to see Reese's Peanut Butter Easter eggs were being sold.

How many people have come up to you and asked if you had a nice Christmas? That question implies that Christmas is in the past. As many of us know from the 12 days of Christmas song, there are indeed 12 days of Christmas and the season of Christmas continues today and through January 6, Epiphany. That's why we still get to see Christmas carols in today's service and our Christmas decorations are still up, though the tree in the sanctuary is a bit dry and Harriett tells me is a fire risk!

What must it be like to hold salvation in your arms – particularly after years of waiting? If we've had any sense of waiting during the season of Advent, waiting for family to arrive home, waiting to open much anticipated Christmas gifts, waiting and hoping, we might glimpse something of what Simeon and Anna must have felt as they cradled the infant Jesus.

In the Jewish tradition, there are two concepts of time. Chronos – what we know as the time we keep on our watches and Kairos - God's time. Chronos time tells us it's the first Sunday after Christmas Day. The bills of Christmas shopping will soon be hitting your inbox or mail box. Some of us entered into this sacred season with great expectations, only to discover it was not what we thought it was.

In Kairos time, imagine the spiritual and emotional toll on Mary and Joseph during this past year. They are given a divine mission to complete in their human flesh, before they appear to be ready. These two parents are within the first forty days of their baby's life. They have journeyed from Nazareth to Jerusalem, to Bethlehem, back to Jerusalem during a time of emotional and physical exhaustion. Our text opens with the young and weary Mary and Joseph at the temple with their new baby boy. After many sleepless, uncomfortable nights, they meet two elders who also sense something about time. These elders have been waiting for a lifetime to see the Messiah.

SHOW VIDEO (9:45 am)

These two wonderful, faith-full, elderly people shine like beacons in Luke's story of Jesus. They are the ones who “get it” – get Jesus, and more importantly, get what God is doing in Jesus. And they “get it” in contrast to the temple system, which will later kill this God-given gift of salvation-in-the-flesh, and, even more startlingly, in contrast with John the Baptist, who will point to Jesus as the Messiah but fail to understand both the work of the Messiah and the God at work in Jesus.

The burden of Luke's story is to tell us that God has arrived among us in Jesus, but, against all expectations, has arrived in grace, invitation and welcome, rather than in condemnation and judgement. Jesus is the love and will of God for salvation in the flesh. That's what the angels tell the shepherds, and what both Simeon and Anna announce in the temple.

But, as we already know, it's not going to end happily. The shadow of the cross already lies across the infant, as Simeon prophesies. Jesus' message and ministry of the coming Kingdom of God will divide, not unite the people of Israel – not into “sinners” and “righteous”, but into those who respond to God's free grace and salvation, on the one hand, and those who recoil in indignation, protest and murderous fury. This is the beginning of the story of the Way of the Cross – Jesus' story, our story, and God's story.

In this passage, Luke's emphasis is on the surprising and shocking grace of God. If God is coming into the world, the key question is, "What is God's disposition towards us?" If Jesus is the Messiah – the agent of God's salvation – what will that salvation look like? What is Jesus bringing – wrath or salvation? Here, Simeon and Anna give the answer: grace and salvation. God in Jesus is a God who is for us, not against us. This God stands with open arms, rather than folded arms, tapping foot and thunderous scowl.

"Luke's gospel begins in the temple – the Holy of Holies. The temple is central to Luke's story because it is the place where God lives and therefore also the site of the struggle between Jesus and the Pharisees over the identity of God. Jesus' claim to understanding divine identity is exemplified in his use of "Abba": he calls God "Father". The Pharisees' and scribes' counter-claim is possession of the authoritative weight of tradition," says Lawrence Moore, a United Reformed pastor in England.

The story that unfolds is of the clash between Jesus' proclamation of God's grace and the Jewish Purity System, rooted ultimately in the temple. This is a system that has turned the temple from being a "house of prayer" into a "den of robbers". The events of the last week of Jesus' life take place in the temple, where that conflict comes to a head in a series of exchanges – beginning, significantly, with Jesus cleansing the temple – that sees Jesus the victor, but results in a determination to get rid of him that is eventually made possible by Judas' betrayal.

The point is that we need to pay particular attention when Luke describes events taking place in the temple. He presents Simeon and Anna as exemplars of the true tradition – the gracious Truth about God: they are old, they virtually live in the temple, they are "waiting for God's salvation." Luke tells us further that Simeon has had a direct promise of salvation from God, in a manner reminiscent of God's promises to Abram that kicks off the whole biblical Jewish salvation narrative. And here, these two side with Jesus in terms of who God is. As such, they represent both the traditional and Jesus-purified temple: we come to the temple at the outset of Luke's story to hear the gracious, loving Truth about God.

Luke's prologue features Jesus in the temple, in which Jesus is seen as the true and authoritative Rabbi about God. He is true and authoritative because he is the Son of the God, whose house the temple is. All of this sets us up as an audience for the forthcoming clash between Jesus and the Purity System. And as the Prologue closes and the curtain rises on John the Baptist in the Jordan in chapter 3 of Luke, we discover that John, too, is caught in the purity-induced myopia that will prevent many from seeing and responding to the gracious invitation of God in Jesus.

What John cannot understand is that Jesus is the agent of God's grace incarnate, not God's wrath. And so, as Simeon and Anna meet the infant Jesus, Luke invites us to listen to their voices, in order to discover the truth about what God is doing in Jesus. John will tell us that Jesus is the Messiah: he will also tell us how difficult it is to accept the God who comes in Jesus. It is Simeon and Anna, instead, to whom we must turn in order to hear the Christmas message: Advent is over! Salvation is born among us!

Simeon and Anna have waited a lifetime for this moment to find perfect peace. For Joseph and Mary it is only the beginning of their stewardship of a favored life. This is the beginning of a journey of unanswered questions for first-time parents. They know they have a long way to go in their responsibility as parents to fulfill the divine promise of parenthood they have made to God.

Joseph and Mary were young people of limited means, who struggled to get to Bethlehem for the census. While there was no room at the inn, one might wonder if Joseph possessed the resources for a hotel stay? He stood by watching the mother of his child give birth next to beasts of burden. After his divine child's arrival in the world, he witnessed shepherds and others worship him. Then he was faced with his human role as a provider in the time beyond birth. All he had to offer his son was a life time of the limitations of a father's social location, says Shelly Copeland a pastor in Hartford, CT.

The text tells us that Simeon was "guided by the Spirit" to come into the temple at the appointed time. When he arrived, he saw two young parents who had come a long way, to follow the law of the Lord and offer a sacrifice for their child. These parents, like many others of that time, could have made the decision to give up on the faith, because it cost too much. Mary and Joseph remained committed to the rituals of the faith, even though religion cost them the daily resources they needed for survival. In fact, they presented the gift assigned to the poor, a pair of turtledoves, because they could not afford to offer a lamb.

Simeon was a seasoned person of faith. As one who had deep relationship with God, he had surely taken note of numerous families coming and going from the temple. Simeon was expecting a miracle and waiting for the messiah. When he saw that this young family had brought only turtledoves, he knew they did not have the funds to offer a

lamb. In other words, Simeon in a moment knew the long-awaited Savior of the world was being raised by parents in poverty.

Imagine being this seasoned person of faith, who had the chance to witness a poor mother and father with the Anointed One in their care. Imagine knowing they had a child with tremendous promise and possibility for an entire people. If you were in such a position, would you do something more for this family than offer a blessing? As people of faith in a privileged nation, we have an obligation to care for the poor and marginalized in tangible ways. We miss out, as a community, when we do not acknowledge that all children in our midst are a gift to the world. Perhaps we are called to create a society with a positive regard for struggling, faithful parents, because we believe we are co-stewards of the future. Perhaps this text is pleading with those of us in this generation to create a more just society for the children who come into the world through parents of limited means.

Karoline Lewis, professor of preaching at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN puts it this way “We desperately need Anna and Simeon this week. We need them to help us utter the praise of God that simultaneously responds to God’s presence and resists the presence of evil. We need them to model the reaction to the convergence of waiting and fulfillment. We need them to give us the courage to trust in our God who is indeed present and powerful when the world in which we live suggests otherwise.”

Within this text of love and support for a child, we unmistakably hear the note of justice sounded clearly. Indeed, the rising and falling of many has and will occur in terms of their treatment of children. Luke’s words have set both the model of parental and adult love for children and they also challenge all of us to ask: “How are we caring for our children today?”