

MY EYES HAVE SEEN YOUR SALVATION

LUKE 2:22-40

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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DECEMBER 31, 2017/1ST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

Today is the last day of 2017. It is a day when our thoughts naturally turn to newness and possibility.

What will the next 365 days hold for us? For our families? Our church? Our nation? Our world?

What trends might continue? What surprises might be in store for us?

What personal improvements will we attempt? What successes do we (perhaps optimistically) anticipate? What failures do we fear? Who do we hope to be and to become in 2018?

On this day when our thoughts quite naturally gravitate toward newness, today's text from Luke introduces us to two old people. Or at least older people: Simeon and Anna.

Two people who had seen a lot of new years come and go. Two people who have spent many long days hoping, waiting, longing.

Two old people who encounter a brand new baby boy.

It is Jesus, of course. His parents have done what all good Jewish parents were supposed to do—they had brought Jesus to the Jerusalem temple for purification rites. Every Jewish firstborn male had to be dedicated to the Lord, and Mary and Joseph were doing this.

They had come to the temple to offer the traditional sacrifices prescribed by the law of Moses. Interestingly, they sacrificed a pair of doves or pigeons. According to the Levitical law, this was what the poor who could offer nothing else were permitted to give for purification.

Just like in the story of his birth, Jesus is already identified with the poor, the lowly, the easily ignored.

This is worth pondering for a moment. The Saviour of the world, God Incarnate, begins his human journey in poverty. If Jesus had come today, where would he be taking his first steps? In a refugee family trying to make their way in a new city? On the reserve? With the teenage high school dropouts who can't make the month's rent?

It's a question worth thinking about—we need to lift these familiar stories out of their too-familiar, too-comfortable Christmas constraints to be appropriately shocked and unsettled by them sometimes.

At any rate, upon seeing this lowly boy of humble beginnings, Simeon famously declares:

My eyes have seen your salvation.

The question I have oriented my sermon around this morning is a simple one: What did Simeon see?

He obviously saw more than just a month and a half old baby of poor parents. He had undoubtedly seen many of those. He saw something else in this one. This one was different. This was the one he had been waiting for.

Simeon had been waiting for the "consolation of Israel." That's an interesting phrase. What does it mean?

Well, Simeon had been waiting for a lot of things. For relief from oppression of his people by the Roman Empire. For for the time when his people's sin would be forgiven and healed. For the time when his people's worship would be purified. For liberation. For comfort and hope. For all of these things and probably more besides.

He had been waiting for his people's Messiah, or "anointed one" would come. And he had been promised by the Holy Spirit that he would live to see this.

And he saw the fulfillment of all of his longing and anticipation in Jesus.

He saw:

A light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.

Already before Jesus has done a thing, Simeon knows that this child will not just be for the salvation of his people, but for all the world.

He sees that this Jesus will bring light beyond his own ethnic borders. His justice will be for all the people of the earth, not just Israel. His hope is not narrow but expansive.

But then Simeon says something interesting to Mary about her child.

This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed--and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

This is a remarkable statement.

From our historical vantage point, we of course know that this was exactly what happened.

This Jesus *was* destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel. The very rich, the very powerful, and the very powerful were often the ones who did the falling; the sick, the poor, the outcast, the unrighteous—these were the ones Jesus would raise up.

And Jesus would, indeed, reveal the inner thoughts of many. He would expose

- those who sought to insulate themselves from obligations toward their neighbours through false piety
- Those those who loved money more than God
- Those who wanted God's hammer to fall on their enemies but had little interest in examining their own lives
- Those quick to judge.

- Those who used religion to pile on unnecessary burdens to those who could not bear them.
- Those who could not bring themselves to forgive.
- Those who asked impressive sounding questions about how to be saved but really only wanted to justify themselves.
- Those who found him to be a rather disappointing and unimpressive Messiah.

And, by contrast, he would reveal the truth in,

- those who knew their own sin but hungered for mercy.
- Those who asked him to help their unbelief.
- Those who said, "To whom else would we go, you have the words of eternal life?"

Yes, Jesus would indeed lay bare the inner thoughts of those he encountered throughout his life.

And, of course, a sword would pierce Mary's soul as she watched her son's life get snuffed out by the collusion of empire and religion.

Jesus still does each of these things. If we are paying attention, at any rate.

The rich and the powerful and the religious still squirm when they encounter the words of Jesus. The poor and the lowly still find in him good news. Anyone who pays even the slightest attention to Jesus' words will still have their inner thoughts laid bare. And who among us does not feel the soul-piercing injustice and agony of his death each year at Easter?

Simeon might not have seen all of this with the clarity that we who come later in the story do. But he knew enough to know that his eyes had seen salvation in the broadest sense in a tiny little baby boy.

On this first Sunday after Christmas, we have encountered two people who have been waiting and longing for a very long time.

For hope, for salvation, for healing, for deliverance.

The child of Christmas will fulfill the hopes they have and even some that they don't.

What about us? What are we waiting for as 2018 approaches?

Our longings undoubtedly look a bit different than those of Simeon and Anna. They probably have less to do with nation and ethnicity than theirs did. They are probably more personal, possibly even existential in nature. But they are no less real.

It seems like the older I get, the more longings I accumulate.

I recently made a partial list.

I'm a parent, so my longing very often begins at home. I long for a good future for my kids, for them to make wise choices, for them to find ways to express their gifts in ways that benefit themselves and others, for them to chart a course in the world that aligns with who and how God has made them, for them to respond in faith and glad obedience to their Creator. I long for them to love and to be loved well.

I long for good things for people I know and love. I long for health and strength and peace and fulfillment and hope and courage and joy and many other things besides. I know the road is long, and that each of us has faced and will face different obstacles along the way. I long for us to each experience the abiding peace Christ along the way, the One who goes before, behind, around and within us no matter where life takes us.

I long for the church. The big, global church that encompasses every tribe and tongue. I long for us to become what Jesus had in mind for his body. I long for us to demonstrate unity and courage and conviction and hope, and to not care so much about things like power and cultural influence and status. I long for faithfulness. I long for a deep commitment to the truth that there is no fear in love, and that to love well is to tell the truth about the world and our place within it.

I long for the world to look at the church and to see always and only Jesus.

I have deep longings for a world put right. No more war, no more disease and famine and injustice and suffering and violence. No more commodifying of human lives, no more degrading and insulting discourse, no more trivializing of what matters most, no more careless and greedy exploitation of creation and one another.

I long for a world where refugees can go home and never have to run again. I long for a world where the rich and the loud and the powerful no longer squelch and stifle the

poor, the weak, those whose voices are ridiculed, misrepresented or ignored. I long for Isaiah's vision of wolves lying with lambs and swords being beaten into plowshares. I long for "peace on earth" to be more than just a slogan we see on Christmas cards.

And, of course, I long on an individual level as well. I long to be less anxious. I long for experiences of joy to overwhelm and transform all that might naturally call forth my anger and sadness. I long to love more consistently and comprehensively. I long for less to require forgiveness for. I long to love what is good, true and beautiful more than I love being thought well of or vindicated or justified. I long for the law of God to be written on my heart, to know even as I am fully known.

That's just my list. I'm sure yours might look a bit different in places, possibly very similar in others. But I think that to be a human being is to long for a future that is better than the present. It is to have a deep and abiding hunger for a world that is unlike anything we have seen.

This is deeper than wishing, as Naomi mentioned earlier. These hopes and longings are in broadest possible sense, an expression of what we believe God wants to do in and through and for us. They are more than just desires for nice things and experiences for the future. They connect us with what we are convinced we have been made for.

Peace. Joy. Hope. Holiness. Love. Not just for us, but for all.

The New Testament calls this "the kingdom of God."

And the Christian claim, from that first Christmas right down to the present, is that it has begun with Jesus, and that it will be fulfilled.

The baby boy who was small enough to be carried into the temple by Mary and Joseph is big enough to fulfill the longing of all of creation.

One of my favourite lines in any song that we sing each Christmas comes from O Little Town of Bethlehem:

The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

I think that Simeon and Anna, two elderly people well acquainted with waiting and longing and hoping and fearing, got a glimpse of this truth in Jesus.

And two thousand or so odd years later, do we still have this conviction?

Have our eyes seen the salvation of God this Christmas? Have yours? Have mine?

Of course we can't see Jesus in the flesh like Simeon and Anna did, but there is more than one way to see, isn't there?

Has our faith been strengthened this Christmas? Has our love for Jesus as God's response to the brokenness of the world been kindled? Or rekindled?

Has our resolve to be like Jesus in the world been fortified? Has our devotion to love of God and neighbour been intensified? Have we been reminded once again that God's disposition toward the world is grace and that ours should be, too?

Can we be at peace for all that we don't know simply because we have encountered Jesus again, through all the language of hope and fulfillment that we rehearse each year around this time, and we know that somehow the reality to which all of these words point is enough?

I hope so. I pray so. Because if all of our waiting and watching for Jesus—this Christmas or any Christmas—just comes and goes and drifts away in the New Year, then it will have been in vain.

This is what Christmas is about, in the end. Seeing Jesus. Again or perhaps for the first time. And celebrating and embracing and committing ourselves to the salvation that he offers to all.

I haven't said much about Anna the prophet in this sermon. I have focused on Simeon's response because Simeon had more to say.

But in many ways, Anna's response is just as if not more significant. She responds simply with praise, gratitude and witness.

At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

May we, too, go out into 2018 praising God for the miracle of Christmas. For God with us truly is a miracle, and we must never forget this.

And may we not grow weary of speaking about this child who really is the one in whom the hopes and fears of all the years—yours, mine, the world’s—are met.

Amen.

