

A New Year, a New Era
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Scriptures:

²²When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³(as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), ²⁴and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; [□] this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

29 "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
30 for my eyes have seen your salvation,
31 which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel."

³³And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

³⁶There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸At 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. (Luke 2:22-40, RSV)

Introduction and Opening Comments:

Well, over the last week did you get enough football with all the bowl games? Tomorrow are the final college football bowl games. Two of the games are the semi-finals for the national playoffs on January 8. New Year's Day bowl games remind me of Janet and Nigel, a happily married couple, who faced the annual conflict of which was more important: The New Year's football match on television or lunch together as a family.

Hoping to keep the peace, Nigel ate lunch with the rest of the family, and even lingered for some pleasant after-lunch chat before retiring to the den to turn on the television.

Some minutes later, Janet looked in to see how Nigel was doing and graciously brought him a cold drink. Janet smiled, kissed him on the cheek and asked what the score was. Nigel told her it was half time and that the score was still 0-0.

'See?' Janet said happily, 'You didn't miss a thing.'

Sermon:

The week between Christmas and the New Year's Day has always been a strange time for me. Since Thanksgiving, I have been climbing an emotional slope of holiday preparations and

events. Many folks during the week in between Christmas and New Year's Day will put their house back in order, store the holiday decorations, shove the big turkey roaster back under a cabinet, say goodbye to out-of-town family, exchange the over-sized or under-sized gifts, etc. After Christmas, I drop a little emotionally, but my activities are not back into a full, non-holiday routine yet, because, well, the New Year celebration is coming.

During this time, many of us may be thinking about the old year, things left undone or unresolved, new possibilities, and new resolves in the coming year. Some of us are gathering up our last year's financial history for impending tax time. Or, as Mark Twain said, New Year's Day is the accepted time to make your regular annual, good resolutions. Next week you can begin paving hell with them as usual.

Nevertheless, it is not time to stop thinking about Christmas. It is not time to put away the wonder, hope, and mystery of the birth of the Christ child. Now it is time to think about how we will make real all that Christmas meant in the very practical aspects of our everyday lives.

Many biblical scholars maintain that the author of Luke was a non-Jew or a Gentile, who was very knowledgeable of the Hebrew Scriptures and Jewish traditions, writing around 85 C.E. However, I think a better case can be made for the author being a highly assimilated Hellenistic-Romanized Jew, living in the Diaspora, and writing to a mixed Jewish and non-Jewish community of faith. Part of the case for this point is the author's emphasis on Jerusalem, the Temple, the Law, and his insider condemnation of the Jewish leadership in connection with Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. Also, I remind us that the Jesus communities at the time of Luke's and Matthew's writings were still made up of predominantly Jewish believers. Even in those places where the author seems to get something Jewish wrong, we can explain it as his understandings as a Hellenistic Jew simply differing from those of the Palestinian homelands. Therefore, it is to Luke's emphasis on the Law of the Jews that we turn to our scriptures today.

Mary and Joseph, in compliance with the Law, go to the Temple on the fortieth day after the birth of a male child for the ceremonially purification of the mother. After this ceremony and offering, Mary would have been able to resume many of the normal religious, familial, and inter-personal activities forbidden to her post-partum. Their offerings indicated that Mary and Joseph were truly poor people in the economic sense.

There was also a ceremonial naming and redemption of the firstborn child at about this time, although Luke does not make as much of these things as he does Mary's purification. (Lev. 12:1-5; Exodus 13:2; 11-16, Numbers 18:15-16) Luke may not have made much of the naming and redemption of the firstborn because he is aware of Jesus being dedicated to God and his divine naming occurring before his birth. However, the point I want to make is that Luke on every turn wants his audiences to know that Jesus, his family, and his ministry were legally and ceremonial compliant with the Law of Moses, and thus authoritative for the Jewish people's relationship to God and relevant to all others.

This is a very important point, because in Judaism as much as a person's faith is an individual thing, it is more an all-encompassing way of life for family, community, and the greater body of God's elect. In our western religious life, we tend to be all about individual faith, guilt, and personal salvation. In Jesus' day and in many parts of the world today, a person's religious life and faith is about belonging and participating in the collective identity of their family, tribe, or group and its life, past, present, and future, within God's will. This aspect is often reinforced and demonstrated in various daily, weekly, or other periodic rituals or observances. I have in mind the devout Jews' morning and evening prayers, ablutions or washings and prayers before meals, weekly devotions to studying Torah, and various seasonal and annual holy feast days, etc. Yes, some of these acts of devotion and piety were abused

and became ends unto themselves, but for most they were devout reminders that every aspect of one's daily life is lived in a holy matrix of God's presence.

In our high-paced, western individualistic, guilt-driven, and over-achieving cultures, dominated by technology, I think we have lost the significances of ritual, especially those religious rituals that mark many critical aspects of life like we've heard in Mary's and Joseph's life today. Fewer and fewer families eat meals together much less share in any time of family prayer at meals or spiritual development. The sacredness of life and relationships are often defined by trite, maudlin sound bites. Even such moments as the birth of a child and acknowledging that child as a holy blessing in family and community, the sacredness of a wedding, and the holiness of funerals are having less and less to do with the sacred reflections and mystery that belong to such moments, but more and more about crass sentimentality and vulgar displays of personal vanity. In short, in many of the sacred moments in life, we have belittled the profound mysteries of life and death that open us up to a greater participation in the holy in such moments of existential focus.

The holy and the sacred now tend to be relegated to just specific people and places like the Pope, the Dalai Lama, preachers, nuns, missionaries, the Vatican, cathedrals, churches, or certain places in nature. Many people's sense of the holy and sacred are, at best, perfunctory attendance at Christmas and Easter services unlike Joseph, Mary, the old priest Simeon, and the prophetess Anna, who understood that the holy is the all-encompassing milieu wherein every act of our day occurs. In such a reality, a person's, a family's, or a community's daily lives are enriched and elevated to a level of participation in the holy, its purposes, and presence.

Okay, back to our text. Serving at the Temple was an old, pious priest named Simeon, whose heart and thoughts were heavy with concern and longing for God's redemption and restoration of God's people. He longed for the coming of an era when the Jews would experience the peace, prosperity, and all pervasive goodness of God's blessings and presence, who in turn would become a blessing to the nations.

As the text indicates, at some point in Simeon's deepest moments of prayer and longing, God had revealed to him that he would not die before he saw the Anointed One of God, the Messiah, the one who would restore his people and usher in the New Era of God as a blessing to the world.

As Mary and Joseph stood there in the Temple, Simeon had been led by the Holy Spirit to be there at the same moment. In a moment of direct awareness, he knows that this infant in the arms of this poor, young woman holds the hope for the Jews and the nations for all time. He sees in this child the answers to the ultimate questions and anxieties of human existence. He proclaims this without any knowledge of Mary's special visitation or the events surrounding Jesus' birth.

He looked into the face of a forty-day old infant and said, "This is he, the one of my faith and hope, the promise of God, the giver of revelation to Jew and non-Jew alike - "the hope for all the nations." Simeon had hung on to his hope until he saw the reality of God's promise of salvation, and then he said, "Take me now Lord, I have seen the fullness of my faith in you." Little did Simeon know, little did Mary know, and little did Joseph know; however, you and I know because we have 2000 years of knowing the good, the bad, the ugly, and the hopefulness of the Christian faith.

At times, the activities of the followers of Jesus have been shameful. Great kings, emperors, and governments have embraced the Christian faith and have used it to justify some of the most horrible atrocities. The powerful have forced people to confess Jesus, be baptized, or die. Powerful religious leaders have schemed and killed for the power of the church of Jesus

Christ. Powerful religious forces have said and done awful things to saint and sinner alike over vain, self-serving theologies and Christologies. Common folk have used the message of Jesus for personal gain, to dominate others, for personal glory, or to avoid being compassionate toward to their fellow human beings deemed inferior or not like them.

On the other hand, the powerful truth of the Holy God of Creation that permeates Jesus teachings and life has more often lifted the human mind, spirit, and actions to the very heights of the Holy itself. I would hate to think of a world without the message of God in Christ. The Gospel of Jesus Christ has made each one of us here today better people and despite all the headlines, the world is more in tune with God's will than many may think.

The birth of the infant Jesus became a pivotal point in global history. Much of what we call real is influenced by this child, whom we call the Christ. No matter who you are or where you are on this planet and soon maybe even among the planets, this child's birth, and life will in some way or the other affect you if nothing more than your calendar. Hopefully, his effects are felt in the ideals, ethics, and concepts of human compassion, mercy, justice, and morality.

We have founded governments, built nations, and beautiful edifices in Jesus' name, when in truth he taught that the sum of all that is holy in this world and in this life, is to be found in our relationships to God and to one another through the power of love. Jesus taught that in the power of love there could and would come the New Era - the Kingdom of God on earth. And, I add that love of the neighbor, near and far, is a choice, not chemistry, that is aided by the power of the Holy Spirit. And, friends, love is not a finite resource but an infinite source of divine energy.

The era of peace, justice, prosperity, goodness, safety, wholeness, and health that humankind has longed for from day one will never come through the force of governments, technologies, human reason, or even religion should we have another 4.3 billion years on this planet. It is only through the power of the Holy Spirit that informed and sustained Simeon's faith and hope and in Anna's spirit of proclamation that we, humanity, have any hope at all.

Pretty naïve huh? Such statements sound like the sort of thing a child, a Christmas-dreamer, or some unsophisticated, old religious air-head would come up with doesn't it?

To this, let me just say that we have made some significant strides toward the ends that the birth of the Christ child symbolizes. We are at least beginning to think and to act in terms of global and stellar ethics and morality and to understand the interconnectedness of all life on this planet as the divine scheme of things. Many of the prosperous western nations are trying to act in the interest of the powerless and helpless. People are banding together in unprecedented numbers in humanitarian efforts that reach across ethnic, racial, socio-economic, and religious boundaries to bring clean water, food, medical care, and education to the underserved and underdeveloped nations of this world. Some religious communities are attempting to resolve theological and religious differences without bloodshed and mutual demonization.

In response, the cynic would say that we are doing these things out of self-interest. Finally, we are learning the lessons of fouling our own nests; forcing our will and ways on others, and the horrible social and economic repercussions of war. Well, if we as individuals and as species are not willing to listen to the enlightened lure of the Holy Spirit, then that may be the best God can do with some people to bring them online with kingdom building.

In the processes of humanity learning and growing in the ways of life, the Holy Spirit will continue to remind us of the faithfulness of God in the words of Simeon and the pious, old prophetess Anna, luring and moving us along the pathway of world salvation and redemption. I paraphrase:

²⁹⁻³¹“Lord,” now I can die content! For I have seen and I know him, whom you promised. I know the Savior you have given to the [world]. ³²He is the Light that will shine upon all nations, and he will be the glory of your Christ people!”

³⁸At that moment she [Anna] came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption.

As we think of the new year, let us set for ourselves the personal resolution and goal of honoring God’s will in our lives and the lives of our families by dedicating time to solemn moments of reflection, prayer, and study; let us recommit to prioritizing our lives around God’s will in Christ, not cramming our lives full of “experiences” that add little to nothing to our moral, ethical, and spiritual development. To this end, do not let our New Year's resolution be something that goes in one year and out the other.

Tomorrow is the beginning of another day full of the possibilities of the New Era of the Christ, wherein each person may choose to allow the supreme Law of God, the Law of Love, to live in them unrestricted and move us all toward the goal of peace on earth and good will to all humanity. Tomorrow could be a day where peace, wholeness, justice, and mercy roll down like living water and nurture all life on this planet. A planet where each human has at least the necessities of life. A place where animals and creation can pursue their natural courses uncontaminated and unmolested. A universe that need not fear the human species.

Oh, as I said, such is the babblings of an unsophisticated, naïve, religious, old air-head, isn’t it? The Beginning of a New Era, phooey! Let’s stop all this childish Christmas dreaming, get on with it and get back to life in the real world.

O, God, no! Please God, help us, like old Simeon, to keep faith in you. And, like pious Anna declare redemption for all in Christ. Let us not become disheartened, cynical, and defeatist. Let us live by faith in your words and presence in Jesus Christ, until we see the fullness of your kingdom come on earth that began so long ago in the birth of the baby Jesus.