

## **Luke 2:22-40**

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

Now 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. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Guided 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, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

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

And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then 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 so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.’

There 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 for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. 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.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

### **The Promise of Christmas**

Happy New Year’s Eve Day! I’m not sure how many of you will be going to New Year’s Eve parties tonight – when I think of the days that New Year’s Eve parties were on my agenda, church usually was NOT on the agenda. And when church was once again included on my agenda, New Year’s Eve parties fell OFF my agenda. Fortunately we Methodists have a history of Watch Night services that goes back to 1740, and while drinking and dancing was not the defining feature of these services, there are similarities in the way we Methodists and people in general look at the New Year’s holiday.

For one, we look at ourselves critically around this time of year. Second, we *resolve* to do better in the coming year.

But there may be a difference in how we go about *preparing* for the New Year. People often approach New Year's Eve as their last chance to act out before they have to commit to their New Year's resolutions. It's their last chance to misbehave before they have to follow through on their resolutions – it's the same mindset we have on Mardi Gras, the day before Ash Wednesday and Lent, or Halloween coming before All Saints Day – I was reading about a character from Alpine folklore called *Krampus*, and there is a *Krampusnacht* that is similar to Mardi Gras celebrate the day before the Feast of Saint Nicholas, where people would dress up as a sort of demon and visit people's homes, and it was customary to offer the Krampus some schnapps, like one offers candy to children on Halloween. These are meant to be *fun* festivals where we get all of our *badness* out of us before we have to start being good. To be honest, I like the way we celebrate Halloween and Mardi Gras and New Year's Eve – I think I'd even enjoy *Krampusnacht* if it's celebrated in a fun-loving way. But one thing about these celebrations is that they embrace a dualistic understanding of humanity – that we are this mix of good and evil, and the evil side of us has to express itself. And if we truly believe that there is this evil side of us, we become less *resolute* in making positive change in our lives. We may wake up hungover on New Year's Day and swear never to drink again, but within a short period of time we may regress back into our old ways.

This is where we Methodists, and I believe in a broader sense, we Christians, differ from the culture at large. We're not content to accept anything evil in our nature. We strive to be cleansed of all sin and all evil. So Watch Night services were celebrated by a renewal of our covenant with Christ. Watch Night is about girding ourselves for the coming year, committing ourselves to being better disciples of Jesus. It's about rejecting the evil of this world and embracing the good and only the good.

And we have to gird ourselves because there is a lot of pushback in the world out there – there is a lot of resistance to good. We've just finished celebrating Christmas – Jesus' birth – and there's a certain innocence about Christmas, like the innocence of a new born baby. *Everyone* can celebrate a new born baby. If you could imagine Pontius Pilate or Judas Iscariot or King Herod or the High Priest of the Jerusalem Temple trudging through Bethlehem on Christmas Eve, they might have stopped and visited the manger and smiled and congratulated the parents and even left gifts for the child. They would have all fit in well in our nativity scene, because this little baby Jesus is not a threat. But when we consider the adult Jesus, the words he proclaims and the challenge that he poses to all of us, that nativity scene doesn't look quite as peaceful. Jesus is going to grow up, and he challenges us to do the same, not to accommodate the evil within and around us but to purge it from us and from this world.

That's what Simeon and Anna are celebrating in our scripture lesson today. They're looking at this little baby and they are seeing the promise of a new world, not just of Israel's salvation but the salvation of the gentiles as well. God had promised to free Israel from the current oppression by sending a Savior, and Simeon and Anna both see that it is Jesus.

But evil is not purged without some struggle. Simeon says as much in today's lesson, telling Mary that "...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." Talk about putting a wet blanket on the Christmas spirit! This child is destined to divide us; some will rise with him, and others will fall. People's innermost sin will be revealed as they oppose him. And Mary will know the pain of a mother who must watch her own son suffer and die. By embodying all that is good in God, Jesus will expose all that is bad in this world in a way that no one else ever has or ever will.

And if we want to truly be freed from the bad, we have to be willing to follow Jesus, to pledge ourselves to him and to his word lest we resign ourselves to living in an endless cycle of good and bad in our own lives and in our world. This is why Watch Night is Covenant Renewal night.

And one of the main functions of a church must be to assist one another on that very difficult road. Historically this time after Christmas from Epiphany until Lent has been a time for churches to prepare themselves for the task of accompanying people on their journey to baptism or to becoming confessing members of the church, and that meant that the body – that is *us* – needs to be grounded in our faith, which means we have to be serious about our walk with Jesus. We need to be reminded of what Jesus did and what he told us to do, so that we can do a better job doing those things and help others along the road to doing those things. It's all good and well to say that Jesus died for your sins, but how seriously you *believe* that will be evident in how well you actually follow Jesus, obeying his words and living by his example.

And so, as the church, as those who profess faith in Jesus Christ, our New Year's resolution should be to become a mentoring body of believers charged with discipling one another, particularly those who are the weakest. That seems to scare a lot of folks who feel that their faith is their own business, but we are not simply an assembly of individuals here; we are the body of Christ, and we are charged with not only respecting one another but also lifting up one another and being willing to listen to one another, even correcting one another. Because that's how we grow up in the Spirit. We hold ourselves and each other accountable to Christ. May God grant us resolve to be ever-more faithful in our Christian walk.