

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

<sup>10</sup>I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. <sup>11</sup>For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

62For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. <sup>2</sup>The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give. <sup>3</sup>You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

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.

**Let Christmas Linger Forever**

I haven't decided yet if having Christmas and the New Year holiday so close together is a good thing or a bad thing. On the bright side, having two holidays back to back allows us most of us more time off, time for children to enjoy their vacation and their new toys, time for workers to enjoy a relaxed pace, and a little more time to keep Christmas going – we usually keep our decorations up until New Year's Day, and we even have a few post-Christmas gatherings on the days following Christmas. We can keep the Christmas hymns going in church for a little while before getting back to "normal." On the downside, New Year's Eve is a holiday that clashes with Christmas. We can hardly call New Year's Eve or New Year's Day a "holy-day" in the true sense of the word as the first is more about the works of the *Holy* Spirit while the second is centered more around the *distilled* spirits. Now I'm not a wet blanket; I love music and dancing – I'd love to see more dancing in church, dancing for joy in Christ – but too many people get too wrapped up in the drinking and end up starting the brave New Year with a throbbing head. There's nothing like a hangover to zap the Christmas spirit right out of you.

I am all in favor of putting our *commercial* Christmas behind us, of deflating the Santa and his helicopter found in the front yard, of unplugging all the lights and taking down the Christmas tree. But for the Christian, Christmas should be something that lingers forever, something that the season may accentuate, but something that we never forget. Indeed Christmas should be central to our whole being. When we digest the full meaning of Christmas our lives cannot be the same, and no ornaments or decorations are necessary for us to maintain our joy and gladness. God entered our world in the person of Jesus, and that fact cannot be underplayed. That fact affects how we live as well as how we die.

Look, for example, at how it affected Simeon. In today's gospel reading we are told that Simeon looked forward to the consolation of Israel – the nation was suffering from within and without; it was ruled by a corrupt monarchy and corrupt priesthood that answered to Rome, and all of them preyed on the common folk to support their extravagances. This directly defied the Law of God that the priests and monarchy were supposed to uphold – care for the widow and orphan, tend to the needy. Instead of being the apple of God's eye, Israel had become a corrupt mess. Simeon is clinging to the promises that God has made, that righteousness will have the day, that injustices will end, that things will get better, and the One who will initiate these reforms is known as the messiah. God will send a messiah who will establish peace and rule righteously over all the earth. Simeon is waiting for some affirmation that this messiah had finally arrived, that Israel's future is secure, that God is true to his word, and he is overjoyed when Jesus is brought into the temple by Mary and Joseph. Simeon takes Jesus in his arms and says, indeed he sings, "Lord now you may dismiss your servant in peace according to your word." In other words, Simeon is ready to die now. Simeon has lived to see what he hoped to see. Christmas is over – the messiah has arrived, and now Simeon may, quite literally, rest in peace.

In a way we Christians are much like Simeon. Simeon has seen the One who will bring righteousness and peace to the world, even though the world is still plagued with violence in and injustice and has been since sin entered the world. And we can pretty much bet that

violence and injustice will still exist in the world after our death, just as Simeon knew that injustice and violence would exist after his death. The fact that the messiah has come has not resulted in an immediate cleansing of our world. But it has affirmed a promise that will someday be fulfilled. Like Simeon we will reach an age when, like him, we can say, "Lord, now you may dismiss your servant." And we can look forward to resting in peace because we have seen Jesus Christ, and we have faith in him as Savior of the nations. Christ SHALL reign over all the earth as he reigns in the heart of every Christian.

Which is why we celebrate our New Year's Eve in a different manner than most others. Our celebrations take the form of either Watch Night services or covenant renewal services, both of which remain in harmony with the message of Christmas. Watch Night was first celebrated by both free blacks and slaves in 1862 on the eve of the Emancipation Proclamation which declared that blacks in the Confederate states of America were free. Covenant renewal services date to the seventeenth century and are often held on New Year's Eve or New Year's Day; these are services where Christians are reminded of the commitment they made to follow Jesus Christ. It's a time of repentance and renewal in our mission to serve our Lord and Savior. I believe that both of these services are in harmony with the spirit of Christmas because they look forward not just to a new year but to a new heaven and a new earth. Those who celebrate Watch Night understand the clear connection between a piece of legislation that declared freedom to millions who were in bondage and the establishment of God's reign on the earth. Those who celebrate covenant services understand the connection between our commitment to Christ and the establishment of God's reign. Christians understand that we are not passive spectators but active participants in the establishment of God's reign. Even Simeon, on the verge of death, was compelled to act upon his faith after seeing the baby Jesus by singing in praise to God, and in giving Mary a heads-up that a sword would pierce her soul, that she would witness something that no mother would ever want to witness – the brutal execution of her own son.

I encourage you, therefore, to celebrate in a manner befitting our calling this Wednesday night. May we celebrate what God has done and what God is doing in us and around us. May we commit ourselves to ever-better discipleship in 2015.