

“Eyes Wide Open”

Isaiah 42:5-9 & Luke 2:21-38

“For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples ...” Luke 2:30-31

Our two Scripture readings for this morning come from the Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, and our good friend, Dr. Luke. Let us listen for God’s word for us today.

Isaiah 42:5-9

5. Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: 6. I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, 7. to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. 8. I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. 9. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

Luke 2:21-38

21. After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. 22. 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 23. (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), 24. and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." 25. 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. 26. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. 27. 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, 28. Simeon 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." 33. And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. 34. 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 35. so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed--and a sword will pierce your own soul too." 36. 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 seven years after her marriage, 37. then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. 38. 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.

The opening scene of the ABC News documentary *The Search for Jesus* begins with a voice-over from celebrated TV reporter Peter Jennings. He's reading the Christmas story out of Luke against the backdrop of a Middle Eastern man carving the face of Jesus into a block of wood. As

the man finishes and sets the carving down, and as Jennings finishes the Scripture, the camera focuses on Jennings standing in a garden to introduce the documentary. His opening lines highlight the interest that even the secular media has in Jesus. "Hello, I'm Peter Jennings, and we have been searching for Jesus—as reporters, that is, because it's an irresistible story. And whatever your faith or religion, there's simply no denying the extraordinary influence that Jesus has had—that he does have—in people's lives."¹

Have you been searching for Jesus? Has Jesus been lost? Have you been lost? Who is this Jesus? Are you waiting for your consolation? Are you a prisoner of war sitting in the dungeon? Are you looking for redemption?

Great questions for us as we sit on the brink of a New Year. Today we have the opportunity to look back and celebrate the ministries of three gifted members of our church and the influence Jesus has had on their lives and the influence they have had in the life of this church. We also have the opportunity to look forward to the extra-ordinary influence of Jesus in all of our lives during 2008. Who is this Jesus?

The passage from Isaiah is sometimes called the “Servant Song.” Isaiah paints a picture of a Messiah that comes in righteousness, opens the eyes of the blind, and sets the captives free. The Servant Messiah brings light to those sitting in darkness.

Our good friend, Luke, whom we have been reading during the past five weeks of the Advent/Christmas Season, tells us the story of Mary and Joseph as they bring their child, Jesus, to the temple. Luke tells us some of the Jewish customs that were associated with the birth of a child--circumcision, redemption of the first-born and purification after childbirth. We could take some time looking at the meanings of these customs and how they might be important to us today. More importantly, we look to the beginning of a New Year and our question is, “Who is this Jesus?” Is He a cute, little, unassuming baby in a manger? Is He a child brought to the temple for the purpose of Jewish rituals? Who is this Jesus?

As we look to the New Year, let us think about waiting for the Messiah, looking for the Messiah and seeing the Messiah.

WAITING FOR THE MESSIAH

Luke took pains to describe Simeon. He was an ideal Jew. He embodied everything God intended for his people. He was righteous and devout. He operated with integrity toward God and others. He had also been waiting for the consolation of Israel, which is another way of saying he was waiting for the Messiah. This Messiah would bring consolation—comfort, solace, relief and support--to people who were anxious and oppressed. The Holy Spirit, also called “the Comforter,” was upon Simeon, and had revealed to Simeon that he would actually see the Messiah before his death.

Have you ever waited anxiously for a letter that would bring some kind of important news? You know it's coming, but until you held it in your hand, you would not rest. You check your mailbox daily. We can imagine Simeon entering the temple each day, wondering if this would be the day—waiting for the redemption God had promised. And one day Simeon sensed the Holy

Spirit leading him to the temple, and on that day Mary and Joseph entered the temple with their baby. Simeon took the child in his arms, thanked God, and began to pray. He could now die a contented man—his consolation had come; comfort had arrived; his dreams had been fulfilled

Ernest Gordon was the Dean of the Chapel of Princeton University for 26 years. He experienced his call to ministry in a Japanese concentration camp during World War II. Gordon and his fellow prisoners were used as slave labor to build the Thailand-Burma Railroad, and hundreds of these soldiers perished from mistreatment. As an officer, Gordon struggled to help his men make sense of all the suffering they had to endure. He became deathly ill and was spared by the care of Chaplain Dusty Miller, who shared his precious rations with Gordon. At one point, as Chaplain Miller nursed Gordon's broken body back to health, he spoke the words that would nurse Gordon's broken soul back to health as well (and call him into ministry.) Miller told him: "A man can experience an incredible amount of pain and suffering if he has hope. When he loses his hope, that's when he dies."²

Waiting for the Messiah means we have hope! To be sure, conditions were bad, very bad, in Israel at the time of Jesus' birth. Think of the loss of their political independence, cruel King Herod, the rise of the many false religions of the day, legalistic scribes and Pharisees and the silence of the prophets for over 300 years. Things were bad, really bad, at the time of Jesus' birth. But in the midst of the darkness, degradation and despair there were people like Simeon and Anna—waiting, looking, hoping, and expecting the consolation of Israel.

LOOKING FOR THE MESSIAH

Anna is old, around 84, yet she had never ceased to have hope for the redemption (exchange, salvation, deliverance, rescue, liberation, release, emancipation and/or recovery) of Jerusalem. Anna was a widow and she had known sorrow yet she had not grown bitter. Sorrow will do one of two things to us: It can make us hard, bitter, resentful, and rebellious against God and others, or it can make us kinder, softer, and more sympathetic towards God and others.

When I was working for Goodyear, I had the opportunity to travel to several different places in the world. I will never forget the trip to China. We crossed over into China through Macau. Our first stop was at a rural, isolated commune on the outskirts of town. The little farming village was surrounded by a drainage ditch that was used to dump their waste in. As we crossed the bridge and walked into the commune, we were invited into the homes of the residents. Their homes were mud-thatched, with dirt floors--two room huts. To my amazement, the pigs lived in the house with the people yet in the midst of the sorrow of this place, I saw hope in the eyes of the people. They were looking for their redemption—their deliverance, liberation, release and recovery.

When I was a pastor in California, I was invited into the home of a high-level executive of the Los Angeles Times. His wife's name was Anna and she was dying of cancer. Anna and Carlos had no relationship with God, the church, and did not know anything about the hope of redemption found in Jesus Christ. Their neighbors were members of our church and asked if I would visit with them. I had the opportunity to visit with the family for several months before Anna died. During the times we met, we talked about the hope and power of the resurrection. During our time together Anna and Carlos came to know the Lord and His saving grace. Anna

told me a day before she passed away that she was looking forward to her redemption—her liberation and release from this world to heaven.

A few weeks later, her husband came to the church and brought me this cross. He had never been to the church, had never been inside the church. He told me that one day he had come to see me and I was not at the office, but he found some scraps of wood in the church's dumpster. He took the scraps of wood home. From the scraps of wood Carlos made this cross, he said that at the center of the cross was the heart of God. He explained to me that in the death of his wife, he had found the hope in the midst of his sorrow.

What have we done with the sorrow in our lives? Are we looking for redemption—comfort, solace, relief, support? Are we like Anna, the Prophetess, who continued to worship and pray during her years and years of sorrow and loneliness? Are we like the poor Chinese peasants who look for redemption in the midst of our poverty? Are we like the rich, wealthy executive who found redemption—deliverance, rescue and recovery-- in the midst of his sorrow?

SEEING THE MESSIAH

When Simeon took the Christ child in his arms, he began to sing, praising God by 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."*

Simeon's eyes were wide open and he was able to see the light and glory of the God—found in the Christ child.

Simeon and Anna saw the coming of Christ as good news because they were looking, longing, and waiting for God to break into history once again and bring consolation and redemption. They were waiting for God to bring them comfort, relief and support. They were waiting for God to redeem them—to bring deliverance, rescue, liberation, release, emancipation and recovery! In their times of bitterness, they refused to focus on their afflictions; instead they looked forward with hope.

I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

This prophecy was fulfilled in the Christ child. In Jesus Christ, God has consoled his people—that's what Simeon was looking for; and the Lord has redeemed Jerusalem—that's what Anna was looking for. Consolation brings comfort and relief to our deepest longings for healing and restoration. Jesus Christ is the one who brings God's consolation to our losses. Redemption rescues us from powers that hold us in bondage--the power of sin, the power of death, the power of Satan.

SO WHAT?

That leads us to the “so what” question for today. How do these ancient words spoken about Simeon and Anna change our life today as we end 2007 and begin a New Year?

If we are satisfied with our lives as they are, if we have no longing in our hearts for consolation or redemption, the good news of Christ can ultimately become bad news for us. Jesus Christ can become a stumbling block over which we will fall; he’ll be a sign we oppose; he’ll expose our hearts, and we will refuse to stay in the light; choosing to continue hiding in our dark dungeons.

But perhaps God has graciously and tenderly been frustrating us with a life that is not centered on Christ. Maybe God has been filling us with longings and desires that cannot find their fulfillment in cars, or homes, or careers, or relationships, or anything else this world has to offer. Maybe God has been exposing our hearts so that we begin to see a need for someone beyond ourselves; someone to comfort and redeem us.

Peter Jennings died of lung cancer in 2005, but before he died he said this about his faith, “I discovered there was a new spark to my own faith. I had been raised in a fairly predictable Anglican communion, where the practice of religion was, I am sorry to say, often as much social behavior as it was spiritual. But today I find there is both comfort and challenge in practicing my faith, and though I am a dismal failure on many fronts, in trying to live it . . . my own faith has helped me to develop eyes that see the spiritual dimension in many stories.”³

Earnest Gordon experienced severe pain and suffering in his Japanese prison camp, yet he found hope.

The peasants in the rural commune were not satisfied with life as it was; they talked of their hope of redemption.

Carlos’ eyes were opened in the midst of his wife’s death and he found a faith that has sustained him in the very heart of God.

How about us? Are our eyes wide open? Are we looking for Jesus? Are we waiting for our consolation? Are we a prisoner of war sitting in the dark dungeon of life? Are we looking for our redemption?

Hear the GOOD NEWS:

*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.*

Jesus Christ is our consolation—our relief from life, our comfort in the storms, and the best support group we’ll ever need. Jesus Christ is our redemption—He is our salvation, our deliverance, our liberation and our release. The “so what” for today: in Jesus Christ we can exchange the dark dungeons of life for the rescue and recovery of God’s grace.

Let us pray;

Lord God, you are the light for the Gentiles and the glory for the people of Israel. We ask today that you would be our light and glory. Bring light to the darkness that we sit in. Bring light to the suffering we face. Bring light to the impoverished places of our soul. May we live in the heart of God this New Year! May our eyes be wide open to see your glory! Let us go and tell of your Good News--to the mountains and the valleys, and to the entire world: Jesus, the Messiah, has been born and He has changed our lives! Amen!

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December 30, 2007
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¹ The Search for Jesus with Peter Jennings (*©ABC News Productions, Inc., 2000*)

² Bill White, Preaching Today.com

³ Peter Jennings, Faith and the Media