“LOOKING FORWARD TO A NEW YEAR”

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church

December 31, 2017

Text: Luke 2:21-40

Last Christmas at about this time we visited my dad in Pennsylvania. On the last day there, we had a picture taken of the four generations – my Dad, me, Dan, and Tally (the red-headed rose among the thorns). Thirty years ago we had another generational picture taken when my grandfather was living and Dan was just a tot – four living generations together in one family. Some of you probably have such pictures in your family archives – three or four or perhaps even five generations posing together for a moment frozen in time!

The day before Daniel was born my parents advised us that they would not be coming to Carlisle (where we lived at the time) until the week after the baby arrived – whenever that might be – in order to give us time to settle in. Daniel was born on the afternoon of March 17; my parents arrived with my grandfather in tow on the morning of March 18. From all accounts, my mom started out the door to the car in the same motion with which she hung up the phone from our call announcing Daniel’s birth. There is a memorable picture of my 85 year-old grandfather sitting in a chair in the hospital that day holding his first grandchild, my grandfather’s face beaming with pride, the hands of one generation proudly and tenderly holding the much-loved child of a new generation.

That precious image comes to mind each time I read the passage in Luke’s gospel about Simeon holding the baby Jesus in the Temple. Simeon was not a grandparent to Jesus; he was just a devout old man who had patiently, faithfully, tirelessly waited and watched for the coming of the messiah. While others had given up hope or tired of watching and waiting, Simeon persevered. He remembered the prophecies of Isaiah about God’s chosen one who would be the consolation of Israel and who would usher in a new era of peace and prosperity. He dared to hope that the prophecies were true and to believe in the God from whom they came. He looked back across Israel’s history and saw the faithful hand of God guiding, prodding and saving God’s people over and over; he trusted God would do so again. He looked back to the prophets, but he also looked forward to the fulfillment of the promise, to the coming of the messiah. In the baby Jesus held in Simeon’s aged arms the past and future met: past promises and future hopes for Simeon and for all of Israel meeting in the infant Jesus.

It was not mere coincidence or dumb luck that Simeon happened to be in the Temple when Mary and Joseph brought their infant to be dedicated as required by Jewish law. As my dad often said, coincidence is God’s way of working anonymously, and God was at work that day in the Temple, leading Simeon there in fulfillment of God’s promise that Simeon would live to see the Messiah,

leading him past the vendors offering animals for offerings,

past pilgrims making their faithful way to the house of God,

past other families dedicating their children to the Lord,

leading him to one particular family and one particular child,

leading him to the messiah, to an infant held in the loving hands of poor parents who could afford only two turtledoves (a peasant’s offering) as the sacrifice to be offered to God.

Simeon found the messiah, held the infant messiah in his own weathered hands, because he listened to and followed the leading of God’s Spirit.

Are you willing to be so led, to be so patient, to be open to the leading of the Spirit, wherever God may lead you? Remember the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Yet to Come in *A Christmas Carol*? They led Scrooge away from the safety of his home to encounter joys he had long forgotten, lives to which he was selfishly oblivious, and grim possibilities for the future that he dared not imagine. In so doing Scrooge was redeemed, the refrain of his life changed from “Bah! Humbug!” to “God bless us every one!” If Scrooge can be redeemed then so can we. Are you willing to be redeemed, to be led by the Spirit of God in this new year to a place of God’s choosing – not yours?

Simeon was led to a child who offered him the extraordinary moment for which he had long longed! It was extraordinary for Simeon, but it must have been very odd for Mary and Joseph. Imagine these young parents

nine months removed from angelic encounters that foretold the child’s birth and demanded of them simple obedience,

not long removed from that silent night in Bethlehem when shepherds came rushing in to kneel at the manger and tell them of the tidings of great joy for all people they had heard from the lips of angels.

Standing in the Temple, quietly and inconspicuously fulfilling their religious duty, Mary and Joseph meet yet another stranger, an old man who asks, “May I see your son? May I hold your child, for I have long been waiting to meet him?” I wonder what Mary and Joseph thought at that point. Did they wonder – what next? Who next? Did they look with anxious eyes at every passerby wondering if there might yet be another messenger from the Lord? Were they startled with each knock at the door of their home, wondering if another angel would appear or another stranger ask to see their son – as the wise men would do? And what of the messages they received – the promise of divine conception, tales of angelic choruses, and the strange words of Simeon? How did these holy parents, chosen by God, handle the unique challenges of being the parents of the messiah?

We don’t really know. Scripture is largely silent about that, except that we know Mary and Joseph were good Jews who did the right thing under the law. They circumcised and dedicated their son as the law required. They welcomed graciously the strangers who had been sent to them: shepherds, wise men and old Simeon alike. They trusted God and handed their son into the hands of the ancient man in the temple, and as he took the child in his arms, Simeon spoke of holy and haunting things:

*Lord, now let your servant depart in peace…for my eyes have seen your salvation…* (And then to Mary alone.)*…This child is destined for the falling and 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 soul too.*

What were Mary and Joseph to make of these words? It is one thing to be told that your baby is cute or looks like his father or has his mother’s eyes; it is another to be told that he is destined for greatness that will come at the cost of great pain to him and to you. A familiar Christmas carol asks:

*Mary, did you know? Did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters, will one day rule the nation, is Lord of all creation?*

What did Mary know and believe about her son and God’s plan? Scripture is largely silent on that count, but if Mary had any doubts after the visits of the angel and shepherds, Simeon may have dispelled them once and for all with his prophetic words, words offering not only rosy promise, but also the grim foreshadowing of the cross and sword that would pierce Mary’s heart. Luke wants us to know from the beginning that the good news of Christmas is tied tightly to the darkness of Good Friday and the joy of Easter’s dawn. The shadow of the cross lies not far from the manger of the Christ child. So Simeon’s praises were tempered by the reality of the world to which the child came – a world that would reject him and crucify him.

Today we stand at the dawn of a new year. It is a time to look back and to look forward as Simeon did. We look back and recall Simeon’s words about the Christ child as we look forward to his return in glory. We look back at the year just passed and recall some joys and sorrows, and we look forward to the year to come with cautious hope or perhaps with great anxiety for our nation, for our world, and for ourselves. We look back on promises fulfilled and New Year’s resolutions long broken in 2017, and we look forward to new resolutions for a new year that begins tonight.

Some years ago Thomas Friedman raised a thought-provoking question in his book *The World is Flat.* He asked:

*Does your society have more memories than dreams or more dreams than memories?*

The same question might be asked of our church and of each of us:

*Do you have more memories than dreams*

*or more dreams than memories?*

Are you holding tightly to memories of the past or are you embracing dreams for the future? Friedman suggests, “When memories exceed dreams, the end is near.”[[1]](#endnote-1) We are people who should dream great dreams and hold great hopes for the future because we believe the promises of God. We can remember the past and cherish it, but we dare not live there, however glorious or haunting it may be. We dare not try to turn back the clock to try to make our nation great again or our church great again or ourselves great again, but rather we should look forward to a future that is in God’s hands, a God who gives us reason to hope. We learn from the mistakes and successes of the past, but we look forward to a future which is full of hopes, dreams and possibilities under the guiding hand of God’s Spirit.

It was that kind of future to which Simeon dared to look – a future filled with the promises of God for him and for the world. Because he dared to wait and hope and trust God’s leading, he was able to meet the messiah and be dismissed in peace. Twenty centuries later we are still waiting for the Lord, watching for his return and hoping in his promises. That posture of waiting and watching, hoping and dreaming about the future is a faithful way to frame our lives in this new year as we seek to be faithful disciples of Jesus day to day. We need not fear the present or the future, for it is all in the strong, reliable, loving, faithful hands of God.

It is the eve of a new year, a year in which God is with us still, and that, my friends, is enough to give us hope, great hope – come what may in 2018! Amen

1. Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux: New York, 2005, p.451 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)