

A Light For Revelation
A Sermon Delivered at Littlefield Presbyterian Church
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Opening prayer:

Lord, we pray that in this hour we would open our hearts and our minds to your Spirit. Help us to focus on your Word. May we see life through Your light. Guide us into your love and peace. Amen

Gospel Lesson—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 turtledoves 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 seven years after her marriage, 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. 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.

Message:

For most in Jerusalem it was just another day. King Herod woke to another day of political intrigue negotiating power with Jerusalem's elites and trying to stay ahead of imperial plots. Money changers were converting foreign coin into temple currency while merchants were hawking doves to the poor. In the temple it was another day of quotidian routine and perhaps temple gossip. One wonders if there was talk about the recent birth and what it meant. And perhaps there were some who questioned Mary's story of the virgin birth. Could such a thing be? I can hear some voices say that the God who made humans out of humus could also be a God who can bring forth a child from heaven. Yes, for most, it was another day of living in the shadow of the Roman empire.

But for a handful of souls it was an extraordinary day, a solemn and surprising day. Mary and Joseph were making their public appearance in the temple. The infant Jesus was being presented to the Lord according to a law that transcended the law of the Empire. In obedience to the Law of Moses, the couple made the journey in compliance with their traditions. One can't help but wonder what ran through their minds. Was Mary apprehensive about how she would be received—about how her child would be received? If there were gossip, did she hear it? And Joseph—the one who put his reputation on the line—was he concerned about what would happen and how it would affect his young wife? But more important than any concern they may have had, was their obedience to the call of God and the fulfilling of the commands of the Torah—commands that were given for the welfare of the community and the good of life.

Waiting that day was Simeon—a man whose life was defined by waiting. His life was lived in the light of hope. He was waiting for the long expected consolation of Israel. With him was the prophet Anna—one completely devoted to the temple, praying day and night. To this couple, to Anna and Simeon, this day was both a day long expected and a day of surprise. On this day they will hold the embodiment of the hope they longed for. When the moment arrives, Simeon cannot contain himself overflowing with joy as he sings:

“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 song reaches beyond the boundaries of Israel and is sung to all the world. The child that he holds is a gift to all: a light for revelation to the Gentiles—those who have in the past been the outsiders; this child that he holds is for glory to Simeon and all Israel—the fulfillment of the Torah and the prophets—the child who will flood the world with light. The song is actually a duet for Anna also sings the child's praise and sings of redemption through him.

This day of surprise and song was also a day of solemn warning. Simeon proclaims to 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”. The status quo will be shaken. The light will expose the shadow of death. There will be opposition. And Mary—“and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Anna alludes to the child as a priest—one who mediates redemption. Simeon declares that child Jesus will be a prophet: a Light for Revelation.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman poses the question “What is the message of a prophet”. His answer: judgment and hope. For those in power, for those who see this world as a place to use people and things for their own glory rather than for the glory of God, for them the light of prophecy may be judgment more than they can bear. But this light is a healing light. It is a light that seeks to reveal and to heal—to show the sores that we bear and to restore us to health. This is the meaning of salvation.

After my third year at Michigan State University, I dropped out of school. My life was in crisis mode. I was in deep straits. When I was 22 year old, I decided to change schools and change my major focus of study. I matriculated at Wayne State University and majored in music. I was assigned to study flute with Ervin Monroe, the first flutist of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra--an extremely accomplished flutist who was only 7 years older than I. I walked into my first lesson feeling rather intimidated. Erv asked me to play something—anything I wanted. So, I began playing. After a few notes Erv said: “Stop”. “What's wrong?” I

asked. “Everything”, he said. “Your embouchure is wrong, your breathing is wrong, your attack is wrong, your phrasing is wrong. Everything is wrong”. At that point I think I considered walking out, going home, and turning my flute into a lamp. I looked at him and said “Should I give up?” “Not at all”, he said cheerfully. “We can fix it all”. Under his guidance, I learned to play.

Erv provided judgment and hope. Bad playing is bad playing and he called it for what it was. But he also knew that under his guidance, where I was was not where I could be. Hearing him initially critique me was painful. But his critique was not meant to crush but rather to shake me and shape me.

In Psalm 119, the psalmist praises the Word of God saying: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” This is actually a more poetic way to say that prophetic revelation is both judgment and hope. The light shines on our feet and exposes the dust collected from the path we have trod. The light causes us to assess where we are and how we got there. The light to our path speaks to our future and where we are going. It implies the hope that lies ahead as we move forward in the light of the Word. “A lamp to my feet and a light to my path” also tells us that our life is dynamic, on the move, and should be a performance under the guidance of the Word of God.

In fact, Jesus' life is just such a performance: a three act drama: incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection. I think that for most people, the incarnation—God entering the human race through Jesus Christ—begins and ends with Christmas day. In fact, the incarnation includes the entire life of Christ. Of his first thirty years, little is said. Our passage today sums it up saying: “The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.” Outside of his experience in the temple in his twelfth year, we know only that he followed the normal cycle of growth. It is during his ministry that we see what the incarnation means as we learn how Jesus lived a life of perfect love—the fulfillment of the law. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, instructed and guided the lost. And he confronted those that sought to use their power to control and confine others.

“Show us the Father”, the apostle asked. “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father” was Jesus reply. Throughout his ministry the light of God's love shone brightly as he served those on the margins of society. The powers that be responded to this life of light and love by crucifying our Lord. On that darkest of days the light for revelation shone brightly as Jesus responded to the violence

thrown against him with words of forgiveness.

The Book of Colossians tells us that on that day “having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Col 2:15) The cross showed the world that there is a violence at the core of power and privilege—a violence directed against anyone who would question its supposed ultimate authority. Jesus took no part in the power plays of darkness. Instead he yielded his life committing his Spirit into his Father's hands.

The Song of Solomon (8:6-7) tells us: “For love is as strong as death, its ardor unyielding as the grave. It burns like a blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot sweep it away.” Jesus shows that love is stronger than violence. The river of violence that Christ endured could not quench God's love. The resurrection is the ultimate surprise—the victim becomes victor—a victor who does not retaliate but rather forgives and offers healing, reconciliation, and peace.

Through the resurrection we see that the structures and the powers of this world do not have the final word. Love prevails. The resurrected Christ speaks words of forgiveness and love and counsels us to fear not. He who is the light for revelation challenges us to bring this light to the world. The one who fearlessly challenged injustice calls us to be a prophetic voice today.

Christ is the pattern for an authentic life, and he is the one who empowers us to live that life. Through the Spirit, Christ continues to bring judgment to those who need to be corrected, and he continues to provide hope for the future.

Laodicea was an ancient city with deep Gentile roots. Before Antiochus II Theos named it after his wife, Laodice, the city had been called Rhodas and before that, The City of Zeus. Today it is a city in Turkey called Denizli. At the time the Apostle John received the Book of Revelation, Laodicea was a major financial power and a major commercial center for the wool trade--specifically black wool. It was also well known for its medicines. Unlike neighboring Hieropolis which had hot springs and unlike nearby Colossae which had cold springs, Laodicea had to transport its water into the city through aqueducts. By the time the water reached its destination, it was lukewarm—neither immediately good for hot soothing baths nor cold refreshing drinks.

The city was diverse and self-sufficient. It had a sizable Jewish community as well as Greeks, Romans, and Syrians. In 60 CE Laodicea experienced an earthquake strong enough to destroy it. When Rome offered to send supplies and

support to rebuild it, the Laodiceans said, “Thanks, but no thanks. We can take care of ourselves.”

Listen to what Jesus, the Light for Revelation to the Gentiles has to say to the Church in Laodicea. (Revelation 3:14-22)

“And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God’s creation: “I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.’ You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.”

Judgment and hope. The Laodicean church was not performing well. If they had asked “What’s wrong”, Jesus would have said “Everything!” They thought they had it all, but instead they were wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. By saying that they were lukewarm, Jesus was, in effect, telling them that they were useless. So Christ gives them a reality check—a judgment that could shake them like an earthquake and hope that could shape them into his image. He calls the wealthy to find in him true wealth, to find in him the wool that really matters—robes of righteousness, and to receive from him medicine to open their eyes to see their neediness and to see the needs of those around them. To those who had isolated themselves in their dens of comfort and control, he stands at the door and knocks offering food and fellowship—true community—to those who open the door. As the light for revelation he challenges the powerful and the privileged to see that the life they have is not true life. He calls them to open their hearts to live in his presence—the one whose very life gives true life.

Walter Brueggemann in his book “Gift and Task—A Year of Daily Readings and Reflections” states that the faithful are invited “to relinquish the grip that the present has on our lives and imagination and to shift energy toward that good

future from God. This summons a deep challenge to the ideology that affirms that the future will be only an extension of the present, as though we cannot image otherwise.” (p15). I think this is another way of saying that we should let the light of Christ, the light for revelation, be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. As we end one year and start another, we need to allow the light to show us where we are and be courageous enough to see the dust on our feet. But we also need to open the door of our imagination to the future that Jesus calls us to walk into—a future formed by forgiveness, reconciliation, love, joy, and peace. This we can do by the grace of God and through the help of the Spirit of Christ.