

First Sunday of Christmas

December 31, 2017

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Luke. (Luke 2: 22-40)

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, [Mary and Joseph] brought [Jesus] 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 people,
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.

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

This has been an unexpected and holy two months at Immanuel. Since the end of October, we have welcomed three newborns into our midst. Liam, Graham, and Matteo, have all been born in the last two months. And we have commended three elders into God's everlasting care: Fern, Jane, and Tsup Yee. As a person charged with the caretaking of souls, I notice such things.

And I have been thinking a lot about beginnings and endings. It gets me thinking about time. As we move into a new year, it is a good time to think about time.

The ancients told time by sun and moon, by planting and harvest. Time was less about what day it is and more about, is it time to plant the crops or move the flocks. They had the long view of time. Today, we tell time by Apple watches and Google calendars, precisely, down to the millisecond. Still we are often late, and we feel like we never have enough time.

The Bible speaks of both kinds of time. The time with which we order our days and the time that is in the hands of God. The Bible speaks of chronos time: days, weeks, seasons, years. The appointment that is at two p.m. on Tuesday, or the amount of time it takes to get to South Minneapolis.

But the Bible also speaks of kairos time: God's time, the right time, the appointed time. That critical moment when things come together for the fulfillment of God's promises. Jesus once said, "*The kairos is fulfilled.*" "*The kingdom of God is at hand.*" God's dreams have come to pass, and they are coming to pass as we weave through our days.

Chronos time is linear. It goes from here to there in precise measurements. Kairos time flows and bends. It is more circular than linear. The end is at the beginning.

Have I confused you real well yet? Let me give you a concrete analogy of kairos time. December 21st was the winter solstice. You know what the winter solstice is. Right? Anybody? It is the shortest day, longest night of the year. It is the time when the earth is farthest from the sun, in its elliptical rotation, and then begins back. Days got shorter until December 21st, and then they started getting longer. One minute a day we have been gaining. Did you notice? Days are getting longer, and by next week we'll be gaining two minutes a day.

But we are also entering the coldest, harshest part of the winter. Today's high is a whopping negative five. January feels dark; it feels cold. But the world has already turned. The light is already getting stronger. Regardless of how harsh the winter is, the winter is already doomed. Time is fulfilled. The beginning of winter is already the end of winter. In much the same way, the world turned with the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We are now in the days when the light of Christ is getting stronger. God's purposes are coming to pass, even if we only see them one minute a day. "*The kairos is fulfilled.*" "*The kingdom of God is at hand.*" The end is in the beginning. That's why Mary, in *The Magnificat*, could say, "*God has shown the strength of His arm.*" "*God has lifted up the lowly.*" And Simeon could say today, "*I have seen your salvation.*" The beginning touches the end.

This Gospel we heard today is about kairos time. We see Mary and Joseph coming to the temple. It is now forty days after the glorious night when the angels sang and the shepherds visited.

Forty days after the birth, they come for Mary's purification rite and Jesus' dedication. In our culture, it's almost the equivalent of the end of maternity leave. It is the time when you leave that quiet time and move into ordinary life. I wonder if we shouldn't have a blessing for the mother and dedication of a child to God before they go out into the world after maternity leave. To bless the beginning of ordinary life.

Jesus, the creator of the universe, the purveyor of life itself, is now six weeks old. Laying on a blanket, he can hold his head steady. Jesus has survived birth and the first six weeks, which is more than can be said of the majority of his peers, and he is ready to be part of the outside world.

So Mary and Joseph come to the temple. Can you picture them, holding that infant that's six weeks old? What do you see in them? I see exhaustion. Is there any parent of a six week old that is not exhausted? Those first six weeks are all consuming. And if you keep looking, you might see some uncertainty. They've never done this before. They're nervous with the responsibility before them, this life beyond their own, that is the stuff of angel visits. Are they wondering what the future will hold? What the ending will be?

Mary and Joseph come to the temple before they go back into their ordinary, chronological lives. They come, as we come on a Sunday morning, in search of something beyond the ordinary days. For hope that God has touched the present with eternity. That life and time have a purpose. That the end reaches to the beginning. And the world has turned, and we are a part of that turning.

Mary and Joseph are leaving the angel song and heading for the everyday. And there at the temple they meet Simeon. In contrast to the young, nervous parents, Simeon is old of years, and wise. He has seen babies and parents. And, more importantly, he has seen God at work. Simeon has this sense of time beyond time. He knows what he is looking for, and he sees it.

Somehow, in this child, in this six week old, who can barely lift up his head, Simeon sees a sign that the world has turned, that the light is getting stronger, and that God is, even in that moment, making a difference beyond the shadows and brokenness of the world. And that's why he can say, "*Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace; for my eyes have seen your salvation.*" Even if that salvation isn't fully formed, even if Jesus is still a baby, he knows the world has turned, that death is doomed. That fear and hate and oppression are doomed. The world has turned. And he speaks of light. "*A light to reveal you to the nations and the glory of your people Israel.*"

Then Simeon goes on:

“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 soul also, Mary.”

Simeon is wise enough to know that this salvation will not come easily. This salvation will not be without cost. The world may have turned, but — to steal from *Game of Thrones* — “winter is coming.” The world will not give up its shadows without a fight. And there is much to be done in healing, and forgiving, and making this world whole.

Simeon doesn't just say, “It's going to be okay. Wait for it. God is going to take care of it all from afar.” Simeon reminds Mary and Joseph, and all of us, that even if we know the ending, we still have a part in making this world whole.

We live in kairos time. God's time. Christ has turned this world toward the light and the fulfillment of God's dreams. And we are a part of that fulfillment.

As the new year dawns, we offer our hands, and our hearts, and our lives, toward the fullness of the Kingdom of God. We work toward that day when all will be warm and fed, all will be heard and respected, all will be healed and whole.

We watch for the light that we know is coming. We live toward God's reign, that we are certain has won. We know that the end has touched the beginning. We live in kairos time.

Amen.