

## *“Light for Revelation”*

Luke 2:2-40

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There has been debate over whether the 12 Days of Christmas song was created as a symbolic metaphor for Christianity where each number is a symbol, like the 10 Lords a Leaping the 10 commandments, three French hens the Trinity, and then can you guess about the partridge in a pear tree? Researchers say it is more likely a nearly two centuries old memory game song, first published in a riddle book, where you would be out if you didn't get your part right. But the song does get two things about Christmas right. There are actually 12 days of Christmas, so we are in the Christmas Season that lasts from December 25<sup>th</sup> to the celebration of the Epiphany on January 6<sup>th</sup> - the light of Jesus revealed to all the nations. The two turtle doves are a biblical reference as we now know from Luke Chapter 2. Which refers back to Leviticus Chapter 12, where a poor mother, without enough money for a lamb, was allowed to bring two turtle doves to the temple as an acceptable offering after the birth of her baby.

Luke spends about as many verses in Chapter 2 describing Mary and Joseph's visit with Jesus to the Temple as the verses about the birth of Jesus from the decree from Emperor Augustus to the shepherds glorifying and praising God. So this is important to Luke, for what they say about the role of Jesus and his birth as the fulfillment of God's promise of salvation: light for the Gentiles, and glory for Israel. Mary and Joseph are solidly in line with Jewish traditions and expectation – in verse 21 Jesus is named and circumcised and then the purification ritual and a presentation of the baby in the Temple in Jerusalem. We know that transportation in Jesus day, for poor parents without enough money for a lamb, was likely walking, maybe the donkey was still around, which would mean about a two-hour walk from Bethlehem to Jerusalem with an 8-day old baby – that is commitment to the law of the Lord as Luke calls it.

The scene is set for the entrance of two prophets, Simeon and Anna. Both are described in a way that shows they are the real deal – Simeon is righteous, devout, he has been told he will see the Lord's Messiah before he dies. Anna is named a prophetess, – either 84 years old or the Greek is not clear, has been a widow for 84 years – a long life of worshipping night and day, fasting and praying. Simeon and Anna are there and they are ready. They are ready because in Simeon's case a life of long watchfulness and hope, a man who is close with the Holy Spirit, so close that the Spirit rests on him, and reveals things to him, and he is so open to the Spirit's guiding that on this particular day he listens to the Spirit and goes to the Temple. They are ready because in Anna's case she did the work, fasting and praying, night and day, persevering in the long years of her long life in what Eugene Peterson describes as the work of faith – a long obedience in the same direction (*name of book he wrote in 1980*). Or what Soren Kierkegaard calls the purity of heart, to will one thing (*title of essays he wrote in 1846*), by which he means the will of God.

There is nothing that tells us that they were expecting to meet: the Lord's Messiah, the consolation of Israel, God's salvation, the light for revelation to the Gentile, the Glory of Israel, the redemption of Jerusalem – all phrases that describe Jesus in this passage – *as an 8-day-old baby in the Temple*.

But their lives were ready, and Spirit-filled, and built on the work of faith practices, so that when Simeon sees him, the old man draws him into his arms and praises God, knowing a completion has happened, he can go in peace for he is holding the salvation of God, the culmination of a life of waiting. And Anna makes a beeline right for the family and gives thanks to God. Anna speaks about the child to all who were looking forward for the promise of the redemption of Israel. I wonder if this long passage is included here because while Simeon might be dismissed from his post now, Anna just keeps on speaking the rest of the years of her already long life, about the child to all who were looking for signs of God's redemption.

We have turned the calendar page from 2020. Lord have mercy. And maybe we are looking for signs of hope in what we pray will be a better year and life feeling more normal...., although that might be an elusive term 10 months down the road from life changing abruptly: hope for the distribution of vaccines to reach them, or loved ones, or herd immunity to be reached, some may hope for a better financial situation, to pay down debt or get back to work or increased hours or a new job, for the arrival of stimulus checks, some may be hopeful in a change in political leadership, or perhaps in the health benefits of dry January, some may hope to see the fruits of anti-racism work within this church and society, for kids to go back to school, to see long-missed friends, resume activities, to never Zoom again – although I think that one is with us just maybe *not so much*.

You may have some of these, a different list of hopes, prayers and New Year's resolutions for wellness within you, your family, our country, our world. Anna and Simeon will remind us that these hopes are only our hopes because the birth of Jesus has changed the world. Jesus is the ground of all hope and the source of all light. He is the comfort and the consolation, the incarnation of God's love. That is his.

Here's what's ours: persevering in the long obedience in the same direction towards God's will, the love of God spread by our words, shown in our actions, witnessed by our service. Being so close to the Holy Spirit, that someone would write that the Spirit rests on us, and we talk to each other, and the Spirit guides us each day. Doing the work of the practices of faith, persevering in long years of praying and fasting and worshipping. And then being open to the light of revelation wherever it comes – a baby in the arms of a family too poor to afford a lamb, counting on the words of scripture tightly held in their hearts to be fulfilled and then recognizing what is before their eyes.

I remember Pastor Scott speaking about perseverance as being one of his favorite words to describe the spirit of the Lewinsville Congregation. Well, we have had some chances together to really put the rubber to the road on that one. And it will now be one of my favorite words to describe you all: how in the global pandemic, we persevered together while apart, in care and calling, and check-ins, in friendship and joy, in prayer and mourning, in supporting this church's ministry, in expanding our contributions to the Deacon Fund and meeting Mission needs that arise, in worshipping online even when we are often very over it.

Why else would we do this other than our hope together that the birth of Jesus has changed the world? That he is the ground of all hope and the source of all light, and that the promise of Christmas, that he is with us in all of it, not only connects us, but is the strength of our perseverance in faith and together as a faith community.

The Cellist Pablo Casals, regarded as one of the greatest cello players and composers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, was asked, at the age of 93, why he continued to practice the cello three hours a day. Casal's replied, "I'm beginning to notice some improvement. And that's the thing that's in me. I notice myself getting better at this." (*Christian Century* article "Good Habits Shape Good Ministers" by Peter W. Marty 2.10.17) That is a remarkable line, full of humility and hope, and joy in a life of doing the same thing over and over and over.

Dedication to an art, not unlike the dedication of Simeon and Anna, of our church, of our own lives of faith in Jesus. Who is himself the purpose and who gives of himself the strength for us to continue to move towards him. With this Christmas promise, in the words of the Rev. Dr. Neal F. Fisher, that "nothing builds perseverance more than the conviction that in some real sense the victory has already been won." (*Christian Century* article "What Rules Apply to Everyone" by Neal F. Fisher 2.19.18). The victory won, by a baby, held in the arms of an old man, recognized by the heart of an old woman. Such are the surprising revelations of the God we serve. Thanks be to God. Amen.