



# First Sunday after Christmas

December 27, 2020

Prelude: "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen" Wilbur Held

## Gathering

Liturgist: I will delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God.

**All:** For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness.

Liturgist: As the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.  
*Isaiah 61: 10-11 adapted*

**All Singing: 98 "Good Christian Friends, Rejoice"**

God's Greeting  
Passing the Peace

## Reconciliation

Liturgist: When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, so that we might receive adoption as the children of God.

**All:** Because we are God's children, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father."

Liturgist: So you are no longer slaves, but God's children; and since you are his children, he has also made you heirs.  
*Galatians 4: 4-7 adapted*

*Silent Confession and Lament*

Soloist: "In the Bleak Mid-winter"

In the bleak midwinter, frost wind made moan  
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;  
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow  
In the bleak midwinter, long ago

Our god, heaven cannot hold him, nor earth sustain;  
Heaven and earth shall flee away when he comes to reign  
In the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed  
The Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ

Angels and archangels may have gathered there  
Cherubim and seraphim thronged the air;  
But his mother only, in her maiden bliss  
Worshiped the beloved with a kiss

What can I give him, poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;  
If I were a wise man, I would do my part;  
Yet what I can I give him: give my heart

Liturgist: An angel appeared to shepherds and said, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

**All: Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."**

*Luke 2: 9-14 adapted*

**All Singing: 82 "Angels We Have Heard on High"**

Liturgist: Galatians 5:13-18

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

## Proclamation

Duet: "How Wondrous Was That Night"

Coleman

A star in the sky was the sign that He gave.  
Three wise men and shepherds would see.  
And they followed the star to the manger bed,  
To see what God's gift would be.

And the angels sang Hallelujah!  
And the heavens exploded with joy.  
But the world was silent, for it did not know.  
How wondrous was that night, how wondrous was that night.

The tiny babe in a bed made of straw.  
Would one day become King of Kings!  
He would wipe every tear away, heal every fear.  
What peace and joy He would bring!

The world lost in darkness, no light for its path  
But God would provide a way  
So He sent His own Son to be savior of earth.  
The babe born that wondrous day.

A tired worn heart has a shadow of doubt.  
How could all this wonder be true?  
But a glimmer of hope is God's ember of love,  
That lives on in me and you.

Scripture: Luke 2:22-40

When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons."

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,  
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.  
For my eyes have seen your salvation,  
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
and the glory of your people Israel."

The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.

Minister: The Word of the Lord.  
**All: Thanks be to God.**

Sermon: Saw Enough

**All Singing: 56 "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus"**

## Dedication

Prayers of the People

**All Singing: 93 “Go Tell It on the Mountain”**

Benediction

Postlude: “Good Christian Friends, Rejoice”

arr. Kristen Campbell

### Worship Leaders

Pianist / Organist:

Lynn Hollender

Vocalists:

Marjie & Molly Coleman

Liturgist:

Amy Boerman-Cornell

Violin:

Kathryn Boerman-Cornell & Willem Mouw

Prayer:

Bill Boerman-Cornell

Sound / Video:

Schuyler Roozeboom

Minister:

Roger Nelson

Hymns are from *Lift Up Your Hearts* (Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2013)

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Text: Luke 2: 22-40  
Title: Saw Enough  
Date: 12.27.20  
Roger Allen Nelson

Rule number 7.4, line 3 of subsection B, in the sermon writing rule book, reads:

*Don't open a sermon with a book report or book review. However, in extraordinary circumstances an exception may be made on the first Sunday after Christmas.*

These seem like extraordinary circumstances so I'm going to exercise that exception.

It dawned on me recently that Richard Rohr in "Falling Upwards: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life," and David Brooks in "The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life," are writing about the same thing. In exploring how we come to find meaning, contentment, and intimacy they both break life up into two parts.

The first half is about achieving success and accomplishing goals. Brooks describes this as the first mountain. We climb what the predominant culture endorses for happiness – school, career, comfort, accumulation, adulation....

But then, both Rohr and Brooks write about some transformational experience where we discover the top of the mountain to be less satisfying, or we see kind of meaninglessness in the first half. That transformational moment may be some manner of loss, or a sense of existential longing, or a struggle that we don't have the emotional or spiritual capacity to resolve. But then we realize there is a second mountain, a second half, and we turn toward exploring meaning, making peace with mortality, and a deepening spirituality.

We want certainty and clear answers for the first half, but live more comfortably with doubt and uncertainty in the second half. We want things to be black and white in the first half, but realize there are two sides to everything in the second half. We know our selves filled with both shadow and light, and know that everyone else must be that way too. During the second half we're aware of paradox and irony – realizing that success is often found in failure and life is found in death.

Now. I know that this take on life is seen through the lens of privileged white men in the second half of their lives, but I think it's also a helpful frame for our text this morning....

This first text after Christmas is about the first half and the second half. This story is about beginnings and endings. It's about a young family at the beginning of the first mountain and an old man and old woman on the second mountain.

Consider....

Mary and Joseph were following the rules and regulations for faithful Jewish parenting. According to Leviticus 12 a woman was ceremonially unclean after giving birth. If she

gave birth to a boy, she had to wait 33 days to be purified from her bleeding. If she gave birth to a daughter, the wait was 66 days. So, Mary and Joseph obeyed the law. First, they had little baby Jesus circumcised on the eighth day, they waited, and then they got back on the donkey and headed to the temple in Jerusalem.

Again, in keeping the same Levitical law, the presentation of their newborn involved a sacrifice. You were not to go empty handed. The top-drawer offering was a lamb, but if you couldn't afford a lamb you were to present a pair of doves or two young pigeons. Joseph and Mary were commoners – they went with the birds.

What's remarkable here is that given all they had been through Mary and Joseph were quietly faithful to their tradition.

There's no indication that they had a handle on things.

There's no evidence that there were more visits from angels.

There's no story of additional encouragement or explanation from God.

There's no mention of special guidance or personal insight.

They simply did what they knew to do, what their tradition taught them to do, and what the law required. They were climbing the first mountain.

Five times in this short passage there is reference to Joseph and Mary following the Law of the Lord in bringing their child to the temple.

Simeon and Anna, in the second half of their lives, were waiting in the temple. Anna, a long-term widower, found meaning and purpose in a religious life. Simeon, in his golden years, had some spiritual gift and confidence that sustained him. And, so they waited....

male and female,

old and faithful,

without all the answers,

a mix of shadow and light,

they waited until they caught a glimpse of the redemptive activity of God in a baby.

When Simeon saw the baby, he broke out in song. This was the end of a long road. His song is referred to as *Nunc Dimittis* – Latin for the first few words, loosely translated, “Now let me depart...” He had waited his whole life for some sense of meaning or the affirmation of God's promise; now he had seen it and he could rest in peace.

Fredrick Buechner describes that moment this way:

*When the moment finally came, one look through his cataract lenses was all it took. He asked if it would be all right to hold the baby in his arms, and they told him to go ahead but be careful not to drop it. “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation” he said, the baby playing with the fringes of his beard. The parents were pleased as punch, so he blessed them too for good measure. Then something about the mother stopped him, and his expression changed. What he saw in her face was a long way off, but it was there so plainly he couldn't pretend. “A sword will pierce*

*through your soul," he said. He would rather have bitten off his own tongue than said it, but in that holy place he felt he had no choice. Then he handed her back the baby and departed in something less than the perfect peace he'd dreamed of all the long years of his waiting.*

Simeon saw God at work and sang that he could now sign off.

Anna saw God at work and she wouldn't shut up.

When Anna saw the baby, she gave thanks and then told anyone who would listen about the redemption she had seen. Imagine a widower of 84 years discovering that what she had been waiting for was wrapped up in a baby blanket! What a wonderful colorful image.

Oh! And a woman. The first preacher in the Gospel of Luke is a woman.

Dear friends, you can make a fairly convincing case that Simeon and Anna were the first to recognize that Jesus was the Messiah.

Mary is still pondering things in her heart.

Joseph is a sturdy albeit silent bystander.

But, Simeon and Anna are the first to see who Jesus is.

Maybe those who are in second half of life are uniquely open to the muted mystery of the presence of God. Maybe old age softens certainty and makes space for the surprise of grace. I realize that this is a stretch and it reads too much into the text, but...

But, maybe there's recognition that it doesn't have to do with us and what we accomplish, maybe there's space created by not having all the answers, maybe learning to wait is part of the lesson here.

Because, if Brooks and Rohr are right, the fullness or completion of life has less to do with what we do and more to do with what God is doing. Life gets any sense of wholeness and culmination from outside of us. Life is finished by what God does, not by what we do. In the first or the second chapter, we are simply called to be attentive, open, receptive, faithful, waiting...

In Richard Rohr's words:

*It's a gift to joyfully recognize and accept our own smallness and ordinariness. Then you are free with nothing to live up to, nothing to prove, and nothing to protect. Such freedom is my best description of Christian maturity, because once you know that your "I" is great and one with God, you can ironically be quite content with a small and ordinary "I." No grandstanding is necessary. Any question of your own importance or dignity has already been resolved once and for all and forever.*

You know, Simeon and Anna really didn't see anything more than the child. There is no evidence that they heard Jesus teach or saw him heal the sick and gather-in the marginalized.

They didn't see Jesus crucified.  
They didn't know of the resurrection.  
What they saw was the child.

This baby was going to fall off the screen for thirty years and emerge for three. Simeon and Ann didn't see anything more than the child, but they saw enough. Without the full picture they express thanks. Their vision was incomplete, and yet it was enough to sing and enough to share with any who would listen. They saw enough....

Dear friends, may it be so with us.

May we see enough of Jesus to be faithful in the first half and sustained in the second half. May we see enough of Jesus when we're building and when things are coming apart. May we see enough of Jesus to sing and want to tell someone about it. May we catch a glimpse of God's redemptive activity even in a baby. A glimpse may be all we get, but may that be enough.

Again Richard Rohr:

*People who've had any genuine spiritual experience always know that they don't know. They are utterly humbled before mystery. They are in awe before the abyss of it all, in wonder at eternity and depth, and a Love, which is incomprehensible to the mind.*

Amen.