

“In Search of Happy Endings”
Luke 2:22-40
1st Sunday after Christmas Day

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Westminster, Greenville
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In 1941, Irving Berlin wrote the classic song “White Christmas”.

It was the first of all secular Christmas music.

During the darkest days of WWII, it became THE song for Americans at home and abroad to hear. And for over 50 years, Bing Crosby’s recording of it was the best-selling single of all time.

I wonder if you’ve heard that song at any point this past month. If you have, did you pay close attention to the lyrics that you’ve heard hundreds of times before?

Did you notice that this memorable song...is full of SADNESS?

“I’m dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the ones I used to know.

Where treetops glisten and children listen to hear sleigh bells in the snow.

I’m dreaming of a white Christmas
with every Christmas card I write,
May your days be merry and bright,
and may all your Christmases be white.”

The song ends with cheerful wishes...but those wishes begin with disappointment, with a LONGING, if you will, for something that the singer does not have.

“I’m dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the ones I used to know...”

The longing for something we don’t have...

Eighty years later, in the midst of a pandemic—the song still feels relevant.

What are you longing for right now?

For a different kind of year in 2021?

For a life and routine that you recognize?

For people in our society to be more gentle with each other?

For people to work for justice and peace with and for one another?

Do you know anything about longing—

longing for something you don’t have...right now?

Simeon knew.

In our text for today, Luke tells us that Simeon was a righteous and devout man, and that God had promised to show him God’s Messiah before Simeon died.

So Simeon waited and waited—

day after day, year after year,

his was a lifetime of *longing* for God to fulfill

God’s promise.

And then one day, as an old man in the Temple, he sees Mary and Joseph walk in. Simeon sees the baby Jesus, holds Jesus in his elderly arms...and the promise is fulfilled.

The story of Simeon is a wonderfully moving story of faith.

Simeon lived to see God make good on God's word, to see God's FAITHFULNESS come to pass:

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation...”

I don't know of a more satisfying ending in all the Gospels.

In fact, it's an ending that's so good, it almost takes us right past the OTHER part of what Simeon says.

I'm not talking about the part where Simeon praises God.
I'm talking about the part where Simeon speaks to Mary.

Simeon starts out talking about light and glory and salvation. But do you remember what he does next? He turns to Mary, and he blesses her, and says that her son “will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Now wait a minute here. What kind of a blessing is that?
What happened to the glory? What happened to the light?

Up to this point, everything Mary's been told has been GOOD NEWS:

“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

That's what Gabriel said.

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

That's what Elizabeth said.

And then Simeon comes on the scene, telling Mary (and the rest of us) that her son is God's salvation, that is true...but this "light of revelation" will not arrive without conflict for those who oppose him, and pain for those who love him.

Tell me something—in everything you've been longing for recently—that list you made in your mind a moment ago—is THAT the Christmas message that you were hoping to hear?

I'm reminded of a story a man who was a professor of religion at a University, and he had grandchildren he absolutely adored. Being a doting grandfather, he wanted to give them EXACTLY what they wanted for Christmas.

So, he sidled up to them in the days prior to the holiday, and asked his grandkids, "What's on your Christmas list this year?"

One of them said, "We'd like the world..."

After a moment's hesitation, he realized that what they were not asking for EVERYTHING...they were asking for a GLOBE—a literal toy world—so he went out immediately and bought them one.

Christmas morning came, and he gave it to them.

He was so excited to watch them open it!

They unwrapped it—and...he noticed that they were NOT nearly as excited as he hoped they would be.

So that evening, he sat on the bed, beside them and said:

"I gave you the world this morning—

and yet I see that it wasn't exactly what you had in mind.

Somehow I missed it.

If you'll only tell me how I missed it,
I'd like to make it up to you..."

And one of his granddaughters said,
"You gave us a DARK world--we wanted a LIGHT world."

And, he suddenly realized that they were talking about an
ILLUMINATED GLOBE, with the light inside.

So, he said: **"I'll see if I can do something about that."**

And the next morning, he got up and went back—
with all of the post-Christmas rush in New York City:
took the train in, stood in line to get his money back.

He discovered that the store where he bought the original globe did
NOT have a lighted one, so he trudged around in slush and snow, and
four hours later, FINALLY found one that was the kind they wanted.

He bought it and gave it to his grandchildren...and they were
delighted!

Well, one of his colleagues at the university was asking how his
Christmas was a couple weeks later, as the professor told his friend
about all the problems he had trying to find the right kind of globe.

And his colleague said to him:
"WHAT did you learn from all this?"

And the grandfather replied:
"I learned that a lighted world costs a lot more."¹

¹ I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Ramsey for sharing this story. It comes from a mutual friend and colleague, the Rev. Joe Emerson.

That's not too far from what Simeon told Mary today.

If we want a lighted world...

light that shines in the darkness,

light that CHANGES the way people see one another,

behave around one another—

it's going to cost us more.

Think again about what YOU'RE longing for right now.

Perhaps a more predictable life next year than you had this year?

Nothing wrong with that—this past year has been, by any estimation, a very difficult year...

But when you and I are tempted to think—gosh, I just want to feel content again, I just want to be comfortable in my routines again, I just want my old life BACK again...think for a moment about all those who cannot go back to their old life. What does this Christmas mean for them?

Indulge me in a little Bible study for a moment.

When Mary was in the Temple with Simeon, she had no way of knowing what Simeon was referring to when he said to her: “a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Mary did not know what EXACTLY the future was going to hold...

But years later,

when she DID learn what those words meant—

when she walked through the death of her first-born son—

Luke is careful to remind us that Mary’s journey of faith was not done.

If we sprint ahead to Luke’s second book, the book of Acts, Luke tells us in the very first chapter that the disciples were gathered together, waiting for the Holy Spirit to come upon them...

“All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.”

Wait!

Luke hasn’t mentioned Mary since the 8th chapter of his Gospel!

Why did Luke insert that little phrase:

“...including Mary the mother of Jesus...”???

I think Luke—in that passage in Acts—is calling us back to that day in the Temple with Simeon.

This is Luke’s way of reminding us that God remained faithful to Mary, even after she had to endure what no parent ought to endure.

This is Luke’s way of saying that the FAITHFULNESS of God takes many forms!

God’s faithfulness surprised old Simeon in the form of a baby,
a newborn whom he held shortly before his own death.

And in Acts, God’s faithfulness came to Mary in the form of a community. A community of disciples who HELD HER—
even after her own son’s death.

Where have you seen God's faithfulness at work over the course of this past year?

I received a Christmas letter this year from some old friends of our family—by family, I mean my family of origin, when I was a boy, growing up in Michigan.

Actually, it was more than a letter.
It was a poem of sorts.
The first line went like this:

*Tread tender the heart
the world seems so far apart.
The loss of another child
has left us in the wild.*

Why did they begin their letter that way?

Because back at the end of this summer, their son—50 years old, married, three children—died suddenly and unexpectedly of a heart attack.

Never mind the pandemic.
This was the defining event of their year.

Their son was a childhood friend of mine.
We played on the same soccer team.
We did the CROP Walk for Hunger together when I was 7 years old.

I had lost touch with their son through the years, but this spring, shortly after the pandemic began, we reconnected over Facebook. And then a few months later, he was dead.

If I was in his parents' shoes, who knows if I would have had the strength, the energy, the courage to even bother with a Christmas letter?

But what was remarkable to me was not just the fact that they sent a letter. What really stood out was how the letter came to an end:

"The hand we have been dealt still needs to be played.

And then they spoke of the birth of Jesus,
and the love of God known in that birth,
and the love of God that's known in his Cross...

And they ended the letter by writing:

*"A love from above will give us new chances
from sorrow to joy.*

In other words, it was a letter about the faithfulness of God!
A letter that immediately became a source of God's light and hope for me.

And all they did, by writing that letter, was share their gifts.

The gift of being transparent about their sorrows and joys.
The gift of being unafraid to step forward in faith,
to bear witness to the faithfulness of God.

All of which got me thinking...

During a Christmas season unlike any other we've walked through—what gift is God asking you to share?

How can we bear witness to God’s faithfulness at this time of year?

We’ve got good examples in our text.

Simeon had the gift of patience, right?
Waiting many years for God’s salvation to be revealed.

Mary had the gift of endurance.
Of going forward in faith after suffering a great loss.

What gift is God asking you to share, at this time, in this place?

Back in the 13th century, the artist Giotto recreated the scene in our text in one of his most famous paintings. According to at least one critic, Giotto’s “Presentation in the Temple” is “one of the few genuinely witty paintings in great art.”

In the painting, Simeon holds the baby Jesus,
 cradling him like the promise he’s waited his lifetime to see,
 his eyes peering intently at the young child’s face—
 and you can almost hear Simeon reciting the words,

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace...”

But the body language of the baby Jesus is very amusing. It is not the same as the body language of Simeon. While Simeon clearly wants to hold this baby, the baby clearly doesn’t want to be held—at least, not by this stranger!

The baby Jesus looks at Simeon like “Who IS this old man?”
—and at the same time, he’s reaching backward for his mother.

But the most brilliant stroke in the painting is that as Jesus is reaching back, he is extending himself over the altar at the temple.

Giotto creates a painting that appears to be about the beginning of Jesus' life, but it's really pointing toward the end.

The eternal sacrifice God gives us in the love of Christ.
The eternal light that God promises in the cross of Christ.²

Of course, we cannot all be master painters.
But like Giotto, like my family's friends, we can share our gifts.

Maybe the question for each of us, as we say goodbye to 2020, is not, "When can I get my old life back?"

Maybe the question we need to ask is this:

"How can I most faithfully use my gifts,
to be a source of light and hope for God's world,
even when—
creating a lighted world—
just might cost us more?"

Amen.

² I am indebted to two sources for the explanation of this painting: "Art and the Theological Imagination," by John W. Dixon, Jr., New York: The Seabury Press, 1978, and "They Also Serve Who Wait," a sermon by Dr. Thomas G. Long, in his collection *Something Is About To Happen: Sermons for Advent and Christmas*, 1987.