

Date: December 31-January 1 New Year's Eve and Day

Title: *Expecting Jesus...Hope in our Future*

Theme: *The prophet boldly declares the bright future of what Jerusalem will become to the world. Simeon and Anna look into the eyes of the One who was promised to the world and declare that they have seen the salvation of God. We are called to believe and act as if God is already in our future and that is the hope we cling to.*

Texts: Isaiah 61:10-62:3 and Luke 2:22-40

Isaiah 61: 10-62:3

The second section of Isaiah was written shortly before the Israelites returned from their Babylonian captivity. The prophet painted a picture of a glorious homecoming in which Israel would be restored to their earlier glory. While the Israelites did indeed return to Israel their homecoming was less than spectacular. In particular the city of Jerusalem was in ruins. The fields and orchards, having been left untended for nearly 70 years, were desolate. Far from returning to glory the returning exiles labored daily to scrape out a living.

The third section of Isaiah, therefore, continues to promise God's faithfulness and paints a picture of an abundant future, the revealing of God's salvation. What was earlier promised is still to come. It was already (they were not longer in captivity) but not yet (it would take a while to be fully revealed). It is this "already but not yet" theme that is the connection point between this passage and our gospel reading. God's salvation would spring up like a seed. It would glow like a flaming torch for all the nations to see. God's righteousness (vindication and salvation seem to synonyms of righteousness here) will be revealed and it will be as beautiful as a wedding gown. While the people seemed to have been complaining that God has been silent in fulfilling his promises, the prophet cannot keep silent in proclaiming what God has done and is doing in the midst of the people.

Luke 2:22-40

Mary and Joseph show themselves to be observant Jews by obeying the commands to travel to the Temple in Jerusalem for Mary's purification and the redemption of the firstborn. Luke emphasizes the poverty of the family by letting us know that they can only offer a pair of birds as sacrifice. These were ordinary events in the lives of every young Jewish family at the birth of the firstborn male.

While they were in the temple Mary and Joseph encountered a man named Simeon. We're told that Simeon is righteous and devout, filled with the Holy Spirit and looking forward to what Luke calls "the consolation of Israel". . . a Jewish way of saying "the messianic age", the time that fulfillment of God's plan when the messiah comes. Simeon takes Jesus in his arms and praises God with some profound words. Simeon says that God's salvation has come in this child, Jesus.

What does that mean? What is God's salvation? Lots of Christians today assume that God's salvation refers to getting into heaven, but rarely does salvation have to do with the afterlife. For the Jews salvation referred to liberation in the present...liberation from economic, political, religious bondage. Salvation, then, refers to the new Kingdom that Jesus has come to inaugurate...a Kingdom in which justice and peace will reign here and now, on earth as it is in heaven. That's good news!

These words must have blown Mary and Joseph away! Can you imagine? But Simeon wasn't done. This salvation of God, this child, would also bring difficult times. Jesus will divide the nation as some believe

the good news and others reject it. And not only that but Simeon says that Mary's soul will be pierced, the first foreshadowing on Jesus' crucifixion.

As if Simeon's words were not enough for one day, Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph encounter a woman named Anna. While the details are a little confusing in the Greek it is clear that Anna is old and that she's been a widow for most of her life and that she has dedicated herself to worship in the temple. This is a righteous and devout woman. Like Simeon, Anna praises God for this child, bearing witness to all who were looking for the redemption of Israel. What does that mean? Redemption in the ancient world was tied to being bought out of slavery...in this case not slavery to sin but physical slavery. While the later Church certainly did connect Jesus with our redemption from sin and death, in its original context this probably referred to Israel's redemption from their slavery to Rome, from political and economic slavery.

Now, why does Luke include these two stories? What is he trying to say? In addition to the portraying Mary and Joseph as righteous, obedient Jews Luke is also using Simeon and Anna to add to the earlier testimonies about Jesus in the first two chapters of the Luke's gospel. Remember, up to this point it's been shepherds who bear witness to who Jesus is. Here we have two upstanding, devout and righteous people who bear witness to who Jesus is. In addition, according to Jewish law a single individual's witness didn't carry much weight, but the witness of two or three did. Here we have two reliable witnesses to Jesus as the savior.

Preaching Possibilities

Throughout the Advent season we talked about expecting Jesus. We've been expecting him now for nearly 2,000 years! By this weekend the warm glow of the holidays will be over and we'll be dealing with moldy leftovers, over-stimulated kids, messy homes, relatives who have stayed too long, Christmas trees that are dropping needles everywhere and bills for things we shouldn't have bought and don't really have the money to pay for. So, where exactly is this promised salvation?

Living in hope isn't easy. By definition hope is daring to trust in what we cannot see. And that's exactly what is happening in our scriptures readings today. The Israelites are hoping for the full revelation of God's salvation. For now, all they have is a hint of it. Mary and Joseph hold a child in their arms. How can they possibly believe the hope that Simeon and Anna hold out to them? Christians are called to live in the tension of "already, but not yet." God's salvation, God's Kingdom reality, has come in Jesus. We see glimpses of it, though not the fullness of it. Every time love wins over hatred, generosity over stinginess, forgiveness over bitterness we are seeing a glimmer of what we will one day experience in fullness when Jesus returns. For now we not only wait and live in hope, we respond to God's call to be a people who together reveal God's Kingdom to the world with our lives. How very remarkable that we can be living signs of hope in the world today. In the darkness of these days we are a people who are called to *"Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."*