

Manningham Uniting Church

Combined Service Sunday, December 31, 2023

The First Sunday of Christmas, Year B

Texts: Isaiah 61:10-62:3
Luke 2:21(22)-40

Theme: My eyes have seen your salvation!

Introduction

Welcome, beloved friends and family of faith.

The last service for the year. The last Sunday of the year. As we stand on the precipice of a new year, we find ourselves looking back at the year that was, and looking forward to the year that is to come. For me, the birth of Jesus, dear friends, is more than just a historical event. It is a beacon of hope, a symbol of grace, and a promise of new beginnings.

Henri Nouwen once said, *"The Lord is coming, always coming. When you have ears to hear and eyes to see, you will recognize him at any moment of your life. Life is Advent; life is recognizing the coming of the Lord."* Let these words echo in our hearts as we prepare to receive the Word of God today.

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord. **Amen.**

"When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him 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 turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'"

Luke has an emphasis on the Jewishness of Jesus and his family. Five times in our text we are told that Mary and Joseph observed the Law (vv. 22, 23, 24, 27, 39).

In the book, *The First Christmas*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan suggest that Luke's purpose was to set up the birth of the Jewish Messiah as a counter to the birth of the Roman Caesar – also hailed as the “Saviour, Redeemer, Son of God.” The scene in the temple in Jerusalem confirms the child Jesus as the expected one who would redeem Israel from bondage to imperial injustice and oppression. Luke's story is grounded in the mandate in Leviticus 12, which requires the mother to follow specific rites of purification, 40 days after giving birth. It is easy to forget that Jesus was a Jew somehow. But this Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, born to a Jewish family in a Jewish land, practising the Jewish religion.

To me the heart of the Presentation is the Song of Simeon: *“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 peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”* [Luke 2:29-32, NRSVU]

I love this text. I love it even more when it's sung. Have you heard it being sung before? Do you want to hear it? *[Play The Song of Simeon, Luke 2:24,25; Bukas Palad Music Ministry: Spotify]*

And I love the story around it: Old Simeon, promised by the Spirit (he was sure it was the Spirit... it couldn't have been his imagination, just a longing heart's pious wish...) that he would live to see the promised Messiah. But he was so very old. We are told that he “was righteous and devout”. He felt like it was time to go, to leave this world for — well, for whatever it was that God had in store for those who loved and served him. He was tired, so very tired. He was weak, and he was ill. Would the promise be fulfilled? Then one day, a day like any other, really, into the Temple walks a family: young mother, older man, babe in arms. Maybe some older kids. Somehow, he knew this was The One.

(It had to be... he could just tell... there was that nudge inside, he could feel it in his guts and that whisper again...) This baby was the Messiah he had waited so long to see. So, he approached them. He reached out to the woman, wordlessly asking to hold her baby.

She didn't turn away — maybe she knew that this stranger was alright, someone who would be safe with the child. She let him take the boy in his arms. The look on his face seemed to communicate a blessing. He turned his eyes to heaven and — he sang. He sang about the end of his life; that he had fulfilled his purpose somehow, having seen and held this child. It sounded as if God were giving him permission to die.

“My eyes have seen your salvation” he sang. *“My eyes have seen your salvation.”* After all these years of waiting, of dreaming, of hoping, he said, *“My eyes have seen your salvation”*. Another way of putting it is: *“Okay God, let death come. My bucket list is complete.”*

And then we have Anna, an 84-year-old widow who stayed close to the temple and served God through fasting and praying. In return, God blessed her by allowing her to see the Saviour of the world as a tiny, newborn baby.

Both Simeon and Anna, two senior devout Jews point to the baby Jesus as the Messiah they were waiting for. They knew the purpose of their lives! They faithfully waited.

There's an old Sufi myth that when laid alongside our gospel myth sheds light upon our longing for a better life and world. According to the Sufi myth, a certain Sultan owned everything a man could wish for and still he did not know the purpose of life.

The answer to three questions made his life difficult:

- 1. What should I do?**
- 2. With which people should I do the things God asks me to do?**
- 3. When should I do it?**

The Sultan asked the advice of all kinds of wise people, and then he was told that there was a Chishti dervish¹, who lived far away, and who might give him a satisfactory answer. The

¹ a member of a Muslim (specifically Sufi) religious order who has taken vows of poverty and austerity. Dervishes first appeared in the 12th century.

Sultan immediately left and after a journey of several weeks he met the dervish. The dervish was cultivating his own land. He was a simple man, but no simpleton, as he was reciting a Persian verse over and over again: “There is a work beyond knowledge, realize that, go! Do not work to get jewels, be the mine, go! The heart is a temporary abode, leave it and come! The soul is the final abode, realize that, go!”

The Sultan was however not interested in Persian poems and put his three questions to the dervish. The dervish did not answer him and continued with his work. The Sultan became angry and said: “Don’t you know who I am. I am the Sultan of Sultans”. But this did not make any impression as well and the dervish continued doing what he was doing.

A heavily wounded man suddenly appeared, and he dropped to the ground in front of the dervish. The dervish said to the Sultan: “Help me to carry this man to my place!” “I’ll help you,” the Sultan said, “but will you answer my questions afterwards?” “Later!” the dervish said and together they brought the wounded man to the hut of the dervish and took care of him.

“And now I’d like to receive the answers to my questions,” the Sultan said.

“You can return to your palace,” the dervish said, “because you have already received the answers to your questions.

As to what to do, you should do what comes to you on your path.

As to with whom you should do it, the answer is with those who are present.

And as for the when to do it, you should do it the moment it takes place”.

It has been said that at the end of our lives, we don’t remember days, or weeks, or years, what remember at the end of our lives are moments.

“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.” (Luke 2:33-35)

Simeon’s warning to Mary is one about love. When humans love fully as a partner, parent or friend, it involves connecting. But loving means hurting; when others hurt, laughing when others laugh and crying when others cry. As a human, Jesus, His family, and His friends were subject to these highs and lows of loving relationships. There is no escaping.

I always like these words of C.S. Lewis: *“To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken.*

*If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. **To love is to be vulnerable.**”*

To love is to be vulnerable. No escaping! When we close our vulnerability we are shielded from hurt, but we are also shielded from love, intimacy, and connection.

They come to us through the same door. When we close it to one, we close it to all.

To love is to be open to the possibility of being hurt. Relationship pain is an unavoidable part of being human.

Of course, there are times to be guarded, but there are also times to be vulnerable.

We’re protected, but we’re disconnected. When we shut down our vulnerability, we shut down the possibility.

Today is the last day of the year, the last Sunday of the year. For some of us, we exit 2023 with a sigh and a moan. For me this year has been so challenging in so many ways.

I am tired. I am weary. I am grief-stricken. 2023 ends about 12 hours from now.

We all face challenges, difficult times, and disappointments in our lives.

All of us have suffered in one way or another. We all need to be comforted.

*“Lord, now You let Your servant go in peace, Your word has been fulfilled;
My own eyes have seen the salvation which You have prepared in the sight of every people,
a light to reveal You to the nations, and the glory of Your people Israel.”*

These are words of hope. These are words of comfort. These are words of peace.

God came to us at Christmas as a weak and vulnerable Child to teach us how to love. The Heart of Christmas is about love, God’s love. God loves us so much that God gave us the most precious gift imaginable, Jesus. This wonderful gift of love calls us to love one another. As we wrap up 2023, God-in-the-flesh is on my mind. I take great comfort that Emmanuel, God is with us.

I love the wild way God chose to enter the world — a human baby born to unlikely parents amid chaos and simplicity. God was born in a smelly stable to an unwed mother and her faithful fiancé. Pagans were strangely drawn to him like a moth to a flame. Shepherds, the lowest of the low, get the news first. God, in the flesh. Showing us the ways of love and how utterly contrary they are to the ways of the world, to the ways of God.

God, in the middle of this weary world, with us.

God accompanying us, and alongside us.

God among us, and beside us.

Let’s remember God with us as we journey into 2024.

God is with us, in the thick of our messiness!

In that, a weary world rejoices.

Maybe our weary hearts can, too.

Amen.