

BIBLE READING: Luke 2: 22- 40

SERMON

Even when we can't seem to find room for God in our busy lives, the Christmas story serves to remind us that God comes anyway, entering into the chaos of our lives and offering us the opportunity to have that chaos re-created into something powerful and life-affirming and unexpected.

That's what Christmas is - the time when the God of creation chose to become human and bring that creativity into our world, so that the chance to start over again would be constantly available to us. For that birth in the stable is the sign of God's presence in even those areas of life that we might think would most likely be devoid of the divine. Therefore, Christmas shows us that no one, no thing and no place is beyond God's loving concern and God's transforming power.

Today we gather to bask in the glow of the birth of Christ. We join Mary in keeping the news of the wise men from the east and the strange and mysterious tale of the shepherds in our heart.

But the gentle majesty, the moving mystery, the rich traditions, the family rituals of Christmas, all point us away from the wise men and shepherds, away from the star and the manger, away from the tinsel and lights.

On this first Sunday after Christmas we begin to see there on the horizon, peeking over the distant skyline, a stark wooden cross standing as a sign, threatening to contradict all of the peace and the love that we treasure in our hearts at Christmas.

Mary pondered the mystery of Christmas, but her quiet pondering was shaken when she heard the words of Simeon, "...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."

And the reason for that, of course, is that the Christmas story is just the beginning. If it all stopped there with the angels and shepherds and wise men, it might still be a heart-warming tale, but it wouldn't have the power to change lives or offer us hope in the midst of our pains and fears. It would offer only the illusion of change, not its reality.

But how many people want to leave Christ in Christmas? That baby looks so cute in the manger, wrapped mummy-like in his swaddling clothes, trapped in the helpless nature of an infant. Yet, that child grew up.

He willingly embraced the dark prophecy that Simeon spoke about him, so that even our sinful nature could be transformed and he could show us that he truly was our Emmanuel, the God who is with us in everything - even in those private moments when we choose the way of the world and its deadly consequences over the joyous, life-giving possibilities of God's way.

And when we try to lock Jesus away in the warmth and cuteness of the Christmas story, we don't really change anything except our own ability to accept his offers for us to start our world all over again. On the other hand, when we in turn embrace him and his re-creating power, that embrace calls forth a strong response from us - even in the face of death.

Howard Thurmond writes this:

*When the song of the angels is silent
When the star in the sky is gone*

*When the kings and princes are home
When the shepherds are again tending their sheep
When the manger is darkened and still
The work of Christmas begins -
To find the lost
To heal the broken
To feed the hungry
To rebuild the nations
To bring peace among people
To befriend the lonely
To release the prisoner
To make music in the heart.*

Both Simeon and Anna belonged to a group known as "the Quiet in the Land." That group didn't believe in violence or in using political power; they merely wanted to live a life of constant prayer and quiet watchfulness until God would send his Messiah, devoting their lives to watching for the presence of God and to helping to quietly bring God's kingdom to this world, even when the events of the world seemed to indicate that God might have turned away from Israel.

In spite of the harsh evidence of the Roman occupation and the shameless collaboration of the religious leaders in the temple, Simeon remained faithful and expectant throughout his life-long search for the Messiah. In the same way, Anna worshipped in the temple continually in spite of the pain of an early widowhood and the later problems of old age.

Both of them remain ready for God's answer and both accept that answer in the form it came even when it may not have been what they had expected. They kept their eyes open to see the quiet ways in which God would start the world all over again.

That's the way Mary and Joseph lived as well. They had a seemingly unflappable faith. When an angel suddenly appeared to say that Mary was going to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit and when a later angel said that the holy family had to hurry out of Bethlehem to escape Herod's soldiers, they didn't question why. They just accepted God's will and lived accordingly. Can we say the same thing?

In the midst of some of the bleakest hours of World War II, King of England - George VI - came on the radio to talk to the British people. Buzz bombs were flying overhead, thousands of British soldiers had lost their lives fighting the Nazis and the battles on every front seemed to be going against Britain.

As the king addressed his people, he read these words that brought hope and strength and confidence to millions around the world:

"And I said to a man who stood at the gate of the year, 'Give me light, that I may tread safely into the unknown.' And he replied: 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That will be to you better than a light, and safer than a known way.'"

That's the kind of faith that Anna and Simeon had in God. That's the kind of faith that Mary and Joseph lived with God. That's the kind of faith that Jesus himself learned as he grew up and, in Luke's words, "increased in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and humanity."

That's also the kind of faith that God asks of each of us as well - not something that simply makes us feel good or helps us to get through our daily routines, but a living faith that enables us to see God even in the most commonplace areas of life and to perceive God's

will for us even when it's radically different from what we had expected. Even when it comes at some cost to us.

The Spanish writer Miguel de Unamuno once wrote the following blessing: "May God deny you peace but give you glory." That's the kind of faith I wish for all of us in the coming year.

A creative faith that allows us to go out beyond the limits we've placed upon ourselves. A faith that will allow us to step out into the unknown, confident the God will support us, no matter what the circumstances. And an assured faith like those members of the "Quiet of the Land" so that we will joyfully recognize God in the midst of all of life's surprises. Amen.
Acknowledgments: Rev. Jim McCrea; Rev. J. Richard Short