

LIVING WITH THE END IN MIND

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Lk. 2: 21-38

TEXT: ...*my eyes have seen Your salvation...* (31)

INTRODUCTION

The first few wedding rehearsals I conducted in my first church did not go well. While the seminary had been good at teaching me theology and Greek, I was given nothing as practical as guidance for wedding rehearsals. I guess they assumed you'd just figure it out. It is bad enough that some key player is always a half-hour late. (It is wonderful when they have the rehearsal dinner before the rehearsal, because everyone is on time then). Then, when you have strong personalities in the mothers of the bride and groom plus a few "expert aunts" in such affairs, it is a challenge. To me, it was logical to start a rehearsal at the beginning with the order of the processional. It always seemed to take two or three times through to get people to end up where they were supposed to be. Then, they would decide they didn't like the arrangement up front, and wanted the bridesmaids and groomsmen ordered by height— so we'd start over again. One day, I was complaining to another pastor about my problem and asked him what he did. He said, "I always start at the end." To my look of surprise, he explained, "I begin by having everyone stand where they're to end up by the end of the processional. Then, when I explain what is involved in getting there, it all makes more sense and it saves a lot of frustration in the rehearsal." I tried it and have been doing that ever since.

Getting the big picture, where things are going and how things are interrelated and fit together, helps in a lot of areas of our lives. If you're fortunate enough to get an aerial view of where you live, it is often an eye-opener. You think, "So that's how that river goes. I had no idea it meandered so much. And, that patch of woods, I've never seen that, yet it can't be far from my house." The big picture is often amazing and holds us spellbound, especially if it has to do with where we live.

Advent is about getting the big picture. The four Sundays of Advent are not just a chance to focus on Christmas and the birth of Jesus for four Sundays. In the collective wisdom of the believers through church history, the season of Advent has been used to give us a the larger view of the complete work of Christ. It begins with the end— the return of Christ in "great power and glory" (Mk. 13:26). If we don't know about that, things in the present will be hopeless and confusing.

The two individuals in our text, Simeon and Anna, are inspiring in the bigness of their view of things. Sometimes in the elderly, we see them becoming more narrowly focused upon themselves and their needs. Here we have two elderly saints wonderfully expansive in their perspective, looking *way beyond* themselves. They are immersed in and part of the glorious work of God's salvation.

As Simeon takes the baby Jesus in his arms, he prays a prophetic Spirit-given prayer. The central statement of Simeon's great hymn of praise is, *...my eyes have seen Your salvation...* Seeing Jesus with eyes of faith is seeing God's salvation in its entirety. With that knowledge, Simeon can pray, *Now lettest Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word* (29).

SALVATION

"Salvation" is one of the *really* big words of Scripture. It is not confined to the spiritual parts of our beings but encompasses all of creation— everything. While the expression "Jesus saves" has been put on bumper stickers, billboards and used as mocking graffiti, in the fullest sense it is absolutely true. He saves people's souls and will be the Savior of the world— all the created order, and everything that has gotten out of whack.

Salvation is God's answer to the **two central problems** with our human existence: **the problem of evil** and **the problem of suffering**. Both are answered in Jesus. But because the solution for each is different, it involves two comings of Jesus. In His first coming that we celebrate in Christmas, He provided salvation from the problem of evil. But He's coming again a second time to complete the work of salvation— save us and our world from suffering. Let's look at each of these problems.

First, the problem of evil. The Time magazine issue dated Dec. 3 has this cover story [project on screen], "What Makes us Good/ Evil?" I doubt if they had any thought about Dec. 3 being the 2nd day of Advent, but it is a question that is central to our focus on Christ's two comings. Of course, the Bible has told us the answer to what makes us good and evil. But ignoring that, the Time article focuses upon brain scans showing which areas of the brain are activated in moral choices, offering the false hope there might someday be a chemical solution to evil— give everyone the right medication and evil will be done away with.

The Bible gives the only correct explanation of the problem of evil and one that fits with a God who is good. Deep within the creation of our humanity is the ability to choose. We were not created to be robots but creatures with volition— freewill to choose our path. That too was created good with a natural bend toward obedience to God. But, to be truly free, there had to be the possibility of choosing to rebel against God. You know the story, what is called "the fall," in which Adam and Eve chose to obey the evil one, Satan— the original sin. Scripture tells us that with that tragic choice, our hearts were corrupted, changed, so now there is a bend toward rebelling against God. That is seen in Adam and Eve hiding from God and their shame with each other. Every heart from then on has been contaminated with this bend toward evil.

The history of our humanity is full of proof of this. We are capable of incredible savagery and darkness. And if we know our own hearts, we are continually confronted with this truth as well. Along with the desire to be noble, giving, and selfless is an opposite pull to be vengeful, selfish, and indulge in sinful desires. How often to we wonder, "Why did I do that?" or "I know better. What made me do that?" Again and again, in spite of our best intentions, we keep messing up. This original sin, the tendency of our hearts toward sin results in failed marriages, failed

relationships, conflict between nations, acts of dishonesty, acts of violence. As Jeremiah cries out, *The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.*

Who can understand it? (Jer 17:9)

It is not a chemical problem. It is spiritual, beyond the reach of medicine.

But God has provided the solution in Jesus. Since the problem begins inside our hearts, the solution must take place there. That is why Jesus came the first time— to provide this solution. John 3:16 says, *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* Through receiving Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we are born again. The old sinful nature is dealt a death-blow. While we continue to deal with it, now it is not with just our strength and resolve, but with the power of the Holy Spirit within— an ongoing transformation so we become more and more like Jesus. This is not imposed behavior from without or something we accomplish on our own. It is the Spirit of Life within. That is why Jesus came the first time— to save us from our sins and the consequences of our sins.

Second, the problem of suffering. Certainly a lot of the suffering in our world is caused by sin when you think about wars, greed, and injustice. But there is also the suffering due to our human condition and the condition of our world. Sickness, disease, and death head the list. All this also came into the good world, the paradise God created, with the fall. Humans stand at the apex of God’s creation. When Adam and Eve fell, all the ordered creation under them fell as well.

Romans 8:18-23 express it well:

18 I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. 19 The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. 20 For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. 23 Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

While we enjoy the spiritual blessings of salvation in Christ, we are still in a physical body subject to disease and death. The creation around us still needs redemption. Jesus, in His earthly ministry, demonstrated His Lordship over all of creation, stilling storms, multiplying bread and fish, raising the dead and healing all manner of diseases and disabilities. And now, Jesus still heals, delivers, and we see miracles at times— first fruits, hints of a fuller redemption that is coming through Him. But these are not generally, ordinarily ours. But one day, at the return of Christ “in great power and glory” (Mk. 13:26) it will apply to all of creation. There will be no more sorrow, suffering, or tragedy. Perfect justice and goodness will reign.

We pray for healings and deliverances. We do not understand why these prayers seem to go

unanswered. But we are promised that this condition is only temporary. Every believer can look forward to a time when there will be no more pain and we'll have a perfect body and a perfect world to live in. In the meantime, we wait for the completion of our salvation. We live in what has been called an "in between time." Our spirits are made alive in Christ and we are given the assurance that we have eternal life, saved for all of eternity. Yet, we await the redemption of our bodies and the world around us— the restoration of the paradise God designed it all to be. It will be the time prophesied by Isa 11:7-9,

- 7 The cow will feed with the bear,
 their young will lie down together,
 and the lion will eat straw like the ox.*
- 8 The infant will play near the hole of the cobra,
 and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest.*
- 9 They will neither harm nor destroy
 on all my holy mountain,
 for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
 as the waters cover the sea.*

When we have this big picture in mind, it gives us perspective for our living in the present times. It tells us to keep our eyes on Jesus, fix our hope in Him and not on the things of this world. This world will always be a mess until Jesus returns. But, He is coming soon— so we look up and keep alert.

How do we keep this perspective in the midst of our difficulties? Simeon and Anna model for us ways to keep this big Advent picture in mind.

ALERT AND WAITING

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 upon him. (Luke 2:25)

That one verse says a lot about how we are to live in this in-between time. The word, "righteous" lets us know Simeon was living in obedience to God. "Devout" tells us he is prayerful, continuously looking to God for what only He can do. "The consolation of Israel" is the comfort, the healing the Messiah would bring. He was led and guided by the Holy Spirit. Because of his closeness to God, he was one of the few people in the Christmas story to be aware of what was really going on. *It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. 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...* (Luke 2:26-28)

Here is a man in tune with God, with His salvation, and faithfully waiting, alert to the Spirit's call. He had a promise, but how many days and years had he thought, "Maybe today?" Evidently,

his alertness never dulled, no matter how long. Then, that day, *moved by the Spirit*, he is at the right place at exactly the right time— in the temple courts. Joseph and Mary are moving in accord with the required Law of Moses for Mary to offer a sacrifice for purification 40 days after the birth. The law and the Spirit intersect with Simeon. And he is given supernatural recognition that this child at last is the Messiah. Simeon praises God and prays in relinquishment (and here I prefer how the RSV puts it):

*Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,
according to thy word;
for mine eyes have seen thy salvation* (Luke 2:29-30).

Here is contentment. Simeon is prepared to die peacefully, not because of great things he has accomplished but because he has seen God accomplishing His purpose. Yet, he knows he is only in on the start of something even greater than anyone has imagined. He goes on with Spirit-given prophecy about Jesus bringing salvation to the Gentiles as well. Then, turning to Mary he gives further words of prophecy of the nature of Jesus' ministry ending with those sobering words, *And a sword will pierce your own soul too* (35), which find their final fulfillment as she stands at the foot of the cross.

Then the 84-year-old prophetess Anna is there, also alert, recognizing that in this child was the redemption of God's people. Her life, we are told, was marked by worship, prayer, fasting, and attendance in the temple. Again, miraculous timing as she came "at that very moment" (38).

Obedience, a prayerful life, fasting, attendance in church, and being filled with the Holy Spirit are all means by which we keep alert, watching, ready to see fresh inbreakings of God's saving grace. When we live this way, we'll be quick to pick up on signs of a heart being softened to turn to the Lord. We'll sense the unasked question. We'll have the thrill of the Spirit moving us to the right place at the right time for encounters that not only bless us but ones in which we participate in what God is doing. And, as we face some of the sufferings of this broken world in ourselves or in the lives of others, we have that consolation that this is not the way it is meant to be and it is not the way it will be. Instead, we can, *stand up and lift up our heads, because our redemption is drawing near* (Lk 21:28).

CONCLUSION

Earlier, I quoted from Romans 8 about our sufferings and the groans of all creation. I want to close with the expansive view with which that chapter ends. Listen to these verses, 28-39.