

The Bethel Pulpit – Pastor Duane Hanson

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



The Sermon Text – Luke 2:22-40

SERMON- "A Glimpse of What Could Be"

It's a day to begin anew, it's New Year's Day, the first day of 2012! It's also the first Sunday of Christmas...many of us are still lingering in the glow of the special times spent with family and friends over the past week. One of our family's highlights this Christmas was to join my brother and his family through the internet, on facetime. On Christmas morning through the magic of facetime we connected on our Ipads and had the experience of watching my nephew's children, Amy and Matthew, share their Christmas gifts with us. Amy would hold up a doll and we would ask questions about the gift. Likewise, Matthew, would pop up with a new game and excitedly tell us about it. It was wonderful to see them in action on Christmas day, even though they were five hours away it seemed like they were close to us for those fifteen minutes. It was a first for us, a moment we will cherish, there was a feeling of oneness, harmony and love, even if from a distance. It was a moment in time which will never be repeated in quite the same way again, and that is its wonder and beauty.

Each summer at Bethel Horizons we also have those special moments of oneness, of harmony at camp. Once in a while those special moments might be captured in a photo, or on video. But most of the time they are not. We learn about those special moments at camp when we do our evaluations on Friday. It's a great moment when a counselor realizes that a camper who has been unresponsive throughout the week has a breakthrough moment and reaches out in love and care to another person in their group. It may be a good word. It may be choosing to spend time with the unpopular person. It may mean saying to the counselor as she boards the bus that she loves her, and that she had a great time at camp. Those are great moments, but they are fleeting moments. We wish we had them with us all the time.

To help our staff gain an insight into that experience I oftentimes read a poem of Gerhardt Frost's entitled: "We live on glimpses" Allow me to share an excerpt:

We live on glimpses,
Fleeting glimpses in the forest;
That is its beauty,
That its charm.
We live on glimpses and wish for time-exposures;
We live on glimpses of great truths,
Wild truths, like the fact of God's saving love.

Christmas is a time when we truly wish for time exposures. We would like those wonderful Christmas moments we experienced around the Christmas tree, around the dinner table, over the internet to continue. But we all know it doesn't. For we know that the peaceful images we have of children and adults seem to dissolve as we enter the new year. We know that the friendly arms around each other at camp can turn to pushing and shoving, the harmony around the Christmas tree can be replaced by who gets time to watch tv or play on the computer, that joyous night of friendship and love can be turned into times of bickering and arguing with parents.

However, our wish for peace and goodwill this Christmas season isn't limited to our own families. For we know from the protests around the world this past year that people have seen a glimpse of freedom and will not let it go. There are millions of

people in our world who have seen a glimpse of new possibilities in their lives and want change. So many so that *Time* magazine has named The Protester as *Time's* person of the year. As Christians who have experienced renewal and rebirth through the life and death of Jesus, we have a story to tell. And it's a story in which a person comes to this earth to confront the evil, death, and destruction which surfaces in the institutions of every age.

Our text today helps us prepare for the transition between the joy of the Christmas season and the reality of the brokenness which confronts us in this new year. For on this Sunday after Christmas the baby has been born. Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus have moved out of the stable. It's a time of transition. It's a Sunday in which we can begin to connect the dots. And so we ask questions about the baby Jesus. Who is he? Who did he come to? Will he make a difference in my life?

In response to the first question, "Who is He?" , we turn to the words of the gospel writer Luke. Luke introduces us to two unlikely powerbrokers of their day. Meet Simeon and Anna. Two pious people. Two old people. Two people who frequented the temple daily. Simeon is described as righteous and devout. Anna is depicted as a poor person who did not depart from the Temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day. These two people were not people in authority. They were not in positions of leadership.

And yet, it is these two people, Simeon and Anna, that are given the honor of being the first in the world to recognize the distinctive claims of Jesus. And since there are not yet visible clues as to the true identity of Jesus, we discover that it is simply their "eyes of faith" which help them see and prophesy. For in that moment in the Temple they have a glimpse of what is to come, they have a glimpse into the purpose that God has for this baby. They are afforded a glimpse, not a time exposure, just a glimpse of what healing and peace this person would bring to the world.

The story begins so simply. It was a ritual practiced by all faithful Jews of the day. Mary and Joseph bring baby Jesus in their arms to the Temple to participate in the Jewish ceremonial rites of the day. They were doing everything according to the law of the Lord. And so on that visit to the temple, Jesus was circumcised, Mary and Joseph were involved in a purification ritual, and the baby Jesus was presented in the Temple. And it was during this presentation that Simeon encountered the baby Jesus. We read that Simeon took the baby Jesus in his arms and asked God's blessing on the child and in turn presented the child for service to God.

But Simeon perceived that this was not an ordinary baby. He perceived that in this baby God would bring hope and salvation to his people. And so Simeon uttered those words which amazed Mary and Joseph and have come to be called the Nunc Dimittis, the blessing:

"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."

We are told that Mary and Joseph marveled at what was said about him. Certainly these were words filled with surprise! For Simeon was saying that God would enter the world in a new way through this person, and his coming was for all people. In other words,

Simeon was predicting that this child, this Jesus, would touch the lives of many outside of Israel.

But how, we may ask, did this humble pious man make a connection between this little baby he held in his arms and the great hopes of salvation for all peoples? Was it a lucky guess? Was he a fortune teller? No. The gospel writer, Luke, makes sure that we know that it was the Holy Spirit, God's Spirit, which helped him make that linkage. Three times in three consecutive verses in our text the Spirit breaks through the piety of Simeon and expands his vision of just who this child is. Like other pious Jews of his day, Simeon had probably hoped for a powerful political ruler that might end the exile and displacement of his people. Instead, Simeon is found placing the hopes of Israel's future in a baby, and his vision is expanded to include hope for Gentiles as well. There is now a new glimpse of a common future being held up for Jew and Gentile; in other words, for all people.

Like Simeon, we too live in a world of divisions, of tensions, of constant warfare. The terms refugee, exile, homeless, hungry, and poor are not foreign words to us. And we too, live in a world in which we realize that governments fall short in solving world problems. Only days ago Christian churches were bombed in Nigeria, hundreds of people have been slaughtered in Syria in government protests, tension in Egypt is once again surfacing. All across the globe there is a longing for a better future, many people have glimpsed that renewal is possible. And so as we begin this new year, we long to hear words like reconciliation, hope, renewal, and healing. The words of Simeon are offering to us anew this morning. We again are offered a glimpse of what a new life in God's kingdom might look like.

But suddenly there is a twist in the story. There will be opposition to His coming. His coming will bring out those repressed feelings. Following the beautiful words of the Nunc Dimmittis, Simeon turns to Mary and says: "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".

We are now given a hint that Jesus will not fit easily into the world he enters. These were unexpected words from Simeon. These were not words of comfort to a young mother. There is now a note of sadness sounded in the midst of the joyous birth at Bethlehem. Simeon suggests that Jesus is going to be a problem to many people. Could it be that Simeon had pondered the words of Malachi, "But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?" The prophesy is clear—people are going to have trouble accepting Jesus.

The call to follow Jesus was offensive to many first century people. People were offended that God would come to them in such a personal way. They were alright with God being mystical, distant, and spirit like, but God wrapped in flesh, that was too much. They were o.k. with Jesus referring to the Scriptures, but when he said, a new commandment I give to you, "love your neighbor as yourself," they weren't so sure. And to be truthful, there are still many things today that people don't like about Jesus; his call to care for the poor, the powerless, the hungry, the homeless. The words of Simeon to Mary have proven to be true over the centuries and come to us today as a reminder that Jesus' coming will involve us making some judgments about how we live with our brothers and sisters in this world.

Simeon and Anna, two old people, pious, thankful, expectant people to whom God revealed his secret...his Son...as Savior...as redeemer. Two people, not chosen at random, but rather chosen by God because of their faithfulness, their openness, and their thankfulness. They were the first to catch a glimpse of God's new kingdom, they were the first to respond to the question of "Who is he?"

To respond to the second question, "Who did he come to?", we turn to the book of Isaiah. For in this poem of Second Isaiah we discover an insight, a breath of vision not before attained in Scripture. For in this poem we hear the invitation: "Turn unto me and be saved all the ends of the earth." Here is a 6th century prophet declaring that God's saving revelations are not reserved for a particular people, but rather given to all people. And that, of course, is exactly the theme which Simeon raises up in the Nunc Dimmittis. And later, when one adds to that prophesy the visit of the Wise Men from foreign lands to Jesus along with the words from second Isaiah and Simeon, one begins to sense the universal scope of God's peace and God's hope for an elimination of ethnic and national restrictions in this world. These were difficult words and experiences to comprehend for those who thought that Jesus would rescue only Israel.

But that is why we must be bold to proclaim the name of Jesus in all the world, Nigeria, Egypt, China, India, as well as Madison, Wisconsin. For it is God's intent to offer wholeness and healing to all people. And so we join with other Christians throughout the world to reach out in word and deed and thereby give hope to those "who have lost their voice in our world." In order to reach out in word and deed and thereby give hope we must be connected, individually and as a congregation to those outside of our family of Bethel.

And that is why when one joins a congregation one becomes connected to many people outside of one's own immediate family. And so to be a Bethel member means that you may be connected to people in Chernobyl, Poland, Slovakia, Puerto Rico. At Bethel you might become acquainted with people from Bhutan, from central and South America. Through the Bethel Series we have touched people across our country as well as Japan and Germany. And every day at Bethel you will encounter homeless friends as well as people searching for another meal from our food bank.

The Christmas season may end soon but the message of God's love and care for all people—here and abroad—continues year round. God didn't come to us in the form of a person to prosper a single country. Rather, God came in Jesus so that salvation might be near for "all the ends of the earth." Now that's good news.

As to the third question, "Will he make a difference in my life?" I ask you, does one begin to live differently when he/she has heard the good news of Jesus? I would hope so. It begins with taking that glimpse one has of the new kingdom and transforming it into a time exposure. To do so will enable us to see the world as one entity. Our new vision, our glimpse of that new kingdom should help us to focus on values that build up and sustain a sense of community.

My prayer for you this morning is that you have caught a glimpse of Jesus just as Simeon and Anna did. If so, you will be changed. And you will be able to share not just glimpses, but time exposures of what Jesus has done in your life. Amen. © 2012