

“Nunc Dimittis”

A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr

First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – Dec. 31, 2023

Please read:

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Luke 2:22-40

I hope everyone had a good Christmas. Our four children were home and to be together as a family was the best gift for Kim and me... Tuesday, the day after Christmas, I flew to Portland, Oregon, where my brother Doug and I hosted a party to celebrate my parents' 65th wedding anniversary. It was a wonderful party with a slide show and soundtrack from their greatest hits over the past 65 years. We had speeches, champagne toasts and cake. Family and friends attended and it was a lovely celebration of their faithfulness and love through thick and thin. It was a bittersweet time, however, as my uncle, my dad's best friend and best man died just two days after the anniversary celebration. I got to see my Uncle Bob just before he died, and we had a brief family service together remembering and giving thanks for his life.

My uncle was a medical doctor who served in Vietnam. Before his tour, he asked my dad to take in his wife (my dad's sister) and their four children to live with us while he was overseas. My dad and mom had bought a one and a half story starter home and after my parents agreed to receive these extra family members, my dad quickly renovated the upstairs floor so my aunt and her four children could move in. One of those children, Jeffy, was severely handicapped. Although he died at age 27, I think Jeffy is why I have a soft spot in my heart for Special Church. Their three daughters, my cousins, are more like sisters to me, and it was a gift along with my brother to be together again before my uncle died. He saw everyone he loved, and received lots of hugs and kisses and “I love you's” before he died peacefully in his sleep.

All that is to say, it was a poignant week, hearing family and friends tell stories of my parents and uncle. One man took me aside to tell me my dad saved his life. We all agreed although my parents' marriage isn't a perfect marriage, it's a great marriage. And my cousins said the same thing about my uncle. He wasn't a perfect father, but he was a great father. The main theme of the week was about how through the good, the bad and the ugly of life - even through rough patches of marriage and family life - love prevails. Love is a blessing that changes everything.

Which is why our Gospel text is so important for us to hear this morning. God's love changes everything. The revelation we celebrate each Christmas is that the eternal God, Maker of heaven and earth, has freely chosen to enter the limits of our time and space, to become vulnerable in order to show us the blessing of God's love.

Today's lesson is about an elderly couple who lived a good life. Simeon was privileged to hold the Christ child in his arms. Luke writes that as Mary and Joseph brought Jesus in to observe the ritual of purification, Simeon also came into the temple, and took Jesus in his arms. This ancient ritual, prescribed in Leviticus, 12, was a washing and blood sacrifice that all Jewish mothers and their new-borns would experience. It was a kind of foreshadowing of Jesus baptism and his own sacrificial death.

But as Mary and Joseph brought Jesus into the temple as part of the covenant, it was revealed to Simeon that in this child, God's promise of a Messiah was being fulfilled. God was intervening in a new way, in such a radical way as to bring peace and salvation to the world. Simeon had longed for this day, and praised God, saying, "Lord, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation."

It was such a beautiful thing that the early church turned it into a song. We call it the Nunc Dimittis, the Latin words which literally mean "Now Dismissed." For Mary and Joseph, it was not just a song, it was a revelation about their son.

You would think they had gotten used to that sort of thing after all the signs and wonders of Christmas Eve. Skies lighting up with angels singing, perfect strangers showing up, from common Shepherds to exotic foreigners bearing expensive gifts bowing down to worship the new-born king.

But Luke says Joseph and Mary were still amazed by what Simeon said. Whether or not the old man could see three feet ahead of him, he could read the child in his arms. This one had God written all over him. This one would light up the whole world. When he handed the baby back, Simeon knew his long wait was over. Death would not be long now that the Spirit kept its promise. He was dismissed, and he was now dismissed in peace.

But after he blessed Mary and Joseph, Simeon told Mary the rest of the truth about little Mr. Light of the World. A bright light casts deep shadows. As many as rejoiced to learn who Jesus was, just as many would grind their teeth against him. He would force people to choose whether they really wanted to get close to God or not. He would expose those who did not seek the Father, and they would do their best to get rid of him. Simeon saw the sacrificial Lamb, in other words. He saw God's innocent Son still nursing at its mother's breast, and he warned her of the pain to come.

While Mary and Joseph were recovering from this ominous news, off in another corner of the temple was Anna, the prophet, who lived in the temple, praying and fasting... As

Simeon saw who the baby was in his arms, the prophet Anna went off like a smoke detector sounding forth *God is here!*

It was quite a day in the Temple! Luke's conclusion to the whole scene is simply to say that the family returned to Nazareth, where "the child grew in strength and wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him."

What we know about this Christ child was that the favor of God is complicated. God's favor involved being hunted by a tyrant, becoming a refugee in Egypt. It meant he would be arrested, tortured, and cruelly subjected to a criminal's death. But a death, that for the world, was redemptive. His blood was shed as a sacrifice for us. His life was given to save us. He rose again as a sign of God's power over sin and death, and as a guarantee of God's infinite love and mercy toward us.

In the midst of the epic drama of human political intrigue and genocidal slaughter, God entered in to set things right. And God chose to bring salvation by showing up personally in the flesh, and by showing us another way, the way of self-giving love. The mystery of the Incarnation takes divine love from the abstract to the concrete. Emmanuel means "God with us," and is not just a translation of a Hebrew name but a translation of the loving purposes of God to and through us. God has become one with us so that we may become one with God.

And that's an important message in this story, of how people, obscure people like Simeon and Anna, can be and give a divine blessing. And if they can, so can we! Any of us can be a blessing to anyone around us. Blessing involves risk, though, because it requires that you get personally involved.

One of many stories how God's love was mediated to me and my family over the past week is about Orbie Scott. Orbie was a driver for Holladay Park Plaza where my parents live. It's a high rise senior residence with all the amenities. There were a lot of details getting ready for the anniversary party, and one thing I had to take care of the day of the party was to go and get the cakes. I walked out the building and was going to walk to the bakery that had made the cakes and then I figured I could uber back with them. But Orbie was pulling out of the driveway and must have seen a lost look on my face. He lowered the window of his van, and asked, "Can I help you?" I said, "Well, yes you can!" And he drove me to get the cakes and helped to get them back to Holladay Park Plaza. Who does that anymore?

Or I learned about how my Uncle while head of a mash unit during the Vietnam War, would sneak off to a leprosarium, to care for lepers and their families. He couldn't treat their leprosy, but he could care for their other illnesses.

I was reminded amidst all the craziness of our world that there are still good people who are kind and willing to help even a stranger in need. I saw that with my parents, and with my uncle. I heard countless stories of them deciding to be kind. To take time to help someone in need. It's the way of peace, in the sense of "the way it's supposed to be." God's peace sets us free to be there for others, to bless others. What the world needs, what each one of us here needs, is that peace which Simeon received – the peace to take up into our arms another and to bless them.

To hold the Christ child in our arms is, of course, not a possibility for us. But to hold him dear in our hearts, and to hold others in his grace and love is free for the asking. What started in a manger and ended on a cross is God's self-giving love that can be shared with all. We are set free to set others free. We are blessed to be a blessing to others. I like how John Wesley put it, when he advised, "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, in all the times you can, with all the people you can, as long as ever you can!"

Friends, as we look to the New Year, I pray you'll share the song of Simeon, that you'll share in that peace we need to face the reality of our lives and world. The invitation to receive God's peace is for you as we end one year and begin another, so that you'll be strong to bless others in the future. In that sense, we are all now dismissed this year in peace. Nunc Dimittis!

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.