

“My Eyes Have Seen” – Luke 2:22-40

I'm glad to see that so many of you were able to dig out from under the huge accumulation of snow we've been blessed with this year! It seems like the past few days have been a blur of snow shoveling, driving through impassable streets, and working to replace a failed web/mail server. This Christmas has been a busy time, and yet in the midst of the busyness I've still had times when I've paused to think about that young couple dealing with a newborn baby in challenging circumstances. As I contemplate the scene in the manger that night in Bethlehem I wonder if Mary can see all the trouble that lies down the road as she holds her newborn son and looks into his eyes. That's where it all happens for me. That moment of looking into a newborn's eyes and watching for that first sign of recognition is such a miraculous moment. I swear in that instant you can see the whole of that person's life stretching out before them: all the joys, the accomplishments, all the hurts and sadness too, compressed into that moment of dawning awareness.

I suspect it was 'in the eyes' for Anna and Simeon as well, as they held the infant Jesus. What an incredible experience that must have been. It's wondrous enough to sample the miracle of new life; it must be indescribably so to realize that the child you are holding is the Messiah, the Son of God. Mind you, as hard as it is to describe, Luke does a wonderful job of portraying that tender scene. In addition to conveying both the tenderness and humanity and also a sense of awe and majesty in this event, he manages to focus upon several important items.

Perhaps the most important of these items was that this event was fully a part of the Jewish faith, that even in infancy Jesus was fully obedient to the law of Moses. In this brief account that fact is emphasised no fewer than five times. The specific forms of obedience called for in the law included circumcision, which Luke includes with the naming of Jesus, the dedication of the firstborn to God, and the purification of the mother. Luke, in relating the events of dedication and purification, here begins a long sequence in his gospel of relating just how Jesus was a true Israelite. Even in Acts – the second half of Luke's gospel – the church is shown as continuing synagogue and temple attendance. According to Luke, Jesus and the church are no renegade splinter group, no wing-nut cult, flaunting freedom as disobedience to the law. Quite the opposite, in Jesus and the church, Judaism is properly continued and fulfilled. Luke relates that even as Jesus proclaimed a good news that included Gentiles as well as Jews, still Jesus worked within and through his tradition; he threw no stones from a distance.

Those are all good and important points to note, but for me perhaps the most significant message in this enchanting story of two old people and a baby is the obviousness of the baby's greatness. Heavenly angels announced the pregnancy and the birth, later his ministry will be announced by a voice from heaven. Such heavenly displays are all fine and good, but here that greatness is announced in a very real and meaningful way by two senior citizens, two aged and pious Jews, Simeon and Anna.

Simeon was called and inspired by the Holy Spirit into the task of recognizing in the infant Jesus the fulfillment of the hope and longing for a Messiah. While he expected to see a saviour bringing consolation to his people what he saw in the infant Jesus was something quite different: a centre of controversy, a stumbling block for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and a source of great pain and tragedy for his mother. Anna, a long-time widow, was a woman dedicated to prayer and worship who upon meeting the infant Jesus began to praise God and speak about the child to anyone who would listen.

The testimony of both of these people of deep and abiding faith proclaimed that this child, this infant, was indeed the one for whom Israel waited, the one promised by God, the salvation

and glory to his people Israel and even a light for revelation to the Gentiles. We see as we follow Jesus through his ministry, through his death and resurrection, through his continuation in the church that the perception of Anna and Simeon was truly a gift from God, and that indeed Jesus himself was the gift of God, one with the Father.

And that really is the most powerful part of this tender and touching scene: that here in this infant God was stepping into the lives of his people in a way he had not done before (or since, for that matter). Exactly the opposite of the questionable theology in that song which mercifully we don't hear much any more ("God is watching you from a distance"), here we see God intimately immersed in the lives of his people, sharing all of our joys, our sorrows, our pains, our accomplishments, our dreams and hopes, our fears and anxieties, our frustrations, our grief. This is the wonderment of the story began in that first Christmas and endorsed throughout the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, that God is not observing us without passion or involvement "from a distance", but "up close and personal". This is no stern father-figure, standing back aloof and uninvolved except to thunder down directions and disapproval. This is a helpless infant, needing to be clothed, and fed, and nurtured and loved. Our God is not some weird life-form from a bad 1950's horror movie, but the gracious and compassionate creator who gave us not only the freedom to be who we would be, but also the means to come back freely to him when bruised by life or when we discovered that we didn't really want to do it all on our own. Right here in this tender story of two old fogies cooing over a baby we have all that we need to refute any misunderstanding of God as one who might uncaringly reject people; here we have the demonstration of God as loving his people so completely he was willing to offer his own son to redeem them, to redeem us. God, our creator, not at a distance but right here in our arms. It just doesn't get much better than that, does it?

Simeon and Anna had the opportunity to see the glory of God through their own eyes. My eyes have also seen the glory of God, not in the same way but in the lives of people living out their faith. I have seen that glory in people's faces as they watched Christmas hampers being delivered to them. Many of you have seen the glory of God in the appreciative smiles and "thank you's" in the breakfast lineups. Some of us have been privileged to see the glory of God reflected in the face of a person as they drew their last breath. An old saying goes, "it's in the eyes" and I have been blessed many times when my eyes have seen God's glory in Christ reflected and re-shined by good and faithful servants.

But time marches relentlessly on, and so does the gospel story. For now, and for the next twelve years before we next see Jesus when he surfaces in the temple to again pull the beards of the old fogies (although in a different way than as an infant!) all we know is that the child grew, and became strong, filled with wisdom, and with the favour of God clearly upon him. We won't leap ahead twelve years in our own lives, but we are standing only days away from the coming New Year. The symbols of Christmas even now are being packed away and will soon be replaced with another familiar image, that of old "Father time" passing the reins to the infant "New Year." These are images similar to, perhaps even borrowed from, those from this story of Simeon, Anna, Jesus and his parents.

Compared to the original, however, the modern renderings of a beat-up, bruised and prematurely-aged man abandoning control to a naïve, cherubic infant fall pathetically short of what is portrayed in the original. Here in contrast with a tired and jaded old man both Simeon and Anna are instead hopeful people whose faith has ripened and matured over decades of positive reinforcement and affirmation. They see the transition represented in the infant not as a capitulation or a surrender, but a profound fulfillment of God's promise and a wondrous

expansion of God's personal and "in-the-midst" involvement and redemption. Perhaps we can recapture that symbol ... when you see the inevitable images in the media of an old man and a baby as we transition into the New Year, remember Anna, and Mary, and Joseph, and Simeon holding the baby, and remember and celebrate that not only in the year to come but for all time, God will be with you, not watching from a distance, but from right beside and in front and behind and all around you, cradling you safely in his arms, rejoicing in the person you are still becoming.