



Sermon January 1, 2012
R.L. Christensen
Pastor

Sisters and brothers: Those of you who are long time Lutherans may remember the introduction of “The Service and Hymnal” in 1958. It was the first “red book.”

The book represented the finest compilation of liturgical resources to that date. The Kyrie was from the “Divine Liturgy” of St. John Chrysostom who lived in the 4rd Century CE. Other liturgical portions were English language versions of Luther’s “German Mass.” The “new” features of the SBH were livelier music forms and best of all the encouragement of a return to weekly Eucharist. (It would be another 20 years and another hymnal before the ancient practice of Holy Communion at each assembly would be restored.)

Though only a high school student in 1958 I thought the “Service Book and Hymnal” was wonderful. I enjoyed the Elizabethan English and was touched deeply by some portions of the liturgy. Among them the “Nunc Dimittis” (Latin for “Now dismiss us”).

I am a lousy memorizer, but that liturgical hymn made it into my head and heart, and stayed there. “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace; according to thy word; For mine eyes have seen thy salvation; which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; A light to lighten the Gentiles; and the glory of thy people Israel.”

The hymn was sung after the Holy Communion. The sweetness of it grew as I became more and more aware that in the Holy Communion God was showing us God’s peace making and saving work.

The “Service Book and Hymnal” passed into history in 1976. It was a timely passing since my copy of the book was used for over ten years and in great disrepair. I was lucky it lasted just long enough.

What did not pass into history or disrepair is the Nunc Dimittis. It remained and remains.

Simeon’s poetry which is the Nunc Dimittis is in the Gospel reading for today. Mary and Joseph brought the eight day old Jesus to be circumcised and incorporated into the life of God’s people Israel. When Simeon saw the Child he knew in his heart of hearts that in this Child the fullness of God was in the earth. And Simeon who had patiently waited rejoiced that he had

lived long enough to see the miracle of it all. The moment was so satisfying that he was ready for death to move him into God's future.

The poetry is worth a dozen sermons, but you will probably be content with just one. I know I will. I want to put the accent on "peace" and "salvation."

Peace comes as a gift of the Child.

Peace as a gift of the Child is not the absence of conflict, though that is a "consummation devoutly to be wished." Peace is the deep certainty that God is with us and in us, and even if all around us is chaos that peace remains unshakeable because God is unshakeable.

I read a book in preparation for this interim ministry called, "Temporary Shepherds." It is a collection of helpful essays about being an interim Pastor. The writers had a great deal of experience and wrote about many things. But, the consistent word was that the Interim Pastor needed to be an un-anxious presence. The Pastor needed to be with God and the people in the thick of uncertainty and change without being a nervous wreck who only added to the discomfort of the parish. Good counsel.

A friend asked what would happen if the folks at SOH didn't like me or my work? I told him, "First of all they would have to take a number. I have been disliked by lots of folks. Second, they would discover that because of God's graciousness I have a strong sense of peace about myself and what I do. That will be enough."

An un-anxious presence. I think that should be a mark of interim Pastors. I also think it would be a helpful mark of the discipleship of us all.

As life unfolds for you in the usual places you are certainly aware of how many are fearful and unsettled. The list is long and the reasons are varied.

People are worried about keeping their jobs in a fragile economy.

Others struggle with finding work since they are already victims of job loss.

Parents and grandparents worry about their children. Will the schools be good enough? Will the children be studious enough? Will the kids steer clear of ugly choices that could hurt them or kill them?

Folks have health concerns. Bodies get broken and disease is always a threat. Will the threat come true for us or those we love? What will we do if illness makes a home with us for a little or a long while?

There is always the threat of random violence done by folks whose hate trumps their humanity. A bomb here. A shooting there. It is all pretty crazy.

Many are angry about the twists and turns that touch their lives. The “occupy” folks may not have a clear agenda, but they have a clear engine driving them: they are angry because of the increasing disparity between the rich and the poor.

All of us owe God a death. Death is probably at the root of all fear and for good reason. Death can be overwhelming, and while some of us are closer to death than others, no one is immune. It can be scary.

In the midst of those and many other anxieties what people need is the gift of an un-anxious presence. Someone whose peace is rooted and grounded in God’s gift, and who are able to share that gift with others. That is your ministry and mine. A peace that passes understanding – an un-anxious presence that infects others with the certainty that God is alive and well and active in us and among us, and though all around us is change and decay God is forever and reliable.

That is possible because of the birth of the Child. Simeon saw that when he held the baby Jesus. We see it when the Christ comes to us and enters us in the mystery of the Word and the Holy Communion.

“Peace, perfect peace, in this dark world of sin.” That verse from a hymn is what God gives us and allows us to share for the sake of all others God loves.

Peace. Salvation.

The notion of salvation has fallen on hard times in Lutheran circles. That is due in part to our super-religious sisters and brothers who frequently get in someone’s face with the salvation question: “Are you saved, sister? Are you saved, brother.”

Lutherans don’t usually talk that talk and often steer so clear of that approach that we don’t talk about salvation at all. We end up overcompensating and nobody is better off.

When Simeon spoke of the baby Jesus as God’s salvation he wasn’t referring to something far away in time and place. He was talking about God’s salvation entering the human adventure where it was going to stay and stay until God wraps up human history. Salvation is here and now.

“Are you saved?” You can bet God’s life on it. God sets salvation in the very place where you are – in every time you experience. No questions asked, though people often ask questions.

Don’t we have to do something to be saved? The only thing Simeon did was to wait on God, and God put salvation into his arms as certainly as Mary put the baby Jesus into Simeon’s arms. Then, God opened the eyes of Simeon’s heart to see God’s salvation. There wasn’t any “doing” and there isn’t any “doing” except what God does.

I know there is an ebb and flow to our consciousness of being saved, but our consciousness doesn’t alter God’s choices. Our consciousness of being saved by God results in great relief and great joy. You don’t have to spend a second worrying about God’s relationship with you. That is a settled matter. God’s salvation is among us and is here to stay. And the party has begun.

I live in a condo surrounded by dozens of other condos. Some evenings when I take d’Artagnan for a potty walk I can tell from the sights and sounds that there are bunches of folks who are having a better time than I am. My doggie usually has a good time, but that is another story. Don’t you hate to miss out on the party?

There isn't any reason for anyone to miss out on the party God is throwing for the people and the Creation. It can't be fun for them to be on the outside looking in, and they don't need to be.

What we get to do is to let other folks know what God did and is doing. Some people are missing out on the experience of salvation which is here and now. If necessary God will see to it that they catch up later, but there isn't much sense in them having to wait. Let them know we have seen God's salvation and it is there for them to see, too.

Is God's salvation heading somewhere? You bet. God's salvation what we experience now is re-experienced a million times greater.

All the right people will be there. "The Gentiles" and the people Israel. And that's all the folks.

People we have known and loved who have gone on ahead will be there. Some folks we have not liked very much, and often for good reasons. Mark Twain said he had never met a man he didn't like. He never met my father-in-law. Lewis is better now, but wasn't very nice on this side of the Jordan. The blessing is that God doesn't apply our standards. God is much too loving.

I just hope they have not consumed all the wine before it's our time, but as a friend pointed out, "If all the wine is gone, Jesus will make more and it will be the best."

God's peace is in you. Practice it and share it in the world. God's salvation has come to you. Enjoy it and tell all the folks.

"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace; according to thy word; For mine eyes have seen thy salvation: which those hast prepared before the face of all people; A light to lighten the Gentiles; and the glory of thy people Israel."