

HOLIDAY LIGHTS

Seeing Christmas Through the Song of Simeon

Text: Luke 2:21-35

The View Out the Window

How many of you enjoy driving around looking at all the holiday lights this time of year? They are wonderful, aren't they? I drive by a house on my way home each evening where there's just a single spotlight on a Christmas wreath. It looks so simple and so elegant and so easy to set up and put away! Then there are those houses where they put candles in each of the windows, like something out of Currier & Ives card. Don't you love those? In my neighborhood, icicle lights are all the rage these days. Getting them up there along the gutters and eaves is more dangerous than smoking, of course, but there's this tremendous satisfaction as you stand back afterward and think: "Wow, how am I ever going to get those down?" Have you noticed that those big bulb colored lights are making a comeback? Have you seen those new blue LED lights? And what about those special houses like the one down the street here in Oak Brook and that entire neighborhood in Westchester that are visible from the Andromeda Nebulae. NASA does NOT need to listen for sounds of life in outer space. Every December, ET can see right where we live!

This whole holiday light tradition goes a long way back. Ancient pagan religions lit candles as symbols of hope during the celebration of the Winter Solstice – that time when the Earth and the Sun reach their furthest point of separation and start to draw closer again. Early Christians saw the symbolism of that celestial pattern and began marking the birthday of the Son of God this time of year. They lit candles to celebrate the coming of Him who the Bible and Christ himself called "the Light of the world." This Christmas Holiday, I invite you to look closely with me at that particular Light, through the lens of the biblical text known as the Song of Simeon.

The Soul of Simeon

Luke 2:25 says: "**Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon,**" who was "**righteous and devout,**" in whom the "Holy Spirit" moved and spoke, and who was longing for the "**consolation**" – which is to say the redemption of Israel. Simeon is living in a land where news of war and violence is daily fare, where stories of abuses by the powerful are normal, where occupation with vulgarity and celebrity by the poor and rich alike are all too familiar. Racial conflict and ethnic divisions are commonplace in Israel. Religion is nominal for most people and wielded as a blunt instrument by fanatics. There is darkness over the land that has been there for so long that people don't even know any different any more.

In his famous *Chronicles of Narnia*, author C.S. Lewis pictures a world in which it is "always Winter, but never Christmas." The land and its people are under a spell that leaves them cold, numb, and darkened. Snow is everywhere, but Christmas never

comes and, therefore, the springtime – the time of renewal and rebirth – can never come. But there are a few, who never fully give in to winter, who never stop longing for the Light to break through. And they live on the hope of a prophecy that one day a Savior will come whose glory and power will usher in the spring.

Simeon was a soul like that. He lived on the hope that the words uttered in the great ninth chapter of the famous prophet Isaiah's book would come true, that one **"The people walking in darkness [would see] a great light,"** that **"on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light [would] dawn."** Simeon lived his whole life yearning and praying for that breakthrough, **"waiting,"** says Luke, **"for the consolation [the comfort and renewal] of Israel."** What do you yearn and wait for? In whom or what do you seek your consolation, our nations or world's?

Seeing the Light

And then, suddenly, while wandering through the courts of the Temple one day, Simeon saw it. It wasn't even on a holy day, a holiday; it was just an ordinary day but, as he went through the Temple, suddenly the Holy Spirit gave Simeon the ability to recognize in the face of a baby carried by a peasant woman -- the Light of the World wrapped in swaddling clothes. You can see him stopping Mary as she goes by in the court, can't you? You can see him asking if, just for a moment, he might hold the baby. Kindly, she says yes to the old man, what could be the harm. And Luke 2:28 reads: **Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people."**

These words and the ones that follow here have for centuries been used as the final song of worship in churches that celebrate "Evensong" or Vespers services. Like Mary's *Magnificat* or Zechariah's *Benedictus*, this song too has been known by its Latin name. It is called the *Nunc Dimittis* – Latin for Simeon's words "Dismiss now" thy servant in peace. What I want to touch on before I let you go today, is what this amazing song has to say to us about the nature of the Light that met Simeon and meets you and me during these holidays.

Sometimes, you will hear people talking as if Christmas was a Christian holiday – as if Jesus came primarily for those who were already leaning right up against God. I know it would never happen here, but I used to go to a church where people actually got irritated that non-regular churchgoers were showing up on holidays and taking up room. I could only figure that they must not have seen the Christmas lights. Notice the first title that Simeon gives to Jesus. In verse 32 he calls him: **"a light for revelation to the Gentiles..."**

Now the word "Gentile" is biblical code-language for spiritual outsiders, for people who don't have a close relationship with God yet, who don't know the insider jargon, who may not dress correctly for church or stand up at the right time or even show up at all. But Simeon sees what the prophet Isaiah said on behalf of God himself in Isaiah 42:6,

“I, the LORD... make you to be a light for the Gentiles.” And then in Isaiah 49:6, God repeats his instructions. He says: **"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant [and just] bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."**

In other words, God's love is so big that it is not enough for him to simply extend his hand to people like Simeon who are actively seeking him. **"It is too small a thing."** God's grace is so large that He reaches out toward even those who have no interest in him, or who are following other gods, or who don't want to believe in any God. Maybe you're a Gentile like that. You've met Christians you don't like. You don't get this whole church business. You've got your own ideas and value systems. O.K. But the Light of the World still came for you. He is still shining toward you. And if you will dare to look into his face, look into the life and teaching of Jesus, you will find revealed not just somebody's idea of God, but the Lord of Life himself, who says: "I love you. Come, walk with me."

That's not to say that Jesus did not come for those of us already committed to seeking God too. Simeon also calls Jesus a light **"for glory to your people Israel."** See, says God through Isaiah 46:13, **"I am bringing my righteousness near, it is not far away... I will grant salvation to Zion, my splendor to Israel."** Sometimes, I think, it is not those who are far from God who need Christmas most, but those who have been so close to God for so long that they no longer see his splendor. Karl Barth, the famous theologian, was on a streetcar one day in Basel, Switzerland. A tourist to the city climbed on and sat down next to Barth. The two men started chatting with each other. "Are you new to the city?" Barth inquired. "Yes," said the tourist. "Is there anything you would particularly like to see in this city?" asked Barth. "Oh yes," he said, "I'd love to meet the famous theologian Karl Barth. Do you know him?" Barth replied, "Well as a matter of fact, I do. I give him a shave every morning." The tourist got off the streetcar quite delighted. He went back to his hotel saying to himself, "I met Karl Barth's barber today."

It's easy for those of us who come regularly to church to see mainly the Barber. "What a fine church this is," people will say. "Wonderful message, pastor; you really spoke to me today." "Oh, that music! Be sure to tell the choir how great they were!" But beloved of Israel, if you feel any touch of splendor in this season, any righteousness in this place, any hope of salvation singing through this ministry, it is only because God himself is manifesting his **"glory to [his] people."** It is the light of Christ alone that warms and shines with power in and through this Temple and I pray you see Him in this season.

Simeon's Song tells us that Jesus is a light of revelation to those who've never seen the true God. He is the light of glory to those who already walk with God but need to see his radiance more closely. But there is one further dimension to God's light that this Song rings out. Jesus is also a light of warning. Luke 2:33 reads, **"The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in**

Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed."

When we look at the Child in Mary's arms, it is hard to imagine anyone not embracing him. But don't be fooled. Jesus is not really like one of those warm little 40-watt light bulbs that shine from dusty crèche scenes. Jesus is much more like one of those huge luminous signs with the flashing orange lights on them that says: "Turn Here. Danger Ahead. Bridge Out." Jesus is God's last ditch attempt to get the world to turn and change its course. He challenges us to repent of our sins, to forgive our enemies, to care for the poor, to love our neighbors, to cross racial boundaries, to seek the truth, before the course we're on leads to destruction. When you come to a sign like that, you will have one of two reactions to it. You can say: "Thank goodness, someone had the kindness to post this sign and warn me." Or else you can say speak out against this sign: "Who is this sign maker to tell me that His way is better than mine. Who is He to say I can't go in the direction I want to go. Who is Jesus to say that He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life." Herod and the Pharisees made their choice. The shepherds and the wise men made theirs. We must make ours, but in the choosing is set a direction that leads to a rise or a fall.

In his autobiography *Timebends*, playwright Arthur Miller describes watching his wife, the famous Marilyn Monroe, falling into the depths of depression and despair. He feared for her life as he saw their growing estrangement, her paranoia, and her increasing reliance on barbiturates. One evening, after a doctor had been cajoled into giving Marilyn yet another shot and she was sleeping, Miller stood watching her. "I found myself straining to imagine miracles," he writes. "What if she were to wake and I were able to say, "God loves you, darling," and she were able to believe it! How I wished I still had my religion and she hers."¹

What if it were so? What if Christmas came this year and suddenly everyone could see the lights? What if irreligious people suddenly saw in the life of Jesus the revelation of God as he truly is and began a journey toward that star, as those wise men did? What if those of us over-familiar with Christianity suddenly saw the true glory of God in the face of Christ as for the very first time, as those shepherds did? And what if someone hell-bent for destruction, suddenly saw in Jesus the light of warning and the call of hope, as some of us here did or will today? Because this is the truth: God so loves you and this world, my darling, that once upon a holy night, he came to shines his light on this earth.

¹ Source: Dr. William Willimon, from a sermon entitled *The Teacher*.