

“Presenting the Light”

Salado UMC—31 December 2017

First Sunday after Christmas

Preaching Text: Luke 2: [21] 22-40—Year B

Salado, Texas 76571

“You can’t have a light without a dark to stick it in”

Arlo Guthrie (b. 1947).

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Hear our day’s lesson First Sunday after Christmas Day:

[21 After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb . . .] ²²When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³(as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), ²⁴and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. ²⁷Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

**²⁹“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation,
³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”**

³³And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

³⁶There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night

and day. ³⁸ At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

³⁹ When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him (Luke 2: [21] 22-40 NRSV).

Pastoral Prayer prior to sermon: 31 December 2017:

Dear God, our hearts are full to overflowing this morning as we have again celebrated Jesus' birth. In this blessing you remind us once again of the mystery of your love for the whole creation and for each one of us. Again, we have been stunned by your straight-forward incarnation into our human life and history. Again, in quiet moments we have asked with Mary, Jesus' mother, "How can this be?"

You, O God, have made our hearts full to care more and to do more and to give more that our neighbors might live. Through the love of Jesus, we have come into contact with your love and heard your directive to love our neighbor as ourselves. But we know that we cannot do it on our own and so we ask you for your direction and your light.

May we feel discomfort with injustice in our world and even in our own neighborhoods. Make us uneasy with poverty and unemployment in our times of prosperity. Goad our conscience with respect to those who are hungry, cold, or homeless. Bless especially the children in need. Offer our leaders an apt sense determination as they guide us to heal and feed and teach all of our neighbors as members of one family—the family of humanity created by God for God.

All this we pray in the light of Jesus who came to us in Bethlehem, and who comes to us in the daily routine, and who will welcome us home at the end of the day. Amen.

As Luke often does, his story has two matching heroes—one male and one female, for example, Priscilla and Aquila, Ananias and Sapphira, and Elizabeth and Zechariah. We could address Anna's faithfulness. Luke tells us "She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day." Yet the character of Simeon more suitably lends itself to our theme of "Presenting the Light." In the fragment called *Nunc Dimittis* (in Latin) Luke describes Simeon singing:

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 (Luke 2:29-32).

A priest has just circumcised Jesus thereby marking Jesus as a member of God's chosen people. The people of Israel believed that it was through them that the world might receive God's salvation. After childbirth a priest could purify the mother in the Temple. The mother could offer a lamb, along with a turtledove or a pigeon for sacrifice. If poor, as Mary certainly was, two turtledoves or a pigeon was

adequate to meet the ritual requirement. Exodus 13:1-2 reminds us that we sanctify to God every firstborn male. Jesus' presentation in the Temple retells for us Samuel's presentation by his mother Hannah. As a consequence, Luke depicts Jesus' family as completing the conditions of Mosaic Law.

Simeon has long anticipated the Messiah's coming. This Messiah spoken of by the prophets and psalmist is the one to restore God's favor to Israel. This return to divine favor is the meaning of Luke's phrase, "the consolation of Israel" (v. 25). The Spirit told Simeon that he will see the Messiah before his death (v. 26). Simeon's *Nunc Dimittis* begins by announcing that God has set Simeon free much in the same way as a master as an owner frees a slave. Simeon no longer fears death. He is free for the Spirit disclosed this prophetic fulfillment. In Messiah's coming, God frees Simeon/Israel from bondage. God saved Israel, but God's salvation is for Gentiles, too.

What is important to note on this last day of one year as we anticipate the next is what Simeon says even as he encounters Jesus as a baby. Simeon says, "My eyes have seen your salvation" and that Jesus is "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." Entwined here are light and sight. These images of faith—light/sight—are thus intertwined as well. An on-line physics tutorial teaches:

The bottom line is: without light, there would be no sight. The visual ability of humans and other animals is the result of the complex interaction of light, eyes and brain. We are able to see because light from an object can move through space and reach our eyes. Once light reaches our eyes, signals are sent to our brain, and our brain deciphers the information in order to detect the appearance, location and movement of the objects we are sighting at. The whole process, as complex as it is, would not be possible if it were not for the presence of light. Without light, there would be no sight (glenbrook.k12.il.us/GBSSCI/PHYS/CLASS/refln/u1311a.html).

Or, it could be, another example will help. In physical therapy a therapist has a person stand on one leg and balance to measure a patient's progress. But I was stunned to find out about the therapist's way to measure patient's progress. For example, if a patient is aged 18-39 s/he should be able to balance for 43.3 seconds with eyes open. Yet with closed eyes the therapist can only expect the patient to balance for 9.4 seconds. Likewise, if a person is 80-89 years of age with eyes open s/he should be able to balance 6.2 seconds on one leg, while only 1.3 seconds if the eyes are closed. I asked the therapist as to why the balance expectation is over four times more in the light as in the dark. She said, "I bet you never knew how much light had to do with balance, did you?" And she was right. I did not know—and am amazed about it even now.

In Ephesians the writer tells the reader: "everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light" (5:13-14). Jesus is the light of God for Jesus illumines the darkness—and as John reminds us, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5).

Abraham Heschel wrote a definitive two-volume book *The Prophets*. One of the things that he wrote concerning the religion in the time of the prophets (paraphrased for easier understanding) has to do with something we too all need to come to grips. In terms of our faith and the New Year we all seem to be constantly entering into a new world.

Religion had declined not because it had been successfully argued against, but because it had become irrelevant, dull, oppressive, uninteresting. When faith is replaced by creed, worship by

discipline, love by habit; when the crises of today are ignored because of the remembered splendor of the past; when faith becomes an inherited heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority and rules rather than the voice of compassion, its message becomes meaningless (thanks to my friend David Weber for this citation).

Into this world steps Simeon who knows of what Malcolm Gladwell speaks when he writes, “The key to good decision making is not knowledge. It is understanding” (*Blink*, Back Bay Books, New York, 2005, p. 265). Knowing facts is never enough—we need to know how the facts fit together and work. We can make better, more faithful, more ethical, more just decisions, because God’s light has come incarnate in Jesus. The more of God’s light we let in, the better-balanced life we thus express. This is the light, of which we speak, at the end of the tunnel.

Almighty God, strengthen the true light of Christ that shines in me and help me bear witness to your faithfulness and love in the coming week. Open my eyes and ears to the presence of your light.

Amen.

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