

The Grace to Recognize the Future

Text: Luke 2:32

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

"...A light that will be a revelation to the nations and glory to thy people Israel."

It is the first Lord's Day of a new year, and the new year is a time for prognosticating - projecting the future. We have come through the old year and have taken inventory, and now it's the problem of trying to secure our future by strategizing and planning and figuring out what we want to do with our investments, with our business, with our profession, with our lives. As a community of God's people, this second Sunday in Christmastide allows us to return once more to the Christmas story, and on the first Lord's Day of a new year to ask ourselves what that story calls us to be as a people of God.

I would like to suggest that we need grace. We need grace to recognize the future. The future is upon us whether we recognize it or not but, if God would give us grace, we might recognize and receive that future and become more closely identified with the purposes of God for the world and for us, God's people. We are a people who live by a vision. Stemming from the prophets, the whole Western World is a world that thinks in terms of a beginning and a consummation, in contrast to Eastern spirituality that lives in a kind of cyclical eternal return. We think more in terms of that linear movement, the drama of history.

History had a beginning when God said, "Let there be," and that history will have a consummation when God says, "Time shall be no more." We have just celebrated and are celebrating the Good News that, in the meantime, in this historical drama of which we are a part, God is with us. God had visited God's people, and the "Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." So, we in Christmastide are a people who celebrate the presence of God with us as we move toward the future. We are a biblical people who live by that kind of vision. It is important for us to understand the contours of the future to the extent that is possible - to the extent that we can discern that from the word of God and the drama of salvation that is being played out in our midst. I call you this morning to seek the grace to recognize the future in order that we might be what God might have us be. In order to do that, it is always necessary to hear again the Gospel in a new way in terms of that concrete context in which we live, on the first Sunday of

a new year, as we think about the future before us, set our goals and make our plans. In this concrete context, as those who would live by the Gospel, how ought we to fashion our lives and set our goals and make our plans?

Simeon was a beautiful old man, and one of our favorite biblical characters, I suppose. Simeon was one who had the grace to recognize the future. Joseph and Mary brought the child to the temple to fulfill the legal requirements according to the Law of Moses for the child and for Mary. The Holy Spirit nudged old Simeon and said, "Go and look upon that child." He took that child in his arms and had the sense that now the future had been opened - that for which he had been watching and waiting was now present in this child. He had the grace to recognize the future as an old man who had lived righteously and devoutly; that is, he had lived with integrity in all his human relationships and he had been devout in that he worshipped God and trusted God. He is characterized as one of those who was watching and waiting, and trusting and hoping, and praying - and in the child he saw the fulfillment of his hopes, the realization that God was moving now in a significant way to effect God's purposes. So he sang a song. He sang a Psalm, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for the nations, and a glory for thy people Israel." The Song of Simeon, *Nunc dimittis*, coming from the first two words in Latin of a translation of a Psalm.

Luke begins the story of Jesus with singers. He laces into the nativity narrative the song of Zechariah, the song of Mary, and the song of Simeon. Those songs are at the beginning of the story of Jesus for a very good reason. We have beautiful old Simeon, having lived well, ready now to die in peace. That would really be a wonderful way in which simply to close the Christmas season. In fact, I would suggest that if I had my "druthers" I would quit now, we would take the offering and go home. For after all, it is a wonderful story. The child in the arms of an old man, an old man who had lived righteously, worshiped faithfully, lived with hope and trust and found the realization of his dream, and would die in peace. That is a wonderful story! It would be worth the price of admission this morning. We could go home how.

But that's not all Simeon had to say. So, if I would be faithful to the Gospel, I have to go on to tell you what more Simeon said about this child. He said, "This child will be for the fall and rising of many in Israel. He will be a sign spoken against." Then he looked at Mary and he said, "And a sword will pierce your heart." I suppose I could have entitled this message "The Shadow Side of Christmas," because Simeon was not only a beautiful model of living well and dying peacefully, he is also one who had the grace to recognize the future and to see in Jesus a future that would call people into the crisis of decision because Simeon recognized that the future of God was a future that pointed to the transformation of human society, the transformation of the human condition.

The song of Simeon like the songs of Zechariah and Mary is a song of revolution. These are revolutionary ballads. Luke puts them intentionally at the beginning of his gospel in order to say that God intends to do something in this old world through this child, and that this child will set in motion what God intends, that the world be changed, that the human condition be transformed. That means that this child will not simply be sweet little Jesus boy, but one who will face us with the crisis of decision and call us to follow in a way that will result in the transformation of human society. It will be a sign spoken against. He will not be taken lightly, not perceived readily. Mary will bury her child for the way he will go. For in this child was the beginning of a guerilla warfare on this world, whose end is the kingdom of God, the Shalom of the messianic age.

Maybe for just a few moments we ought to think about Jesus and the implications of Christmas for our lives as individuals and as a community. We have been looking at a mission statement or an identity statement in which we have recognized the grace of God that embraces all and excludes none. I believe that is the intention of the gospel. We have failed, I think, to recognize the revolutionary ferment that the gospel of Jesus Christ injects into the human situation. As I said, the song of Zechariah, and the song of Mary, and the song of Simeon were songs that might be compared to a Joan Baez in the 60s. These were the ballads of the underside of society. These were the people of no account who saw in Jesus the possibility of the transformation of the human situation. What was the human situation? Well, the human situation was set forth by Luke when he says that Caesar Augustus made a decree that all the world should be taxed.

Governments tax people. That's what they are about. In Imperial Rome, they were not asking what was just or fair, or good for the provinces. They were asking, "How much revenue do we need in order to support the apparatus of the Imperial government?" So the decree went out and Joseph could load his very pregnant wife onto a mule and head for Bethlehem whether it was convenient or not. There were masses of peasant people who were displaced and dispossessed. It was a society in which the masses were marginalized and living at a subsistence level. The country priests, of whom Zechariah was a model, sang the *Benedictus*, saying now God finally has redeemed and visited God's people. Mary was just an ordinary girl, just a peasant girl, and she sang the *Magnificat*, in which she spoke about how the mighty were thrown down and the lowly were lifted up. Simeon said, "This one will be a sign spoken of again because he will be for the fall and rise of many in Israel." These were the revolutionary ballads of a people who were oppressed and exploited, dispossessed and dominated. The world was in the control of a Caesar in Rome, who had his Herod in Jerusalem, who had his Caiaphas in the Church. And in that collusion of government power and ecclesiastical power— the poor, the masses, were dispossessed, exploited, abused, and their lot was a sorry one.

The story of Jesus is called Gospel, which means literally good news. But was it good news for Caesar Augustus? You had better believe it wasn't. Was it good

news for Herod? Not at all! Herod was so "antsy" at the announcement of the possibility of the birth of royalty that he had all the innocents slaughtered: all male children, two years and under, were put to the sword lest there be any pretender to his throne and to his power. Those who are in power will do everything possible for the perpetuation of that power, for the insuring and the securing of a position of power and influence. The world is no different today than it was then. It was no different then than it is today. The gospel was good news - not to those who were in charge, but to those who were underdogs. The shadow side of Christmas is a shadow side to the rich and the powerful. It is good news to the poor.

Richard Horsley has a book published this past year called *The Liberation of Christmas*, and when I saw the title I thought perhaps it was another one of those spiritual harangues about how we have commercialized and sentimentalized Christmas. But when I got to reading it, I found it is one of those intense New Testament studies which is going on so much in our day, where the gospel and the story of Jesus is being rooted in its concrete historical, social, political and economic context. Richard Horsley, in order to help the likes of us to understand the nature of the gospel, gives us an analogy out of our own day and our own situation in this nation (North America) over against Latin America.

He tells the story about what has gone on over the last thirty or forty years in Guatemala and Nicaragua. I am embarrassed to tell you I know very little about it. I think from the hints I get that you and I would be horrified at the atrocities that have been perpetuated south of our border. We have our hands clean, but like Caesar we have had our Herods. We have buttressed the strong men with their secret police forces. The news has leaked out to us. We learn, for example, when Oscar Romero, the Archbishop in El Salvador, is gunned down at the altar in 1980 because he had gone to the side of the peasant and the poor. We hear about it in our newspapers when six nuns are gunned down by the secret police. We hear about it when the oppressor gets out of bounds and the situation becomes so atrocious that the world finally sits up and takes notice.

But until such time, what we really care about is not someone who is in power, who is concerned about peace and justice. What we really care about and in a matter of national policy is that someone who is in control will keep the natives from being too restless, and who will, for God's sake, keep the communist threat from invading our hemisphere. That was the story for the last forty years. When Horsley gives the analogy of our involvement in the poverty and destitution and hopelessness of the masses of Latin America, he tells also of how in these base communities, little household groups are springing up all over the place down there. He tells how these poor folk begin to read these stories and they read those songs at the beginning of Luke's gospel and they say, "God cares about us. God is into liberation." It is not accidental that liberation theology has arisen in South America and Latin America, and that the model, the paradigm in the biblical

story that they have latched onto is the Exodus -when God with a mighty hand delivered a band of slaves out of Pharaoh's power.

Now, the Christmas story is a story of radical revolution. In order not to hear it, we have successfully spiritualized it. For most of my ministry, and most of your experience, the message would have been stopped ten minutes ago with Simeon, an old man, hoping watching, praying, living well - dying in peace. Period! And to the likes of us, that's good news, and it doesn't reach into the dark corners of our community and national and ecclesiastical situations at all. It's comfortable. In fact, it's inspiring, and it's true. But it is not the whole story. With every returning Christmas it gets more difficult for me to figure out how in the world the likes of us can speak of Christmas as the Good News. It wasn't good news in Rome, it wasn't good news in Jerusalem, and it isn't really good news in the church.

There is a guy I don't like very well. I am glad that it seems as though his sun is setting. His name is Jesse Jackson. But, I don't like him very well. In a presidential election or two ago when Jesse was running, he made a speech before the Democratic convention and there was one statement that struck me and has stayed with me. He was talking about his Rainbow Coalition. He was talking about race, poverty and the ghettos of the city, etc. Then he said, "Someone said to me, 'Why do you meddle in these unpopular issues?'" (I suppose it's like someone saying to me, "Preacher, why don't you be user friendly?") "I deal with these issues," he said, "because they are moral issues, and if they are moral issues, they will become political issues." I heard that and had to admit he was right. Do you want an example? South Africa (ten years ago, fifteen to twenty years ago). Didn't we wonder whether it would end in an explosion and a blood bath? Then events move along to a point at which someone like de Klerk comes along to see the inevitability of a sharing of power and, against great resistance, exercises leadership and moves it to a place where today there is the possibility of the first universal election and democratically elected government in their history. Chief Buthelezi, the black chieftain who wants to maintain his own power may yet undercut it. The white supremacists who want to maintain their own power and prestige and position may yet torpedo it. But, maybe it will happen. Sometimes it is easier to see the dynamics half a world away. All the dynamics were there - the same dynamics that operated with Caesar and Herod and Caiaphas when this child was born. Those in power would do everything possible to perpetuate power, even to the use of police force intimidation - whatever it took. When you are in power, and when you have the wealth and the authority of the organization, you can hold the lid on for a long time. But - if it's a moral issue, it will become a political issue. You know why? Is it just because people finally will rise up? No, I will tell you why. Do you know why people will finally rise up?

Because God loves people, and God is on the side of the poor and the oppressed and the exploited and the dominated, and the Good News of the Gospel was not about God sending a Savior into the world that I might be forgiven and go to

heaven. My goodness, haven't we domesticated the Gospel? Is that what it's about? Or is it about changing the world? Is it about changing society? Is it about facing up to the moral issues and using every bit of power we have in order to be on the side of justice and righteousness, leading toward peace? Will we have the grace to recognize the future? That's where the future is. Isaiah knew it. Micah knew it. Jesus knew it. Old Simeon knew it. And, therefore, they joined God's guerilla corps for the casting down of the mighty who held rule by intimidation, coercion and oppression, and joined the side of those who were looking for a humane existence.

You know, even if we didn't believe in God, even if we didn't believe in the future that God intends, even if we didn't feel the call of the Gospel to be involved with God's spirit in the world. If we were just smart, we would try to wipe out every situation where there is inhumanity, where people live with less than human dignity, where they might come to the conclusion finally that "burn baby, burn, I've got nothing to lose anyway"—where there is violence in our streets, where people gun down people because, if my life doesn't mean anything to me, your life doesn't mean anything either because human existence has degenerated to that point. If we were nothing but smart, shrewd, clever we would recognize that we ought to be about the humanization of the human lot of every human being. But why not do it with God—with grace, with God's grace—recognizing that that is where God would have us go.

If I had quit twenty minutes ago, it would have been one more wonderful Christmas at Christ Community—live well, die in peace. All of that is true, friends, but it is only half of the story. It is actually a distortion of the real story. Frankly, I would rather not preach this sermon, but I can't help it—it is true.

Merry Christmas.