

First Sunday of Christmas – Dec 31

The First Sunday after Christmas is one of the most poorly attended services out of the whole year. For the regular who is going to be there, it can be something of a disappointment that the crowds who thronged the nave on Christmas Eve could not find their way back on this next Sunday morning. It might even be a little disappointing for the preacher. But the folks who figure that church is something you should do every once in a while did their church for the month on Christmas Eve and they are all gone. Some are travelling, some are sick, some are just staying home after a long Advent and Christmas season of extra services.



The preacher should not get too discouraged in this. It was probably a bit of pride to think that they would come back because the Christmas Eve services you planned were so excellent. I would encourage you to see this as an opportunity. This is a moment when you can really get down to the meat of Christmas with the people who are able to hear it. Christmas draws the crowds because who can resist a little baby and the picture of a humble birth, shepherds and angels. It is all quite sentimental and sweet. And that is good. But now we get an old man who waited, an old woman whose widowhood has gone on for many years. Today we get the harder realities of life as Simeon tells Mary that a sword will pierce her heart and she will know grief because of this child who now lies resting in her arms.

This is mature Christmas, for the folks who did not spend all their Christmas energies on the Madison Avenue hype. This is the celebration of joy which does not fade and which has not tossed out the Christmas tree the day after Christmas to make way for the excesses of New Year's Eve and Day. This is Christmas for the folks who looked at all the presents they received and gave and saw a reflection of the greatest gift of all. The world often looks at those same gifts without that perspective and gets rather depressed. The Christian finds in them an echo, a reverberation of the greatest mystery of all time. God has given a gift, precious and perfect. Such people still feel joy and cheerfully come out on a Sunday morning to sing His praises once again.

Collect of the Day

O God, our Maker and Redeemer, You wonderfully created us and in the incarnation of Your Son yet more wondrously restored our human nature. Grant that we may ever be alive in Him who made Himself to be like us; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

The two great mysteries of God get attention in this prayer. He made us and then, more mysteriously, he redeemed us at the cost of his own Son. Our human pride says, "Well, of course, who would not want to save someone like me?!" But that expression of the zeitgeist simply means we have closed our eyes to so much of reality.

Such a banal over-estimation of ourselves is only part of the problem and may not be the larger part of the problem. Not only have we closed our eyes to so much of reality, quite often we have also closed our eyes to the much more important reality of God's love for this world. I read a sarcastic review of a play entitled "The Testament of Mary." It is a terrible play by all accounts. Do not waste your time or money. The play's eponymous character, the mother of our Lord, cries out at the end of the play that Jesus has redeemed the world and it was not worth it. The playwright has drunk deep from the modern age's nihilism. Jesus' redemption was wasted on this place, it did not work. The world is a hopeless place. This too is a blindness, even more profound than the glib blindness of those who imagine that they are really OK. This second blindness looks upon the suffering and wickedness of this world and it despairs. It sees nothing other than this world and it is a wretched place. Blinded by materialism, it cannot see the face of God in the mundane nor the beautiful the human life.

Because culturally we have lost sight of the prayer's first mystery which implies perfection and God's ownership of the whole world, we cannot see the second great mystery which speaks of God's enduring and profound love of this creation. The preacher today will want to connect the first and second mystery. His people need to avoid the two extremes we talked about above and the way out of them is in this connection. The babe born in that manger came to save the world that he made. On Christmas Day we got a little of that in the John reading, but it may not have been our focus. The key to being "alive in Him" is to start with the fact that he is the author of all life, including the fallen and broken life in which we now suffer. His presence in the temple in today's readings is because he treasures that first creation, all of it, though now twisted and warped by sin. We are able to take a sober and honest look at life, not needing to say "I'm OK." At the same time, such a sober and honest look does not lead us to despair for we have another vision rooted in the loving action of God on our behalf. Yes, the world is broken, but the more broken it appears the more glorious the world's redemption appears as well.

The work of the incarnate Christ is a restoration. In order to preach that, one has to have some vision of the state which was lost, some imagination to think of a time when death was unknown, when sickness and disease were absent, when society worked in a perfect harmony and the problems of the world which we know so well were all in the future. We have to have a sense of the possibility of perfection. If we don't the restoration is a cruel thing. An eternal life of this is not kindness.

Jesus has restored our human nature to us. Our culture quite often wants to say that sin is what makes us human. But this prayer assumes that sin dehumanizes us. It makes us less human. Our culture has sometimes grown far too comfortable with the sinner. We have said that it is normal, acceptable. We will rail against and take action against the gross sinner, the abuser, the pervert,

the murderer, but we will shrug off the rest. It is just the way we are. We have too often lost the imaginative ability to hear what it is that Jesus has done in restoring a true and full humanity to us – heaven is not where we are less human but where we are finally fully human.

Readings

Isaiah 61:10-62:3 *Do the opening words of this passage sound familiar? They were used for the OT reading on Advent III. I have included a few more verses of Is. 62 as well.*

¹⁰ I will greatly rejoice in the LORD;
my soul shall exult in my God,
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation;
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

¹¹ For as the earth brings forth its sprouts,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to sprout up before all the nations.

¹ For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet,
until her righteousness goes forth as brightness,
and her salvation as a burning torch.

² The nations shall see your righteousness,
and all the kings your glory,
and you shall be called by a new name
that the mouth of the LORD will give.

³ You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD,
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

⁴ *You shall no more be termed Forsaken,
and your land shall no more be termed Desolate,
but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her,
and your land Married;
for the LORD delights in you,
and your land shall be married.*

⁵ *For as a young man marries a young woman,
so shall your sons marry you,
and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
so shall your God rejoice over you.*

I will rejoice greatly in the Lord. The Lord has clothed me with the garments of salvation. The picture and imagery here is one of a wedding and then of the earth clothed in beauty by God.

This is a most interesting contrast. The wedding of Mary and Joseph was upset by the arrival of this child.

Chapter 62 has the prophet hearing the Lord speaking and refusing to be silent. (At least that is how I read it, one could also say that this is the prophet speaking.) The salvation and redemption of Jerusalem and Israel are a burning torch, a brightness which is noticed by kings and the nations of the world. The Lord reasserts his ownership of what was lost as he gives a new name. Only the owner can give a name. He holds the people of God in his hands like a treasured possession, a diadem, a crown of beauty which is admired before it is given the honor being placed upon the head.

The verses which extend the reading bring home the miracle of this theme. The land has been desolate, abandoned, forsaken. God will change this by his act. If you know anyone named Beulah this is the word for "Married" and if you know anyone, less likely, named Hephzibah that is the term for "My Delight is In Her." Those names were actually once not unheard of when we all read the King James which did not translate them but gave us transliterations of the Hebrew. God is marrying the land, he is restoring the shattered relationship which the idolatry of Israel has destroyed. Remember the consistent image for idolatry in the Old Testament prophecy is adultery. This is God remarrying his adulterous people, renewing his vows to us. It is a great picture of fornication, a purity restored after having been lost. The consistent image of the OT has been that the people of Israel were "whoring" after other gods. This is strange. The thing about virginity is that once you have lost it, it is gone. But God creates from nothing. All those rules are off the table when He is involved.

This reading is about prophecy fulfilled, even though it is looking forward. We can see the wise men coming in Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus. We can see the joy of Simeon today and the fact that the Church today includes some 2 billion people who have seen that light and called on the name of the Lord.

This passage is hard to preach because our culture is not a shame/honor culture. The people to whom Isaiah wrote felt a deep sense of shame for the humiliation of their country at the hands of the Assyrians and Babylonians. They felt shame at the fact that this had come upon them because of their idolatry and sin. We just don't understand shame so much anymore. As Garrison Keillor used to say, "There are parts of the world where shame is still considered a terminal illness." But of course, we cannot use him for sermon illustrations anymore. I wonder if he has any shame.

Psalm 111

Praise the LORD!

I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

² Great are the works of the LORD,

studied by all who delight in them.

³ Full of splendor and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures forever.

⁴ He has caused his wondrous works to be remembered;
the LORD is gracious and merciful.

⁵ He provides food for those who fear him;
he remembers his covenant forever.

⁶ He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the inheritance of the nations.

⁷ The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy;

⁸ they are established forever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.

⁹ He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant forever.

Holy and awesome is his name!

¹⁰ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practice it have a good understanding.

His praise endures forever!

The psalmist is really conveying the emotions of the person who has experienced what the prophet has foreseen. God has done great things and he stands in wonder and awe. God has sent redemption to his people, commanded that his covenant and name be eternally worshiped. Holy and awesome is his name!

But the end of the psalm may give us some occasion to preach. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. Notice that the fear of the Lord is not the end of the wisdom, only its beginning. Those who practice such fear and its attendant wisdom have a good understanding. But notice that it is practice, not accomplish, not complete. There is a little now and not yet here for the preacher to massage into a sermon if you want.

Galatians 4:4-7 This is one of those passages we lift out for a purpose which not be entirely congruent with what Paul had in mind. I have included a few verses on either side of our reading to help you access the argument Paul is making here.

I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, ² but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. ³ In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. ⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. ⁶ And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

⁸ Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods.
⁹ But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? ¹⁰ You observe days and months and seasons and years! ¹¹ I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.

Paul wrote these words to his troubled congregations in Galatia. They had reverted to the old way of thinking about God somehow, as if his love were somehow for sale. Here Paul uses the image of a son and a slave. The son also is disciplined, just as a slave is disciplined, but it is completely different for the son.

Those disciplinary strictures, however, are not the expression of our sonship, but at best a disciplinary reality which prepares us to be and act as the sons of God. A man's son is not always sent to the time-out chair, is he? There comes a day when a man has conversation with his son, father to son, man to man, and that relationship changes. The father delights in the growing independence and capabilities of the son which mean he does not have to use the old strictures of discipline on him. He is a man, he able to make good and wise decisions of his own. If that doesn't happen, we are sorely grieved, when it does, it is beautiful.

This is the fullness of time of which Paul speaks in our reading for the day. Yes, there was a time when we were disciplined as children, but that time is passed. Henri Nouwen wrote about the fullness of time – he spoke of how empty our times often feel. (from "Bread for the Journey.") We are always looking ahead and back to other times, longingly. But what makes this full time? It is the presence of God who was, who is, who is to come. He is all time come together in one place. He is the fullness of time. What makes the moment of Jesus birth full is not that God brought all the right pieces together, but his presence makes that time and this time full.

In the fullness of time – Paul has a real sense that he lived at the end of the ages, at the culmination of human history. We can still say that, but it takes a little effort on our part, at least a little more than Paul had to use. The 2000 years of history which have intervened and the many events which stand between us and that day give many an occasion to wonder if Jesus really is the end of history. The Moslem certainly doesn't think he was!

But the fact that we observe this birth some two thousand years later, that Christmas cards are sent and worship services planned, that holidays are taken and schools let out all suggests that this birth at this juncture of time is still important. We still set our calendars to that birth. We are today noting the beginning of year of our Lord 2018. That's of course what AD, Anno Domini, means, the year of our Lord.

Born under the law to redeem the people who labored under the Law... Paul sees the work of Christ not through a lens of God's power, but through love. It was not God's power that put Jesus under the law. Indeed, Jesus' birth, passion, death, and life in Galilee of two thousand years ago is hardly an expression of his power. If redemption were a matter of power that would

not have been necessary. Power could have accomplished that from the comfort of some heavenly reality. Paul sees that Christ was born under the law – he subjected himself to the very law he wrote. But he did so with a purpose – to redeem the people who labored under that law.

The love imagery continues and intensifies. The law is like the bondage of a slave. He labors under it. But the Lord has come to change all that. He has given the adoption of sons, the access of a beloved child. Because he came and accomplished that, we can cry out “Abba!” - “Daddy!” and God hears those words as a dear father hears his dear children. He cannot tune us out, his love will not permit it.

It is critical, but a difficult thing, that we retain the language of son here and apply it to everyone. If you read Galatians, it is especially important. In the ancient world daughters did not inherit from a father with the same legal status. If we simply call everyone children or worse, sons and daughters of God, we start to create a double system. Paul is being very deliberate and radical in his words here. He really does mean everyone is a son, even the women. Sons have the most beneficial inheritance. The term “children” includes daughters, who change their names to their husband’s last name. In most of the world they still do not inherit the same way as their brothers. Paul is making a radical statement of equality here, one we actually weaken if we start to play the inclusive language game.

One could preach a sermon on the fullness of time. There are some very interesting little factoids about the century which begins with the birth of Jesus. The Pax Romana had made travel inside the empire possible. The Greek language made communication possible. A single political and judicial system meant one could move from Jerusalem to England, North Africa, Italy, Persia, and beyond without ever leaving the country. Roman roads and a bizarre hatred of piracy by the Roman Emperors made it safe to move about. Paul Meier’s book “On the Fullness of Time” would have much to help out the preacher.

Luke 2:22-40

²² And when 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 male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”) ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.”

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶ And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. ²⁷ And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, ²⁸ he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

²⁹ “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;

³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation
³¹ that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel.”

³³ And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴ And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed ³⁵ (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”

³⁶ And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, ³⁷ and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

³⁹ And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.

This text is filled with wonderful little tidbits. The very act of translating tends to permit the editor and the translator to impose evenness to the text. Luke told us in the first verses of chapter 1 that he thoroughly researched the book he was writing and that he had conducted interviews with those who were eye witnesses of the events he records. The first two chapters, and this is more evident in the Greek original than it is in the translations which are before us, has a decided Semitic cast to it. You notice it especially in the way that it creates the sentences and the possessive which are constructed differently than they are in good Greek, and Luke probably knew how to write some of the best Greek in the NT.

A reading of the text also suggests that the events recorded in these two chapters are seen through the eyes of Mary. Did he talk to Mary? Are these words a faithful translation of the Aramaic she would have spoken to Luke and that he then rendered in Greek, preserving her Semiticisms? It is quite possible. She was probably less than 20 years older than Jesus. Luke was researching perhaps in the early 60's. He would have had a chance to do some of this while he was in Palestine and Paul was held for two years in the governor's prison in Caesarea Philippi. While we cannot know, and this speculation does not render the word more authoritative or somehow better, yet, it is an intriguing thought.

The holy family show up at the Temple for the rites of purification. According to the Law of Moses this would have been after 40 days had passed, so in our calendar and reckoning this is Feb 2, the Feast of the Presentation. They are there to offer a sacrifice, a sin offering, on behalf of his mother. All Jewish women were required to do this, but we don't know how many actually did. The proper offering was to be a lamb; but for the poor, a pair of doves or pigeons were permitted. And if they were truly poor, then a handful of flour would suffice. The sacrifice seems

to have been for the pain of the childbirth. God had said that Eve and her daughters would bear their children in pain, and so God had commanded a sacrifice to be brought to the Temple, a lamb or its substitute to point them to the solution to sin and the pain it brings to our lives. The lambs were an arrow of sorts pointing to the Christ, the Savior who was to come. Too often I have heard people say that this sacrifice was for the uncleanness of childbirth. When I inquire what they mean, they usually are thinking the mess and especially the blood of childbirth. But God is not really put off by that. It is the pain, it seems to me, which is the real deforming of his creation.

The fact that Mary and Joseph bring a pair of turtle doves suggests that they were not wealthy, in fact they were poor. Jesus' family is of humble means. The fact that they did this also suggests that both Mary and Joseph were quite pious. The records are of course non-existent, but it is hard to imagine that every Jewish mother in Palestine would have brought this sacrifice after the birth of every Jewish child. The slaughter would have been significant. If you add on top of that the other reasons for which one had to bring a sacrifice, it is not unthinkable that this was not universally practiced. We don't really know how many did, but that Mary and Joseph did this suggests that they were pious. They were the sort of people who show up for services on the Sunday after Christmas.

We noticed that amid the splendor of the temple, the opulence of this enormous building, Luke notes two poor people, two folks who were really old, and who were doing something we often consider to be valueless – they were waiting. We tend to count waiting as empty time, but Paul calls this the fullness of time. Jesus will spend a great deal of his ministry trying to set people straight on just who he is and what he has come to do. But here we see two old people who got it right at the very beginning. Our culture tends to think old people are the last ones to figure out their cell phones and all the latest gadgetry of our generation. They are the butt of many jokes on that account. But Luke portrays them as far more “with it” than the generation in which Jesus was born. His was a culture which valued elders as sources of wisdom, but even so, they were two little old people who otherwise wielded no power. They were the quiet and simple people of the land.

What they got right was that they were looking for the right thing. They were not bound up in the many controversies which would consume Jesus and his day. They had their eyes on the promise of God and were waiting for that promise to be fulfilled. We have already got our eyes fixed on this next presidential election, but is that the fulfillment of the promise? Really?

It seems that only two people there truly grasp the real meaning of this child. He is the one to whom all the sacrifices were pointing. He was the Lamb of God who would take away the sin, the brokenness, the pain, the suffering of the whole world. First Simeon, moved by the Holy Spirit and trusting the promises of God takes the child in his arms and sings the song we know as the Nunc Dimittis. Many of us cut our teeth in Lutheran churches singing his words at the end of every communion service. I have often sung it for salty old Lutherans on their death beds and we have smiled at one another in the promises of God. Simeon said it well.

Then Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, who had also lived to a ripe and old age, prophesied concerning this child to all who were waiting for the redemption of Israel. Here are two old people, in a culture which revered old people, making a big deal about this child. That is a message in itself, especially for the folks of the time. It might not seem so strong to us, but how would we make it so for our generation? Probably with powerful, wealthy, or otherwise important people stopping to look at and marvel at this child.

One might also make something of the fact that Anna is of the tribe of Asher. She is one of the remnants, the tattered fragments of the once mighty northern ten tribes of Israel. God has not forgotten about them. Frequently the prophets spoke of God's restoration of them. Here is Anna, seemingly an embodiment of their predicament. This is almost a resurrection motif.

The Concordia Commentary notices how Simeon and Anna look like an echo of the angels and shepherds. Simeon proclaims, Anna hears and then goes and tells.

Mary and Joseph are frankly amazed. How can they be after all they have seen and heard? Yet they are. There is much to this story that is hard to understand. They return to Nazareth and the child grows. Luke, who researched this story thoroughly by his own admission has left out the whole wise men and star story. He has omitted the Herodian slaughter of the innocents. We don't know why. Perhaps his audience was of a more humble birth and would have related more to shepherds than eastern wise men bearing gifts. Romans had a rather conflicted history with the Persians anyway so perhaps Theophilus would have not appreciated it. He probably also would not have resonated with the whole flight into Egypt thing which plucked at the heart strings of a Jew who celebrated Passover every year.

The words of Simeon attract us in this whole story and they will likely serve as the basis for our sermon. They are a psalm really, spoken in faithful hearing and believing of a promise. The promise fulfilled, Simeon can die in peace. He can depart this life. He has seen what God promised him that he would see. These are the words which we would pray for our own people to speak, we want to make Simeon's words our own words.

You might also pay attention to Anna who lived in the Temple – she was one of those little old ladies who showed up for every church activity. You know the sort, might have even thought that she lived at church. If pressed, she might tell you that it is only there that she still feels alive since her husband died. Anna was a prophetess – recognized as someone who was especially in touch with God. Do you have little old ladies in your church about whom you can say that? I have ministered to them too.

Law

1. It is Christmas but we don't see Jesus. This is a time to speak of promises fulfilled but we look about us and are tempted to see only promises broken. The family have all left again. The bills are on the way from the credit card company. This is New Years with its dreadful resolutions. The Christ child may have come, but so what?

2. We come to the Table of Our Lord and are given a little wafer and told this is the solution of the world, but it looks so impotent, so powerless. Simeon holds this child in his arms and sings of the salvation of God, he has not seen the salvation of God, he has seen a 40 day old Jewish boy. What sort of salvation is that?
3. Our world tells us that we are meaningless motes in a vast universe of galaxies and stars. Our lives are but a flicker in the history of the universe. We won't make a real difference to the stars that shine at night or the planets that revolve around our sun. At most we will contribute to the pollution and global warming of this third orb from the sun. And after we are gone the cockroaches will go on.
4. Our world goes on to tell us that this is really as good as it gets. The world has been progressing up and up for vast millennia and here we are, at the pinnacle of this whole random evolutionary process. Go back in history and you are looking at a degeneration from what we are today. Far enough back and you will find little more than an algae scum on some primordial pond. That is where we all started out.
5. And so we worry about our petty things, and make our way as best we can and then...what? We die, of course. We cannot stop that process, after all. There is no pill which can keep that eventuality at bay forever.

Gospel

1. Jesus is here – His ascension is not a proclamation of his absence but a shouting of his real and intimate presence. No, we do not see the bearded face of the itinerant rabbi as Peter and James and John did, but we hear his voice, we taste him, we bring him inside of us, he speaks to us and through us. His love fills our relationships and he does indeed change the way this tired old world works one sinner at a time. Even the resolutions can become moments of repentant vows made to a forgiving and gracious God and empowered by his love.
2. Hope is a wonderful thing. Simeon waited in hope for the salvation which God had promised. We hold that wafer in our hand and swallow that mouthful of wine and know that we have just encountered the very salvation of God. It doesn't look like it, it looks like a babe in arms, it looks like a mouthful of bread and wine, but it is far more.
3. Thus the worlds portrayal of our significance is all wrong. We are important to God and we are precious to him. His words infuse our words and his love permeates our deeds. There is hope for this tired old world and the great hope for this world are the people sitting in pews in Christian Churches around the world who know His love.
4. What is more, the history written in the rocks is not the only history to be found. God would have us imagine in Scripture a time and a place where we were truly free, a place where death did not touch us and sin did not stain us and the weeping of a widow was never heard and the suffering of the world did not happen. Yes, this world was broken,

but God remembers it well and in this baby born in that stable those many years ago, he took the one decisive step to restoring that entire creation to what it once was.

5. And so, our concerns are changed and our ways are changed and so too is our end. For the darkness of the grave which the world's vision cannot pierce has become light to us. With Simeon we can say, "let us depart in peace." Death has lost its sting for us. We are his people, the sheep of his pasture, and he will lead us through that dark vale and we will come out the other side to that beautiful place which he intended for us all along.

Sermon Ideas

1. Lord Now Let Your Servant Depart in Peace: (That the hearer would so trust in God that he/she might place his/her whole life and death into the hands of his/her gracious Savior.)

There are a number of wonderful ways to understand Christmas. Some of them are simply saccharine and childish. But others are sweet and good and wholesome. Perhaps the simplest and the best is laid out in the prayer for this day. God made this world, he loves this world. He was grieved when it fell into sin and decay. It was not what he wanted for his creation. Rather than destroying it as was his right, he did something remarkable and beautiful. He came into to it to save it. He loved it. The old man Simeon was about to experience the sharpest of Sin's blows, death. He was old and worn out. But God had made him a promise that before he drew that last breath, he would see the Savior of whom Isaiah and the other prophets had spoken. The light for the Gentiles and the salvation of his people Israel. And so he waited. He waited to see, he waited to die. I can only imagine that sometimes he did not want to see that child. It would mean that he lived another day. But eventually the days and their endless progression would grow weary for anyone who endured this broken and tired world. He longed for the day when he would see that Messiah.

Finally the day came, the young couple carried a little boy, barely a month old, into the temple for the rite of purification and God prompted Simeon to see that child and rejoice. It was the Messiah he beheld that day. The creation that had lain in bondage to sin so long would see its redemption in him. Simeon could die in peace, the promise had been fulfilled, and now even death did not seem so bad. It wasn't permanent, you see. The Messiah would even undo that terrible reality. Like Simeon our eyes today are drawn back and forward at the same time by the birth of this child. Jesus has come into the flesh of this world to redeem the flesh of this world. It once lived in a perfect state, without blemish and flaw, without hurt or pain, without death. That was the way God wanted it. Servants were never supposed to depart at all. This child brings that back to us, as it brought it back to Simeon. We hope now, you see. We believe. The world cannot pierce death's gloom to see the other side. It imagines and it fears, but it cannot see. We have been given a sight of what is to come, and the secret is that we look back, look back to a

time when the world was not broken, before sin, before the fall, to a garden, where peace and joy and love marked all.

2. And they were amazed...(That the Holy Spirit would fill the hearer with awe at his strange, incarnate Word who has saved the world.)

The first two chapters of Luke tell the story of Jesus' birth through Mary's eyes. Mary has had all sorts of visits and frequently we get an insight into her reaction. An angel has come and announced her pregnancy – she wondered about that greeting. Elizabeth has greeted her strangely – insisting that she was blessed to have the mother of her Lord visiting. The unborn John the Baptist also jumped at her arrival. Shepherds have visited her maternity ward and spread the word about it through social media– we don't get any insight into what she thought about that. Today she and Joseph are accosted by two old codgers in the Temple: Simeon and Anna.

What would a sermon looking at this through her eyes look like? What did she treasure up in her heart? The sermon will want to recapitulate these stories and wonder aloud what would we think about all this.

Luther said that the greatest miracle of Christmas was that Mary and Joseph believed any of this.

That miracle is still happening today. We wonder at this too. Simeon holds a little child in his arms and sees the salvation of the whole world. We watch a child's head get wet, we receive a wafer and wine, hear an absolution, and we too experience the awe-filled wonder of God's strange kingdom at work in our lives.

We sing that *Nunc dimittis* after we have communed in this place. That is not an accident.

Mary was given to experience the incarnation in a way which we cannot really imagine – she was pregnant and gave birth to this amazing child. But Luke has let us see this through her eyes and join her in this awe. She was given to hold this child in her arms, to look at a squirming infant, a wide eyed toddler, a child, a youth, a man, and to see that this boy she had borne was indeed the savior of the world. She would see that through to a cross and a tomb, and an Easter morning. What would have that reunion been like for her? She had lived this whole story told from the beginning – she had been there.

But we are no different. The squirming infant in her lap did not look like a savior, but he was. The wafer in our hands does not look like the forgiveness of sins and the kingdom of God made digestible, but it is. She held the Lord of the universe on her lap. Did she think about that after Jesus rose from the dead? I bet she did. I bet that is why we have these stories told to Luke so he could write it down.

We hold the body of that same Christ in our hands at the Sacrament. Before we pop it in our mouth like another Christmas confection, take a moment and think about that.

Wonder at it. Be in awe of it. And eat it.

3. Born Under the Law to Redeem those Under the Law: (That the hearer would act on the freedom which Christ has won for him/her in his incarnation.)

Have you ever gotten into an escape movie. The Matrix films a few years ago were escape films of this sort. The protagonist is usually someone who is imprisoned and he is then helped out by someone who sneaks in and leads him out. You can think of Christmas that way, if you want. We are the prisoners and Christ is the liberator. Our prison is not one of bars and walls, but one of realities which are much crueler and a trap from which we have no hope of escape. The walls are death itself and the realities of toil, pain, brokenness of body and soul. They are inescapable. Work hard at your job and marriage, your health will fail you, if that doesn't something else will. Your security, your health, your life itself is all ephemeral. It is a prison house of bondage, this life of ours. This is exactly why Christ came into this world. He was born under the law. He quietly and simply walked in through the same door that welcomed all of us, a mother's womb, an infancy, and the growth which is the course of every human being. Today we see Mary and Joseph making the sacrifice which the law demanded. We see them offer the two turtle doves for the purification from her painful childbirth. But Simeon sees deeper. He sees the spear that shall pierce Mary's heart, he sees death, he sees the full bite of this law, this cruel reality, the prison, and yet he is happy. For he knows that this child shall be the undoing of that law and that prison. The great escape has begun. Jesus, this child of Mary, is the savior of the whole world. He is God come into the flesh that he might redeem the flesh, born under the law to redeem those under the law, including you and me. He has set us free. Yes, we will die and the rules still apply to us, but their sting does not. For Jesus has come and opened to the door which leads to eternal life. The prison house of death constructed by our ancient enemy has been breached, and he leads the prisoners home in a triumphal procession. Every time we gather in these walls to sing his praises, we are marching in that great line of sinners and saints whose first members are in heavenly glory and whose newest members were baptized this morning, 100,000 strong. Simeon could leave that day and face his death differently. He had seen the promise fulfilled. What have we seen but that same promise? How does it change the way we live? How does that freedom and liberty enable us to be courageous and kind, gentle and hopeful [in a world which desperately needs these things?](#)

This sermon will want to speak of hope for people. Hope liberates us from the dreary and dreadful realities which would weigh us down. Hope allows us to be truly free, even free from death. Yes, we will, like Simeon and Paul die. But hope lets us see past that to another day, when we will live again. That frees us to be brave in the face of death. That frees us be kind to the cruel, gentle with the coarse, and hopeful for the despairing.

4. I will not keep silent! (OT- That the hearer would hear God's performative utterance of his/her righteousness, and thereby also become a proclaimer of God's righteousness.)

Have you ever had news you just had to tell? Several years ago I received my PhD in Classics. At the time it was amazing to me, even as I did it, how easy it was to slip that into just about every conversation I had. I just had to tell. I have found this to be true about other folks as well. It does not have to be something big either. If they have seen a good film or visited a great restaurant, I can hardly keep them from telling me, even if I wanted to do so. We are inveterate sharers of good news. We like to tell good things. Just read all those Christmas letters you have been getting via email and the post.

God also has good news to tell and through his prophet he just cannot keep quiet in today's OT lesson. The prophet just cannot keep quiet, but there is another important facet of God's telling. His telling creates the good which he describes.

This is not unheard of in our experience. At a wedding the preacher pronounces the young couple standing before him that they are man and wife. That is what makes it so. The technical term for this is "performative utterance." This happens in other places too. When a jury's verdict in a court is read, it is that reading renders a person guilty or innocent as well, at least in the way that matters. This is not something which is totally alien to us. But God is a performative speaker in a class by himself. He says let there be light, and there is light shining in the darkness.

Isaiah tells us that God will not be silent until Israel's righteousness is like a torch, a bright light which draws the nations to itself. When Isaiah spoke those words, God's people were anything but bright and righteous. Exiled and humiliated, they were bearing the just desserts of their sins. But God has never let darkness stand in the way of his light and he never lets sin stand in the way of his righteousness. He speaks them righteous, and not just a little righteous, but righteous before the whole world.

This, is not, however, the end of this story. As the people of God, some of those nations who have been drawn to him, there is more to tell. For God's righteous speaking through his Word made flesh not a speaking through us. He has come in you through these Sacraments, taken up his place in your life. Like people who have eaten at the best restaurant, who have seen the greatest show, he puts a new word our lips which we simply must tell. It is that good.

Or so it should be and so it is in Christ. God's righteous speaking never really ends for us. We are always in need of it. But that need does not diminish the fact of what it does. We are God's gifted people, not with the latest from Best Buy, Macy's, or even Home Depot, but the people gifted with the Spirit and the Word made flesh. God's holy speech has made us holy. God's fervent, urgent Word has done its work in us. To be silent is no longer really an option for us. Compelled by the story we have seen, impelled by the Word who dwells within us, with divine zeal and joy, we speak God's right-ness, His salvation itself. Where we find it is not so, God's Word comes again today to make it so. Where that Word speaks, it makes righteousness sprout and grow like seeds in a garden.

It clothes us with the garments of salvation and righteousness. We wear them as his beloved.

Anna the prophetess is not quiet – like the shepherds we heard about on Christmas Eve, the little church lady contingent of the Bible gets in on the act. They too are proclaimers of this Jesus.

5. He was called Jesus (Psalm and Gospel: That the hearer would trust that in Christ God has given us the fullness of life itself – we are the people defined by the name of Jesus)

This sermon is really about the naming of Jesus in verse 21. If you do not have a New Year's Day service, that day repeats this verse and focuses on the naming of Jesus in verse 21 of the Gospel reading.

God has given Jesus a beautiful and meaningful name, a name to which he lives up when he dies on the cross for the sins of the world and rises again for our justification. The psalm for this day also picks up on that. The psalmist looks about and sees all that God has done and praised him because of redemption and salvation. The name of the Lord is great!

God had this in mind long before Jesus was born and given that name. Consider Numbers 6, the end of that chapter in which God institutes the Aaronic benediction which we most often use at the end of our services. What most of our folks don't know is the line at the end of the chapter which describes what happens when we speak those words. God tells Moses that the name of God something that can be transferred to us, by this prescriptive word, this spoken action, this blessing. When we stand before a congregation and these words are spoken, the name of Jesus is showered down upon them.

That means some things.

- a. That means the saving work of Jesus is applied to us – we are forgiven. The name of Jesus, spoken in baptism, spoken in prayer, spoken in the sacrament, spoken in sermons and read in Scriptures speaks a truth about what he does. He saves, he rescues us. When the name of Jesus comes to us, God's salvation comes to us.
- b. That means we have his name, we carry it around, we are part of the family. We are adopted into the very family of God. We have been restored to the place to which we were created to be. We are his – we belong to God. Just as we might say “she is my wife” or “he is my son” God says about us “You are mine.” That reality empowers our lives to be lives lived in God's love.
- c. That name applied to us is the undoing of our enemy. Literally the name Jesus means: He saves or He rescues. This is a bitter name for our enemy Satan. He loathes it because it speaks of his defeat. Consider the benediction as it is given to Moses in Numbers 6 – in speaking those words Aaron and his sons and you and I

put the name of God on people. Exorcists cast out demons in the name of Jesus. It has that power over our foe.

- d. Like children who bear the name of their father, people will see Him through us. We carry his name around now with us. When people see us, they see “Christians” the Jesus people. That can rebound to God positively or negatively, but he has tied his name to us. God has bound himself to us.
- e. But ultimately and most importantly this speaks of our hope. The name of Jesus speaks of a reality that Simeon and Anna saw, they died, but they saw another reality which transcended their death. Jesus means “He Saves.” God has in this name spoken something about us, a reality which is opaque to the world, but which faith can begin to see clearly. Jesus saves us from all sorts of things, all things really. Jesus really is the answer. We expect great things from God because Jesus has this name, a name he has given to us. This is a blessing, as God says. His face shines upon us. His favor rests upon us. Our art work is on his refrigerator.

So what does all this mean to us? Philippians 2 might be a good place to think about this. God gave him the name above every name. You might also talk of Simeon and Anna. They kept their eyes fixed upon the promise, they were dutiful children of their father, blessed by him.

This really is a fullness of life – not an emptiness of life. Our lives are empty without God, just as our days are empty time without him. Jesus, his name, his presence, his life, is now our life. His name given to us does not mean some empty word which has no power, but it is the very presence of Christ. He dwells in us. (I John 4 – if we love, God dwells us in and we in him, for God is love.)

We might talk about gifts which get old, batteries wear out, or the clothes get frayed. This is the gift which never wears out. We got the second person of the Trinity. That one doesn’t get old.