

Stepping Out in Faith in a New Year!
January 1st, 2012, 1st Sunday after Christmas

Imagine if we were having the baptism of a little one this morning, and right in the middle of the liturgy, a couple of senior citizens walked up the aisle, a man and a woman. And the elderly man took the baby in his arms, and began to make pronouncements about it. This is the baby we've been waiting for...He will be president one day, some people will love him, and some will hate him, (sounds like most presidents, doesn't it?) but you as parents will spend his four years in office worried sick about his safety.

Now, I've said my peace, and you can go back to your baptism. If that happened, we might wonder about the sanity of these people.

And yet that's essentially what happens in our Gospel today. Mary and Joseph were taking part in a ritual as common in their religious setting as baptism is in ours. The law of Moses said that baby boys were to be circumcised on the 8th day after birth. On the 31st day, boys were dedicated to the Lord in the temple.

After the 33rd day, if the woman had had a boy, she and her husband went to the temple for *her* purification. This was a religious culture that said that giving birth caused a woman to be ritually impure.

So Mary and Joseph were at the temple in Jerusalem to dedicate Jesus as their firstborn, and Mary was there for her purification. The sacrifice for this ceremony was a lamb, but if you couldn't afford a lamb, you could offer two turtledoves or two pigeons. That's what Mary and Joseph offer, so it's clear that they weren't very well off.

Luke says that a man named Simeon had been looking all his life for the consolation of Israel, meaning the Messiah, the one the Jews were waiting for who would free them from their enemies and bring in God's reign. God had said to him, You will see the Messiah before you die. And so on this particular day, the Holy Spirit guided Simeon into the Temple, and in walked Mary and Joseph and Jesus. And it became clear to Simeon that *this* was the child he'd been waiting for, although this child when he became a man would save the world in a way that Simeon couldn't have imagined.

We don't know what Simeon had been expecting. Maybe he didn't expect a poor couple. In modern terms, Jesus wouldn't have been the child dressed in the silk baptismal clothes that were recently purchased at a children's boutique. His baptism wouldn't have been videotaped by the grandfather with the expensive camera. We don't know if Simeon was surprised that God had picked a family that looked like they were just getting by.

But Simeon picks up the baby, and he says these words, which we call the *Nunc Dimittis*: (Luke 2:29) "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace; 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."

One of the things I want you to notice about Simeon is that he had been looking for the Messiah all his life, and listening for the voice of the Spirit. And he is able to see in the face of a baby the salvation of God. He is guided to the Temple that day by the Holy Spirit. He is supposed to be there that day.

And Mary and Joseph were amazed at what was being said about their baby. Those are wonderful things- salvation and light and glory! But Simeon sees the shadow side too. He blesses both of the parents, but then he looks at Mary and says, (v.34-35) "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed- and a sword will pierce your own soul too." (Luke 2:34-35)

Notice that he says, for the falling and the rising of many in Israel. We usually talk about the rise and fall of something, don't we? The rise and fall of a celebrity. The rise and fall of an empire. What does he mean by the falling and the rising? You know there is a sense that the falling and the rising happens within us. We fall short of what God wants for us, we fail time and again. And as we remember our baptism, we are washed clean, we rise again with Christ to love and serve our neighbor.

So there is a sense that this falling and rising happens within us. And Simeon says, There will be people who will oppose this baby when he becomes a man. His way will be threatening to some. And the inner thoughts of many will be revealed as they come up against Jesus. Jesus will cause people to either turn toward or away from God.

And when he says to Mary- A sword will pierce your own soul too- he is looking ahead to Jesus on the cross, as his mother watches her son die because he was a threat to the established order.

So yes, some will follow, and their eyes will be opened to the stranger in need and they'll even begin to love their enemies. And some will say, No, we cannot follow this man because we have to give up too much.

And then Simeon is joined by a woman named Anna, 84 years of age. She has spent a good portion of her life on the temple grounds, fasting and praying for her people. She joins Simeon in praising God for this child, and she begins to tell everybody looking for the redemption of Israel about this child.

We don't know how long Simeon had to wait to finally see the answer to his prayers, but he does. Now, he says, I can go in peace. And Anna was 84 years old when she finally saw the promise God had given her! And it makes me think how impatient I am to see change. It is difficult to wait when we wonder what God is up to, or when God seems slow about a promise. Sometimes we wonder whether the little things we do make a difference.

I heard the story the other day of a mother of young children who wondered about the impact of her parenting. She felt invisible at times: just the one who chauffeured, the one who answered questions, the one who baked for her kids' activities. She felt like who *she* was had vanished behind her kids' needs.

One night, she was having dinner with a group of friends, and one of the women was sharing about her trip to England. The woman turned to this other mother who was feeling invisible, having these doubts about whether or not anything she did made any difference. She gave her a beautifully wrapped package and said, 'I brought you this.' It was a book on the great cathedrals of Europe. The inscription read: 'With admiration for the greatness of what you are building when no one sees.'

I quote from this mother: "In the days ahead I would read - no, devour - the book. And I would discover what would become for me four life-changing truths, after which I could pattern my work: 1) No one can say who built the great cathedrals - we have no record of their names. 2) These builders gave

their whole lives for a work they would never see finished. 3) They made great sacrifices and expected no credit. 4) The passion of their building was fueled by their faith that the eyes of God saw everything.”

She read a story in the book about a rich man who came to visit the cathedral while it was being built, and saw a workman carving a tiny bird on the inside of a beam. He was puzzled and asked the man, 'Why are you spending so much time carving that bird into a beam that will be covered by the roof, No one will ever see it. And the workman replied, 'Because God sees.'

And this mother felt as if God were whispering to her, 'I see you. I see the sacrifices you make every day, even when no one around you does. No act of kindness you've done, no sequin you've sewn on, no cupcake you've baked, no Cub Scout meeting, no last minute errand is too small for me to notice and smile over. You are building a great cathedral, but you can't see right now what it will become.”

And so this mother began to see herself as a great builder, as one of the people who show up at a job that they will never see finished. Sometimes we wonder whether or not the little things we do count. You wonder about the patience that Simeon developed over the years. You wonder about 84 year old Anna, who had spent her life coming to the temple to pray for her people, and to expect that someday God would send a Promised One. Did she get impatient along the way? When will God work in this special way? When will I get to meet this child?

Maybe Simeon spent time at the Temple, looking at the babies that couples brought to dedicate to God, and thinking, Is this the one? He learned to look and listen for God's actions his entire life.

That's a great way to live! What's God doing in this situation? How can I see God's hand at work, even though this isn't turning out the way I hoped it would? On this particular day Simeon got to see the Son of God. But he got to see because his eyes were trained to see! Everyday he was open to what God was doing in the people around him.

It's interesting that this story is not found in any of the other Gospels. So why does Luke include it? Remember that Luke is writing during the last third of the 1st century, after the Romans have destroyed the temple in 70 AD. He is recalling this wonderful story about what all Jewish couples used

to do, go to the temple and dedicate their children. And to the readers of Luke's Gospel, that would no longer be possible. The Temple was destroyed. And maybe Luke is saying, Don't simply be nostalgic for the past. The Temple is gone. God is rewriting the future.

This is the first day of a new year. How is God going to rewrite the future this year? What new thing does God want to do in our lives? What new thing does God want to do through this congregation? What does it mean for us to wait patiently to see where God is active and to get on board, as Simeon and Anna did?

Bob Patterson is a pastor and writer who went on a climbing trip with three other friends to Yosemite National Park. They were climbing up to Mount Lyell, which is the highest peak in Yosemite. Two of the climbers were experienced, and Patterson and another man were not.

The climb to the top was supposed to take the better part of a day, because of a glacier that needed to be traversed to get to the top. The two experienced climbers began to pull ahead of the other two. But Bob Patterson was a competitive person, and he wanted to try to beat the other two to the top, so he began to look for shortcuts. He thought he saw one to the right of an outcropping of rock- so he started to climb to that area, in spite of the protests of his companions.

Thirty minutes later he found himself trapped in a cul-de-sac at the top of the glacier, looking down several hundred feet of ice to a sheer drop off. He was ten feet from a rock that would be safety for him. One little slip and he would slide all the way to the valley floor to his death.

I wonder if we've become stuck somewhere this year, somewhere we shouldn't be, because of choices we've made? I wonder from what situation God might need to rescue us? It took an hour for Patterson's two experienced friends to climb their way over to him. One of them stood on the rock that was ten feet away, and put his pick axe in the ice, and made two little steps in the glacier. Then he gave him these instructions: Bob, you must step out from where you are and put your foot where the first foothold is. Without a moment's hesitation swing your other foot across and land it in the next step. Then reach out and I will take your hand, and I will pull you to safety.

But then he said this: Listen carefully. As you step across, don't lean into the mountain. If anything, lean out a bit. Otherwise, your feet could fly out from under you and you will start sliding down. His friend was asking Patterson, stuck on a cliff, to let go for just an instant and to trust that his friend could and would save him. Save him from a plunge down a glacier to certain death. His friend was asking Patterson to trust him so completely that he would even lean away from what looked like safety so his friend could reach down and pull him to safety.

Patterson writes this: I looked at my friend real hard...for a moment; based solely on what I believed to be true about the good will and good sense of my friend, I decided to step out and lean out and trust him completely. It took less than two seconds to find out if my faith was well founded. It was. (from "Finding Hope When God Seems Silent", Bob Patterson)

That's a great picture of faith. We get stuck in places, often of our own making, and we hurt ourselves and other people. And God offers a hand, and says, Come on and trust me. Lean away from what you might think look like security.

Old Simeon had spent his life trusting that God's promise was true, that he could depend on it, and that God would show him what he had promised. Mary and Joseph might not have looked like the type of couple to be the parents of the Savior of the world, but Simeon leaned away from the mountain and trusted that the child he was holding was the one.

Where is God calling you to trust in this new year? Where have you gotten yourself stuck? Where do you need to lift your hand out and trust that God has a better plan? If you want to pray about that with someone, I will have two prayer stations during communion. Come and ask one of our helpers to pray for your faith, to help you take whatever step you need to take this year. Would you pray with me now? ...Amen.