

CENTRAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA)

Rev. Steve Malone

December 27, 2009

Luke 20: 41 – 52

Please read today's scripture. Luke 20: 41 - 52

Let me read you one more passage from the gospel of Luke; Luke Chapter 2, verse 25.

“Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit he went into the temple courts but when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the law required, Simeon took him into 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 --a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel’. The child's father and mother marveled at what was being said about him and then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother, ‘This child is destined to cause the falling and the 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 and a sword will pierce your own soul, too. There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old. She had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day fasting and prayer. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.’ “The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!”

I have two Christmas stories rolling around in my mind this year. The first is the Christmas Vacation Movie which many of you might have seen. You may not admit it but, you may have seen it! It's a goof-ball comedy where a man has huge plans for a perfect Christmas and where everything goes horribly wrong. Near the end when the tree has burned, and the turkey has failed and the cat has died, and the police show up, he is standing in the ruin of his holiday dream. Somehow in the midst of the rubble, he finds something of the true meaning of Christmas. In that particular case, the family is importing of something along those lines. Still though, in the last five minutes of the movie, everything works out. The Christmas lights come on, and he receives a big Christmas bonus so that he can buy his family a new swimming pool. This is an American story. Things can get a little bit hard but in the end you get a little incite about what matters and you get a new pool! I came across the second story while I was looking for Christmas books for a little Spanish class that I teach for children. In this book that I found, a little Hispanic boy is dreaming about getting a new red ball for Christmas. He is part of a very poor migrant family who have just had to move so that they could find more work. He wanted a ball for Christmas last year, a little red ball, but he didn't get it so this year he has renewed his wish. Christmas morning comes and throughout the year, now, he has watched his very kind, very generous parents struggle to make it. Christmas morning comes and he opens his little gift and it's a bag of candy. He was very, very disappointed---two years in a row! But then, he looks

up and across the room he sees his mother's tears so he walks over to her and gives her a little piece of candy and then he takes a little piece of candy and hands it to his father. And the whole family embraces. There's a deep sense of joy and gratitude hovering all around them. So I turned the page in this book and on the next page it says, 'el fine', 'THE END'. So I flipped it back, sure that I had missed something, and I read it again, and sure enough it stops with 'deep sense of joy and gratitude' so I turn back and it says "THE END'. No red ball. Where is the 'little red ball'? That is not a very American Christmas story. But somehow that second story of a little boy and his family sends a deep taste of bitterness but yet finds real joy. Somehow that story seems a little truer than the 'have your cake and eat it too' version of Christmas.

Now as a side-line, I want to say I am all for Santa Claus. I'm a great believer in Santa Claus. We talked about, maybe, next year having a big Nativity Scene on the roof of the house with Shepherds, Wise Men and Santa all coming to visit the New Born King. In fact, I believe that Santa is very, very important and I think you should try to get children almost everything they want for Christmas no matter how bad they've been. But, the story of this little boy and his poor family is more like this story that we're reading here, the 'Coming of Jesus' story,---the Bible's version of Christmas. 'There is a man in Jerusalem called Simeon who is righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel. There was also a prophetess, Anna. She was very old and she had lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage. She was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped night and day fasting and praying'.

Do you know the phrase that appears in the Old Testament very often, especially in the Psalms? It's a refrain that you hear over and over again. And it's this - 'how long, how long, O Lord?' The story of God's people really has been a story of one long dark night from the beginning of the Bible all the way through Genesis until the Gospels. How long will this go on? God has promised that he would come, but when? The season of Advent, which we have just finished, which has just ended, is the season that teaches us about this. This is a big lesson for Christians, learning how to wait--- learning how to wait through the long, dark night! And it seems like, the two people in the story, Simeon and Anna, know something about the grief of long and hard waiting! We are not given much biography on Simeon. It doesn't say much about him. He seems to me to be one of those characters in the Bible who sort of appears out of nowhere. But it does seem implied that he's an old man. And - from his words - the way he talks to God about what is happening there, it sounds like he's ready to go, like he's sort of reached the end! But God talks to Simeon. In fact God had told him to be in the temple at that point, and God has told him that he has to hang on a little bit longer. It says, outright, that Anna is very old. She's very old and she's very alone. She has been a widow for sixty or so years. After seven years of marriage now she's eighty-four years old. She's been a widow all that time praying and fasting in the temple. Now I could be reading this wrong because they don't give us that much biography but it could be that these two have very active social lives; that they are very involved in the community; that they have lots of money and they just do a little religion, a little church on the side. And it could be that God has made them wait for so long, so many decades, because they are particularly stubborn people. However, I doubt that that's the story. My opinion, and it's only my opinion, is that these two stand in the temple as representatives of those who have been marginalized: as representatives of those who have been pushed off to the side. And those people are the ones who are desperately waiting for God to come. And their language shows

that. Simeon prays, "as you have promised!" These people off to the side, these marginalized people of whom these two are representatives, that's their prayer! "As you promised, when will you come, when will you come?!"

I've read something about ships at sea. From what I understand, (and I don't know this because I'm famous in my family for getting seasick.) I just read a lot of novels about ships. My father was in the Navy, my uncle was in the Navy, they can, perhaps, tell you about this – but they say that when you come from below at night up onto the deck, it can be so pitch black that you become disoriented. It's like - as if you walk from a lighted room at night into the dark, you lose your sense of orientation. And the best way, they say, to get your bearings, is not to look straight ahead but actually to look out of the corner of your eye, so, this way is the best way. Straight ahead, in the Bible, you have a temple, you have priests, you have kings, you have emperors, but out of the corner of your eye, you see a Baby in a manger and his mother, and shepherds and Simeon and Anna.

A new author that we found in the last few weeks, her name is Clarissa Estes. She tells of going to church with her grandmother as a little girl and as they would come up toward the church, the grandmother would point at the building and say to ask the children, "What is that?" And the children would answer, "That's our church" and the grandmother would say "Oh, that's not the church. The church is under that church". This is Clarissa Estes' reflex ion about those conversations with her grandmother. This has stayed with me all my life. When people ask me "How can you still be a Catholic?" Or we could also insert as people ask these questions, "How do you stay a Presbyterian, or how do you stay an Episcopalian?" When people ask me "how can I still be a Catholic", I think about the church beneath the church and who lives there. The heart of Christ that beats and throbs in the underground church regardless of the mayhem above it; you can hear that heart if you lie on the earth. You can hear it at night in your dreams, in prayer, in song, in art. It throbs with endless and immaculate love. I can feel it in the church beneath the church. But often I cannot feel it in the church above the ground. The underground church is the place I return to over and over again: health of the soul; true refuse of the spirit. The church under the church or the church off to the side whichever way you want to put it: it's the same idea. And doesn't it seem like most of the stories in the Bible where God does show up have been over here, not necessarily straight in front of you. There are lots and lots of examples. Take the mother of Jesus herself - Mother Mary who is in the story with Simeon, - a pregnant teenage girl in a culture that doesn't prize women. She lives off to the side; she lives off in the marshes. For Simeon and Anna along with the people they represent, waiting is very hard and living off to the side and living on the margins is very hard. And even if you read back through this passage, even the words of God in the middle of their waiting are hard. He says to Mary, "A sword will pierce your own soul, too. It's all difficult!

Melanie is with me. She's my fiancé and she has a little school and she was singing some songs, playing the guitar and singing some songs with some little eight year old boys one day and they had just sung the hymn "In the bleak Mid-Winter" which is a great minor key sort of Christmas carol. It made one of the little boys begin to remember some of the other songs that were like that one that he sang and he was trying to remember one in particular so he said, "What is that one song that we always sing that's so much like that". So, she began to name off other minor key hymns that these little children sing. She said, "What about this one?" And he would

say, "No, it's darker." So she would name another one and he would say, "No, darker, darker, darker". This is the way God's people often wait. It's a long, dark night and it just seems to go on and on and on. And it just seems to get darker and darker and darker. And in that night this very familiar song is on their lips. How long, how long, how long, when will you come? But, this is what I love about the Christian year. You have seasons like Advent, which we have just celebrated, and the season of Advent is the season about what we have been talking about. It's the season of the dark night. It is the season of waiting. Right? It's the season that teaches us about all the things we've been talking about in the story of Simeon and Anna. But it's over! There really is such a thing as Advent but there really is such a thing, also, as Christmas. There really is such a thing as Lent but there really is such a thing as Easter, too. This is what Simeon says as the Baby Jesus walks in, "Sovereign Lord, as you promised, you can now dismiss your servant in peace for my eyes have seen your salvation which you prepared in the sight of all people – a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" This is what the Bible says. It says that there is a season of long dark waiting but it also says that Jesus does come! The long awaited, the long promised Jesus will come. And he will not forget us and he will not forsake us and he will not leave us behind. Jesus comes and he finds all of his sheep, every last one of them, especially, the lost ones!

For me, 2006, 2007 and 2008 were bad years. I don't even want to talk about it. But it's funny, and I don't know if this even makes sense or not, but it's like, in those years I lost everything, but I found what I was looking for! I lost 300 friends, but I found 5 really good ones. And I lost my security but I also lost my fear. And, in that time, I've never been so lost myself and yet I've never been so loved! It's funny. And I'm no Simeon or Anna and I can't say with any real confidence that the Holy Spirit talks to me. In fact I really have no business standing up here but that's a long story for another day. But as one person who is standing off to the side, and two others who are standing off to the side, I can say this: I am beginning to believe in the consolation of Israel. The church, especially the underground church, the church beneath the church, has a Simeon and Anna sort of job. I have always seen in Catholic churches, you know, as you go into their sanctuaries, off to the side they light candles for people and I've seen them my whole life and I've always thought it a little odd but as I thought about it recently it has become very beautiful to me. In fact we've started to do this. We have several friends who are struggling and who are hurting (I have five of them) and we've started lighting a candle for them just to say, 'we remember you and you're not alone'. We're all waiting together here in this dark night. This is another thing that Clarissa Estes says.

One of the most calming and powerful actions that you can do to intervene in a stormy world is to stand up and show your soul. Struggling souls catch light from other souls who are fully lit and willing to show it. So light your own candle just to say, ***'we're all waiting together and Jesus will come for us!***

AMEN