

December 29, 2019

“The Trouble With Christmas: Troubling Horizon”

Luke 2:21-38

Aren’t you amazed by Santa Claus? Year after year, he keeps showing up unannounced, doing what he came to do, and leaving before anyone can pin him down or get a picture of him. I talked with a few of our younger kids on Christmas Eve and they were sure they were going to set up a video camera and catch him this year. I haven’t circled back with them, but I’m pretty sure they weren’t successful. The guy’s elusive!

We know even less about Simeon than we do about Santa. He shows up in a flash and appears in the rearview mirror almost as quickly. What we do know about him makes me want to know a LOT more of his story. But the point of Luke’s Gospel – as is the point of Matthew, Mark and John’s – is Jesus. In that sense, Luke includes what is necessary about Simeon and nothing more. But what we’re given is enough to get us thinking about Jesus more deeply; His life and our own lives in relationship to Him and the activity of God.

What Luke tells us is that “This man [Simeon] was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation/rescue of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him.” (Luke 2:25)

Simeon is “righteous” – which is the same word used to describe Joseph in Matthew 1:19. He cared about what God cared about; he wanted to live a life of devout, obedient worship that translated into his real, everyday life with the people he crossed paths with and the responsibilities he undertook. He wanted people to get the just treatment they deserved. Jesus said that we’re blessed when we “hunger and thirst after righteousness/justice.” (Matthew 5:6) That was Simeon. Would and could that be said of those who observe you and me?

Simeon was also ‘longing/looking forward to’ something incredible: his next vacation . . . I mean remodeling his laundry room . . . I mean all the good college bowl games and snacks. His longings were much deeper than that. He longed for God to come to the rescue and that drove him to focus intently on and long deeply for the fulfillment of God’s promises. C.S. Lewis wrote in different ways about our longings and desires. In one famous quote he tells us that our desires aren’t too strong, but too weak. He said we were “like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.” (in *The Weight of Glory and other essays*) He also wrote about how the things we long for are only hints of the deepest thing we long for; and he cautioned us not to be surprised when the thing we longed for comes to pass and we find we’re still longing for more. It turns out, he says, that our lesser longings (even good longings like the longing for beauty, goodness, love) “are not the thing [deepest longing] itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found,

the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.” (in *The Weight of Glory and other essays*)

Simeon wasn’t just longing for a better world, or freedom from Roman occupation, or even dying peacefully – all good things in and of themselves. He was longing for God to make His home among us and – someday – bring us to our true home. What are we longing for and do we recognize that most of our deepest longings only scratch the surface of what we long for at the depths of our souls?

We also see that Simeon was Spirit-led. Luke tells us it had “been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit” (Luke 2:26) that he would still be alive when Messiah arrived on planet earth. We don’t know how long ago God revealed this to him, but imagine how his anticipation and attentiveness grew as older he became. On the day when Jesus is presented in the temple Luke tells us that Simeon is “guided by the Spirit” (Luke 2:27), comes into the temple area at just the right time, and gathers up Jesus in his arms. [A little odd for those of us who are trained to sense “stranger danger” when it comes to our kids.] Simeon, Luke is telling us, is Spirit-directed. Are we?

I think it’s safe to say that Simeon had a little extra “umph” in his life with God – to which we might say, “I wish I had it that easy knowing what the heck God was up to!” Or “I wish God spoke to me like that!” Or “God probably only goes out of His way like this for the most important stuff with the most important people.”

Here’s where we have an important choice to make. We can either decide that Simeon gets to have a reality/experience relegated to a few special people who were quite unlike us and who have WAY too much free time on their hands (we could put Anna in this category too) **OR** we can ask: what might it require of us to be the kind of person who notices when God grants a deep sense of His presence and a deep assurance of His promises? I’m not saying we should pursue the spectacular in order to ‘get our names in print.’ I am suggesting that this kind of assurance and readiness/alertness is possible for anyone who has turned their life over to Christ’s Lordship/Rule and is filled with the Holy Spirit. In one of the most hope-filled sections in all of scripture, Paul reminds us that ‘the same Spirit is in us that was in Christ Jesus.’ (see Romans 8:9-11)

What I’m asking us to consider is this questions: how do we cultivate a heart and mind that can catch a glimpse, hear a whisper, sense the stirring of the Spirit SO THAT we don’t miss out on what God is up to in this world? Even more specifically, how do we get to the place where we can more readily recognize the presence of Christ and the work of Christ . . . and the fulfillment of what God has declared/promised in Him?

As we step into a new year – a new decade – I want to offer this testimony: some of what I’m suggesting is just starting to happen in my life. I know 55 year-old pastors should be really good at paying attention to what God says. I also know that we can be really good at paying way more attention to what people say. I know pastors seem to have all kinds of time to be with God, but it’s amazing how much of that time can be filled with distractions and time-suckers. I know pastors seem to know God’s Word inside and out, but it’s amazing how huge chunks of scripture don’t stick or tend to dissipate over time. I know it seems like my longing for being present with God and participating in the things of His Kingdom appear to be strong, but it’s amazing how lesser longings get more of my attention. It might even seem like I’m pretty self-aware, but it’s equally true that I have numerous blind spots. I’d tell you what they are . . . but I don’t see them yet.

What I can tell you is that I am finding a way to be more like Simeon: righteous in more practical ways, deeper longings for God instead of lesser substitutes, living in a more Spirit-led way. And do you know what has helped me more than anything else? Emotionally Healthy Spirituality.

**We watched a brief video introduction to the EHS Course. Pete Scazzero gives a brief overview to the 8-week experience. You can view it on the EHS website or via YouTube.**

Signing up for and taking the course which begins next month may be the best New Year’s resolution you could ever make.

Having said all this, just because we may more readily recognize the presence of Christ and the work of Christ . . . and the fulfillment of what God has declared/promised in Christ, it doesn’t mean we’ll have a trouble-free life. In fact, becoming more like Simeon will also lead to more TROUBLE. Because what Simeon would go on to say – after praising God and blessing Mary and Joseph – was directed specifically to Mary: “This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and 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) TROUBLE was on the horizon. Mary and Zechariah had already sung about what was going to happen, but Simeon spells it out more graphically.

Jesus – and all those who follow Him – will be opposed in one way or another. And as people oppose Him/His ways, you will be able to find out what they really think. And it will pierce your soul to find out what people really think . . . including what you really think.

Noticing, hearing and following Jesus closely can be so troubling to us that it seems easier/more comfortable/less troubling to stay somewhat unaware of the movement of God’s Spirit; in a little bit of a fog; slightly defeated and never attentive enough to actually hear God speak . . . which

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keeps us from actually doing what God says to do, say what God asks us to say, see what God desires that we see, feel what God intends us to feel.

We ARE “saved by grace through faith” (I’m not suggesting we have to be like Simeon in order for God to love us). But we can miss out on having a front row seat to “[God’s] salvation.” I’ll bet Simeon and Anna don’t regret being right where God wanted them to be, doing what God wanted them to do, and seeing what God wanted them to see.

How about you? How about me? Let’s not be a church that misses out on the presence and activity of Jesus in our midst. Let’s come to the end of our life with no regrets. We will – all of us – die someday just like Simeon. The question is: will we die peacefully, knowing that we lived our lives in His very presence and humbly obeyed His plans for us?