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Congregational United Church of Christ in Iowa City
Isaiah 61:10-62:3
Luke 2:22-40
Psalm 148

You are Not Dismissed

Welcome, on this first Sunday after Christmas. This must have been a marathon for many of you, and I thank you for welcoming me on this unofficial seminarian Sunday across the country. Thanks especially to Edie Roberts, who after running the Christmas pageant last week was willing to offer the Children's Message today.

But, our common lectionary marches on, and so we turn today to the story of Simeon. Perhaps we can find some meaning in his story today.

Simeon is unique in the New Testament. His story alone ends with Jesus's birth.

For him, the road ends at the Temple on this day of his dedication. And he recognizes it, praising the Lord and asking him, please, to let this poor servant depart in peace. This is a beautiful song, and we will, in fact, be singing a version of it in just a few minutes (I have been too long in New England to oppress a congregation on the Sunday after Christmas with a long sermon). But does it strike any of you as a bit odd that this man, so soon after predicting that the infant before him will be a light to the world and is, in fact, the long-awaited messiah, turns hastily to looking for an exit? If you were Simeon, don't you think that you might want to stick around and see what happens next?

We certainly would think so, given our Christian upbringings. But for us to understand Simeon's plight, let us look at his actual predictions. There we see that, while Jesus will be a light of revelation to the Gentiles and glory to the Jews, there will be some bumps along the road. The child, he says, is destined to be a rising and a falling for people in Israel. This is always a warning sign for a prophet, because this probably means many men of stature and power will fall from their. And folks falling down from power tend not to fall alone. The prophet who predicted their fall usually seems like a good target. So being the one speaking truth to power does not always work so well.

But more than that, Simeon predicts that this will be a sign opposed in Israel and unrecognized. After all, the Jews that were waiting for a Messiah certainly did not expect this poor baby to be it. When you read about Saviors in the Old Testament, you tend to see passages about warrior kings coming to vanquish Israel's opponents. They are not so concerned about revealing God to the gentiles as they are interested in smiting and subduing them. So, Simeon, seeing what is ahead, must be feeling some confusion and apprehension about what is to come. Not only will this child bring about the rising and falling of men, but he will be doing it in an unorthodox way that inspires active opposition. Not necessarily a wagon to which a right-thinking prophet wants to be hitched, particularly if powerful people have been waiting for him to herald the rising of a king in the fashion of David, Solomon or Saul.

Finally, the prophet hints at the pain and suffering that is to come as he says that this baby's mother will have her soul pierced through. Perhaps, after this long period of waiting for a

Messiah, Simeon could not stomach the end that he saw coming. So Simeon praised the Lord and looked for a way out.

Simeon had served his role, and so was dismissed in peace before any of the things that he predicted would come to pass did come to pass.

Now, after the past three months, how many of you are feeling some empathy with Simeon right now? How many of you have come through these past twelve weeks of the commercial Christmas season, which came concurrently with predictions for the worst economic recession since the Great Depression, with a sense of dread that leaves you wishing that you, too could be dismissed? How many of you are still feeling a bit exhausted by all the shopping that led up to Christmas Day, with the stress of heading out to Coral Ridge to make the inevitable returns, and the pressure to spend money all the time? How many stretched a little bit this Christmas season knowing that some tough times are ahead and just wish that we could have a little peace from worry?

These are all natural emotions. We all want peace, and it is true that what we call the Christmas season can be as trying as any travail that Simeon predicted. But I am here to tell you that you are not dismissed. It is not yet our turn to rest, as it was Simeon's. As Isaiah so eloquently put it, "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch." It is our job to shine a light on the world. Because just as we can feel the darkness closing in on us even in this joyous Christmas season, that darkness always threatens to envelop the world.

Simeon predicted the rising and falling of Men. Simeon predicted the opposition to the sign that Jesus brought. And so we have these things even now, two thousand years after he spoke them and nineteen hundred after Luke wrote them down. But now the opposition to Jesus and his message does not come from the Pharisees found later in Luke, nor from the numerous unbelieving witnesses in the Gospel of John, who do not believe even when presented with miracles, but instead choose to judge. Instead, we are caught up in what my professor Karen King calls the "foolish disciple" motif of Mark, where people follow Jesus but never quite understand his message. We profess to believe in Jesus Christ, and yet we continually struggle to accept the deep implications of what that belief means. I passed two men begging for change on Washington Street last week, as the temperature gauge read six degrees. That was weather fit for neither man nor beast and yet two days before Christmas, men had to beg in the street to find shelter for the night.

In this season, food pantries frequently overflow with the donations of good people. But then Christmas comes and goes and the spirit of the season goes with it, and the food drives slow down until every summer there is a shortage of food in pantries and soup kitchens across the country. We sometimes find ourselves thinking, "is that man asking for money because he needs it, or because it is easier than working?" We sometimes find ourselves wondering, "are welfare and soup kitchens really meant to support families with eight children? Where is personal responsibility in all this?"

In this day and age, many Christians do not energetically proclaim the gospel message of "love thy neighbor" and "turn the other cheek," but instead lead us up to and, too often, into war.

In this time, we too often let the darkness of fear and uncertainty overwhelm Christ's light, of hope and salvation, and do not let Jerusalem's salvation shine out like a burning torch as we know it ought to do. And so we are not dismissed. We still have work to do, and light within us to spread.

But, though our task seems daunting, we have a hopeful message in front of us. For Christmas has just begun. In our liturgical calendar, there are twelve days of Christmas, and we are just on day four. Four Calling Birds, if you remember the old carol. And we have in front of us a story of Christmas renewal as well as a story of Christmas dismissal today.

If you will turn in your bulletin to the opening words, I will share with you the true spirit of Charles Dickens and Ebenezer Scrooge. Now, while you are turning, a brief Hebrew lesson. Ebenezer means, roughly, "pile of rocks," from the root eben, which means rock or stone. I encourage you to go look up "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing" and see where else Ebenezer appears. But with Ebenezer Scrooge, we have a stone-hearted man. And throughout the beginning of a Christmas Carol, we see what that means. When asked for money for the poor, he suggests that they go to the workhouse. When told that there are people starving, he suggests that they get on with dying so as to decrease the surplus population.

While Scrooge's Victorian sensibilities are harsher than we care to express today, the spirit of his diatribes lives on and is in evidence in the opinion pages of our newspapers and the policy debates of our government.

But something miraculous happens to give Ebenezer Scrooge a new life. On Christmas Day, he is visited by three ghosts and recognizes that even he can start life again. Even this stone-hearted man whose life was marked by his uncharitable disposition found his new beginning on Christmas Day, and from that moment forward he kept Christmas well. Now, do you suppose this meant that Scrooge was the same heartless taskmaster for 353 days out of the year, and lived a redeemed life only in the twelve days of Christmas? No, of course not. Scrooge recognized the lesson that Dickens so dearly wanted to teach us, that the Christmas season began two thousand years ago and continues on to this day. It is a lesson we frequently forget, but, wonderfully, have the opportunity to remember anew every December as Christmas comes once a year. Simeon died after proclaiming that the light would come. He never had that opportunity to be that light that Ebenezer Scrooge realized. In these cold, icy days of uncertainty, remember that Christmas lives inside of us, and so long as we allow the light of God's great gift to us, his son Jesus Christ, to shine forth, it will be the Christmas season all the year round. Take a moment. Feel the renewal that marks this, the anniversary of our Savior's birth. Feel the hope and the love of Christmas strengthen your spirit. For in this week, we beat back the devil. Savor the moment. Feel the glory robing you in righteousness and know that we are not dismissed, and that it is our great privilege to be able to proclaim the glorious message that our light has come and that it lives in us. For God blessed us, every one.