

Turning Toward the Light

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Focus: 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.”

-Luke 2: 30-32

Scripture Lesson: Luke 2:22-38

I cannot tell you how the light comes, but that it does. That it will.

- Jan Richardson, *How the Light Comes: A Blessing for Christmas Day*

We did it! We made it to Christmas Day! All of the decorating and shopping and wrapping is done...or if it's not done it's too late now! All of the preparing and waiting is over, now is the time to simply enjoy and celebrate. I confess that, as sort of a type A person, I can get too wrapped up in the to-do lists of the holidays and forget that all of this is not all just a chore to be accomplished but that it is supposed to be...you know fun, enjoyable even!

I was pleased that we got our Christmas tree and decorations up in a fairly timely manner this year, and I was making pretty good headway on the shopping. But over two weeks into Advent our outdoor lights were still languishing in a pile by the front door, and it was starting to get on my nerves that we hadn't gotten to it yet. We would drive around town and every time we would pass by a nicely lit up home or shop home I would hear Rose's sweet little two year old voice say from the back seat "It's Christmas!" and my heart would melt. We went and saw the big Carillon tree and tuned our radio to listen to the coordinated music of the downtown jingle lights. We took the long way home to drive through neighborhoods and saw everything from giant Santa Clauses to lovingly assembled nativities. At one house we even saw a Christmas dinosaur! And at every new delight we would hear..."It's Christmas!"

It was all very sweet until one evening as I pulled into our driveway she said with disappointment about our dark yard..."There's no Christmas." Well, you better believe I told James that we had to get those lights up asap, because I wasn't going to be responsible for squashing her Christmas joy! As much as I don't relish balancing on a ladder out in the cold, it was the reminder I needed that the reason we put lights up is not just because we should, or to check it off the list, but because they make us happy! They spread Christmas cheer and the shine just a little bit of light during the longest and darkest nights of the year.

That is what Christmas is all about, God sending the light of Christ into the world to spread hope and joy to all God's people. Our scripture lesson this Christmas morning is about two such Christmas light seekers... Simeon and Anna. Two people who had their eyes peeled for signs of Christmas, anxiously awaiting the hope that God had promised they would see. Listen for the word of the lord...

Scripture- Luke 2:25-33, 36-38

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷ Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

**²⁹ "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word,
³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation,
³¹ which 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 the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him...

³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ At that moment she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

We all know about the shepherds and the wise men. We all love the chorus of angels and the star in the East...but I wish this story of Simeon and Anna got a little more attention at Christmas time! They really complete the trifecta- of course there are the shepherds who represent the ordinary, working class Israelites who are honored with a chance to meet the humble baby King laying in a manger. Then there are the Magi from the East who represent the outsiders and gentiles who are invited into God's story and remind us that Jesus is born for the salvation of the whole world. But then there are, Simeon and Anna, the faithful elders of Israel who have served God their whole lives long and finally, finally receive the gift of hope they have been waiting for. And they speak about the child to all who were looking for redemption, thus adding them to the burgeoning chorus of prophets who will go and tell it on the mountain!

To be fair, over the centuries Simeon's song of praise has been set to music by many composers and is often used to close compline and evensong services echoing his words "Dismiss thy servant with peace..." But Anna's revelation hardly gets remembered by the church at all. It smacks a bit of ageism and sexism that they don't get included...there are certainly enough spots on the advent calendar to add a few more characters! Someday, I want to commission an artist to make me a nativity set that will include a slightly hunched older man with a cane and an aging matriarch with her gray hair tied up in braids to join the crowd of prophets gathered around the manger.

Because the truth is, most of us are a lot more like Anna and Simeon than we are like Magi or Shepherds. We are the old faithful...we are the ones who still came to church on Christmas day in sub-freezing temperatures! We are the ones waiting here, in the temple, for some sign, any sign of God's light coming into the world.

Anna and Simeon are a reminder that Christmas is for everyone. Of course it is for the children who remind us of the awe we felt the first time we saw the twinkling Christmas lights. But Christmas is for everyone, not just for the kids. Christmas is also for those who have seen more Christmases than they care to count. Christmas is for everyone who still looks forward to that thrill of hope as we light the Christ candle and sing Joy to the World, the Lord HAS come!

I love that line of Jan Richardson's beautiful poem that Nancy read a few minutes ago, "I cannot tell you how the light comes, but that it does. That it will." For it is true that neither Simeon, nor Anna, nor I, nor anyone else for that matter can tell you how the light comes...all we can say for certain is that it will, that is has, and that we have seen it.

We humans have a tendency to get quite distracted with worry about that "how" of salvation. How does the light come? Is there anything we can do to make it come faster? If we say just the right prayers, and sing just the right songs, and preach just the right sermons can we be sure it will come to us first? I mean...could we at least have a list of who the light is and is not coming to?

But no, that's not how it works. We don't get to say how the light comes. In fact, Christians have done quite a good job of showing the world exactly why we are not in charge of salvation, because we are nowhere near as generous, abundant, or gracious with our love as God is. So it is not our job to bring about the light. That is what Jesus was born to do. God sent Jesus into the world, a baby, laying in a manger, a gift not just to some, but to all of creation. Christmas is for everyone.

Anna and Simeon in their faithfulness, in their waiting, in their years of prayer and hope (and if we are honest probably with a good share of worry and disappointment as well). In their faithful waiting, they are a reminder that the light WILL come to all of us, even in those times when it seems the furthest. It will come. God is with us.

We cannot say how the light comes, but that it does. It is not our job to muster up our own salvation or anyone else's, but, it is our job to point it out when we see it! It is our job to lift up our downcast eyes, to put a hand on our neighbor's shoulder, and to point towards the light with awe, and wonder, and a thrill of hope, saying, "Look...there it is, the light comes!"

That's what it means to go and tell it on the mountain- not that we are responsible for making sure everyone is saved, but that we have been given the gift of being able to share our experience of the light with others, to help them have hope that the light is coming for them too.

I came across a story of Christmas in a neighborhood in Baltimore in December 2020. In one of the darkest months of the pandemic, Kim, a single mom, was sitting with her daughter in their dim living room when she got a text from her neighbor. His name was Matt and although they had been neighbors for a few years it had only been during the isolation of the pandemic that they had begun to talk more- after all, they didn't have much contact with anyone else! It was Matt she had told about the recent death in her family, and about her stress at work after surviving the waves of downsizing. She had confided in him that her depression had been really getting bad and she had begun having anxiety attacks as she watched Covid numbers tick up

sharply after thanksgiving. The vaccine was coming, but it was not available to them yet and she was scared.

Her phone vibrated with a text to look outside her window, so she opened the curtains to peek out and was hit with an unexpected blaze of light—Matt had strung a string of Christmas lights from his house to theirs. “Just a way to show that you aren’t alone,” his follow up text said. It was a beacon of hope just for her...a promise that the darkness would not overcome her.

Neither she nor Matt expected what came next. Their neighbors noticed the nice gesture, and they were inspired to join in. Up and down the street, all over the block, lights started popping up. Neighbors strung lights from one home to the next, until their road was crisscrossed with icicle lights, twinkles, and stars of all shapes and sizes connecting every person on the block.

It was a reminder for everyone that the light was coming, that not even the darkness of this difficult time could overcome it. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. And that light loves searching out what is hidden, what is lost, what is forgotten or in peril, or in pain. I cannot tell you how the light comes...but I can tell you that it does. That it will. That it will come for you and for me. No matter what your age or station, no matter how dark it seems or how long you have waited. Christmas is for everyone, so go tell it on the mountain! Amen.