

God With Us
Menno Mennonite Church
December 27, 2020

Purpose: To celebrate the coming of Emmanuel in our midst.

Message: God with us comes into the midst of our world and changes everything.

Sermon Concentration: Luke 2:22-40

Synopsis: The least expected has happened! God has come to us in the form of one who defenselessly comes to re-make the world. God has come and entered into our reality, not in a half way preconditioned sort of way, but by way of incarnation where God comes to be with us in the here and now, dwelling with us in the midst of our messy world. God is present in our least expected places, the ungodly places of our lives and brings all that has been written to fulfillment in the revelation of Jesus. We declare the kingdom already here even as we wait for the full revelation of the kingdom coming still.

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Luke 2:22-40

²² When the time came
for their purification according to the law of Moses,
they brought him up to Jerusalem
to present him to the Lord

²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord,
“Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), ²⁴

and they offered a sacrifice
according to what is stated in the law of the Lord,

“a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

²⁵ 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.

³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary,
“This child is destined for the falling
and the rising of many in Israel,
and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵
so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—
and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

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.

The day has come and gone. That which we have anticipated has been accomplished. The adaptations have happened and spare a few lingering celebrations (if you are like our family one day is never quite enough across time zones), Christmas has been here already. There is something sacred in how we mark these days, and I don't speak of the songs and symbols of the time. It is far deeper than that. It's the stuff that just makes Christmas what it is, the touchstones of where and when it comes together familiar yet new each and every year. It is these traditions that we adapt and change, but never quite give up from year to year that makes the season what it is. Skeptical though I may be of "let's make a memory" it is those memories that come to the fore when we touch base with our holiday. I was struck with how many memories came rushing toward us both as we made the rounds this week with Christmas bags. It was a blessing to be able to share that together. Emily and I could help but wonder if we haven't just started a new tradition and, honestly, whether that is what we meant to do.

Because church is no different. We are shaped by our traditions and comforts. We know the story and the familiar contours to the days of Caesar Augustus, Bethlehem, the Shepherd, and a baby away in a manger. We tell the story because it is part of making Christmas what it is. We tell the story to recall again the work of God with us, and rejoice in the telling, deeply familiar, yet ever new. There is something comforting in the cadence, the twists and turns of the extraordinary birth of the extraordinary child. I think we end up listening to the story as much to hear the melody of the songs with which we are well acquainted as much as we are attempting to capture the notions of what it might be to have been in attendance on such a holy night when God came and moved into the neighborhood once and for all. There is not a whole lot of surprise in the telling; but perhaps that is not the point.

But we stop at the manger most of the time. The baby is here and planted and that is about it. We can pack it all up in tissue paper until next year. Spare a couple of stories of Egypt and the Temple depending on your narrator, we don't get much of Jesus until 30 years later when we have a guy at a wedding turning water into wine. The photo album of the adolescent Jesus is quite sparse and we are left to wonder if Jesus just had some divine alarm clock go off in his head that told him the time had come, to get up, find his cousin, and head to the wilderness? Or was it something far more gradual and easy over the course of the decades. I read one author who, very much tongue in cheek, speculates on the young Christ resuscitating lizards for his

sibling's amusement to be able to bop them once more on the head. It is a bit of mystery what happened along the way.

Despite our inclinations, this story this morning is very much part of the birth narrative. Its not a part of the usual tour of Luke chapter 2; that usually ends with Mary pondering meekly all things in her heart. When you keep going you quickly see that this is part of what it means to be good new parents in the Jewish way. It is a continuation of the story, perhaps even a trip on the way home from Bethlehem to save the donkeys. It is just as ordinary as the rest of the story—what happens for the first born of a devout family. It should be noted that within Luke and Acts, the recipient of the text was thought to be a gentile, perhaps somewhere within the Roman power structure, which justifies the pains taken by the author to explain the details of Judaic Law. It is within this most common of ritual, a rite no doubt performed by the priest numerous times every week that newness breaks in. Two of the hangers on at the temple, the ordinary crowd speak up and proclaim what they know to be most true: this ordinary child is far more than his typical circumstances would suggest. Simeon sees in the child the one for whom Israel and he had waited for so very long, declaring his full identity to the congregation of Israel. This is echoed by Anna who recognizes in this cooing child the coming of power and shaking for the whole of the world. Joseph and Mary marvel at these things. In other words, they were weirded out by strange people saying strange things about their kid.

I think this is a Christmas story we need today. Of course; we have to keep the Angels We Have Heard on High, the Christmas pageant sheep and all the rest. But when we add Simeon and Anna to the mix, we have the right people to remind us that in the midst of the ordinary functions of the familiar lie the very interventions of God. We need someone to offer that insight to rescue Jesus from the business as usual of our holidays and places. What they pronounced so long ago remains true today: Jesus—the Christ, and the kingdom of his coming—is meant for the rising and the falling of many. Given the opportunity God with us can shake the foundations of our world today when we grasp what it really means that there is no place where God is not, despite our inclinations to wonder. As we have had children, I have, at times, wondered at the future that I have brought them into. I know I am not alone in this; each generation has its bogymen. For some of you, the question was nuclear war that never came to be by the Grace of God. I have to remind myself at these times that what I want to give to Luke and Anna is not an easy world protected from challenge, but a real world infected everywhere with God. I pray

daily for their ability to see that presence of the divine, to know it, to trust it, and to gain strength from it. As much as we long for the answers of when and how long o Lord, our longing is greater still for the holy presence of God coming to us, longing to see what we proclaim today to be true. Jesus the ordinary child is the embodiment of the extraordinary promise that there is no place that we can be that God is not. We need their eyes of the spirit to see and speak that which remains so often hidden. Often the sheer ordinariness of the birth of a saviour lulls us into forgetting the true impact of this messy, remarkable birth.

Our vision can be so easily clouded by the way things are. Our ears become plugged by the noisiness of the day. We hesitate to think that God's call building the radical kingdom about which Mary sings was meant for us, for our time and our place. Sometimes the advent wreath is aspirational as we wait upon the Lord. We can be afraid of being too rash, too over the top, too far up against the way things are to boldly declare "Unto us a Child is Born" with its full world-altering meaning behind it, let alone to speak of the kingdom come and the world turned upside down. Perhaps we prefer our traditions and the comfortable resonances that they have to the possibility of seeing God at work yet again in this time, this place.

Our rejoicing in this time has far more to do with what is than what was. I wonder; how might we train ourselves, especially now, to take on the vision of Immanuel that would allow us to spot him even in the unlikely places of our lives? What is we would take the work of "Keeping Christmas well" as Dickens would have it, as anticipating the coming of the savior and knowing that this looking will inevitably change what we perceive? I wonder what we might see. What might we be called to do, to respond, to live life differently when we prime ourselves to see God with us everywhere, and not just in the appropriate seasons and moments when we prod ourselves to squint and see?

With such vision, with such hope, with such expectation, we are offered a starkly different view than that which we normally carry; we are offered a view of God's ongoing salvation and the revealing of all that God is doing in this world, a sight and promise that must be declared, that must be sung, that must be held out as joy to the world in all times and all circumstances. Dare we look to the child born with Anna and Simeon eyes? Dare we open ourselves to what the Holy spirit might reveal if we look beyond the sweet ordinary to the profound revolution launched on this day? Dare we see? Dare we join in? Dare we break with tradition and make our world forever new.

The point of this season is not solely the marking of tradition and story, of remembering what has been so long ago. It is an active and open invitation to take on a new sight and new vision, looking for the coming and active moving of God's hand, eyes that have been changed and moved by the encounter with the living God with us. May we each be granted the grace to be able to say "My eyes have seen the coming of God's salvation."