

## **The First Sunday after Christmas + January 1, 2012**

*“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his son ....”* (Galatians 4:4) About a week ago we heard the part of the Christmas story we know best. Today we get to hear the rest of the story. Forty days after Jesus’ birth, the Holy Family went to the Temple. As prescribed by the law, Mary and Joseph took the child there to be presented to the priest. There they met two aged saints: Simeon and Anna. Simeon, a very holy man was waiting for the fulfillment of God’s promises. And it was promised to him that he would not die until he had first seen the long awaited Messiah. With the birth of Jesus, not only did his dream come true, but the fulfillment of God’s dream came true. So, old Simeon took the child in his arms and praised God: “Now you may let your servant go in peace, according to your Word. For my eyes have seen the salvation, which you have prepared before the presence of of all people; a light to reveal you the Gentiles and for the glory of your people Israel.”

Simeon, after seeing and holding the child, was able then to depart this life in peace. He could go in peace for he had seen with his eyes and held in his hands the very salvation of God. He could leave this life with a peaceful mind and peace filled spirit. Along with Simeon there was Anna, another holy person. Anna never left the Temple. She fasted and prayed and worshipped constantly. She was a prophet, a teller of the truth and echoed Simeon’s song and confirmed his words. Mary and Joseph could count on the testimony of Anna and Simeon to be true because these two aged saints were guided and inspired by the Holy Spirit and filled with the Spirit. Having seen the child, they were now ready to leave the world. They could depart in peace. They could go in peace because finally, they had seen the salvation of God come true, God’s very dream come true in the child Jesus.

Now, we echo the song of Simeon and the words of Anna. For, we too have met God in the child Jesus. We, too, may praise God for what we have heard and seen. We proclaim the good news of Christmas: God is among us! And along with old Simeon we can say: “Now, Lord let your servants go in peace.” Now unlike Simeon or Anna, we may not be ready to draw our last breath, but we can rest secure in the peace that we have come to know and trust in the Child Jesus. It is a peace that passes understanding and reason but it is a peace we know and one that brings joy, wonder and astonishment.

Now, at the beginning of a brand new year, maybe we can join our song with the song of Simeon and say “Now, we your servants may go in peace.” Can we bid farewell to last year in peace and enter into a new year in peace? Since we, too, have seen and met and encountered God in the child Jesus, can we order our days in peace?

There is a lot of ritual around the New Year. Many of you probably engaged in such ritual last night if you were determined to keep your eyes open until Midnight or beyond. Besides the rituals of New Years Eve, there are the rituals of welcoming and greeting the New Year.

One of these rituals comes in the form of statements that I hear folks make every year, things like “Well, this year has got to be better than last year,” or “I can't wait for the New Year and get this year behind me.” Deep inside these comments, I hear the healthy lament of those who have experienced tragedy, pain or suffering and a blessed hope that a new year might, in fact, bring new life. I also hear, in, with and under these comments something of a resolve to make things better. Some won't be so subtle but will go public in the form of New Year's Resolutions. And sometimes these can be very good things as we resolve to take on new habits or attitudes or resolve to do away with old and destructive ways of being. And with the resolutions and the hope we might even find ourselves crossing our fingers and even counting on a bit of luck to take us into better days. Now, chances are that in many ways this New Year will be like the old year. There will be much to celebrate and there will be much over which to lament. I suspect that like previous years this year will include failure as well as success, sorrow as well as joy, bad days as well as good days and chance are that a year from now we might find ourselves saying: “I can't wait for the new year!”

Maybe we can bid farewell to the old year and enter the New Year echoing the song of Simeon and the honesty of Anna, with the perspective of those who have seen and encountered and met the fullness of God in the Child Jesus. Maybe one of the best ways to greet the New Year is with the affirmation that God is with us, regardless of what happens. God is with us in our achievement and our losses, in what is fixed and what isn't fixed, in what is complete and incomplete, in darkness and light, the good news is that we may greet a new year in peace for we know that God has entered our time. For here is the really good news that may guide us into a new year: God has entered our time. And this is what makes our time worth living, not our ability to fix things or get things right, but with the peace that comes from the astonishing news that God is among us.

One of the ways we affirm this is the way we Christians keep time. You've probably noticed, we keep time a little differently than the rest of the world. For example, we are now still celebrating Christmas while the culture around us pretended that it ended on December 26. That's why we keep a Christian year and keep seasons and special days like Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter at the forefront, rather than Mother's Day or Thanksgiving or Fourth of July. It is the church's way of saying that the most important thing about keeping time is the good news that God has entered our time. God is with us, standing by us, making time for us and even doing new things among us. I think we can enter this New Year in peace, we have seen with our eyes and touched and met and encountered the living God in the very flesh of Jesus. In fact, the words “Go in Peace” are words we hear not just at the close of the year and the beginning of a new one, but at the beginning of each week. We hear them every Sunday. We will hear them again today as words of dismissal to go out and serve and love our neighbors. They are not words borne out of human resolve but words undergirded with the very promise and power of God. We go in peace, because in this gathering, in this Word, and at this table we hear and see and touch and taste the very presence of God who has entered our time. Amen.