

[Isaiah 61:10-62:3](#)

Psalm 148

Galatians 4:4-7

Luke 2:22-40

Sermon for December 31, 2023

THE ROAD OF PEACE

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Summary: For my eyes have seen your salvation.

We have four Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – and in two of those four accounts, we find episodes relating to the birth and infancy of Jesus. In Matthew's Gospel, we learn about the visit of the Magi, the paranoia of Herod, and the flight of Mary and Joseph to Egypt to escape Herod's persecution. Luke adds to the nativity story by telling us about the journey to Bethlehem from Nazareth, the birth in the manger, and the wonder of the shepherds in the surrounding hill. And then Luke goes on to add the beautiful story we find in today's lectionary selection.

How Luke came upon this additional information we don't know; but we can say with certainty that it was provided to him under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and that it was included to teach us something of great importance. My suggestion this morning is that what the Spirit is teaching all of us is the three stages of the road to spiritual peace.

But before we turn to Luke's account, it's important to remember and emphasize that Jesus came to teach us, not how the world works, but how heaven works, not worldly wisdom, but God's wisdom, not the world's ways, but the ways of God. If by merely human intelligence and human experience and human reflection, we could arrive at an understanding of God, there would have been no reason for God to enter into our merely human world, to bring heaven's light into our human darkness, to show us heaven's way, heaven's truth, and heaven's life.

In the story Luke recounts for us, there are three episodes: one involves Mary and Joseph bringing the infant Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem in obedience to the requirements of Jewish law; in the second, we learn about the reaction of an elderly priest named Simeon to their appearance; and in the third, the reaction of a devout elderly woman named Anna. And each of these three episodes, I believe, teaches us something vitally important about the road we must all travel on the way to heavenly peace. So let's consider them one at a time.

Luke 2: 21-24.

There were three ceremonies in Jewish law and tradition that every firstborn male had to undergo. At eight days, there was the circumcision, on which day the boy also received his chosen name. At about thirty days, the parents paid a certain sum of money to the temple in a ceremony called the redemption of the First-born. The thought behind the ceremony was that the first born child literally belonged to God, and the fixed sum the parents paid was symbolically as it were buying their son back from God. And on the fortieth day, there was what was called the purification ceremony, when the parents brought an animal sacrifice to the temple,

to certify that the woman was now ritually clean. Two of those are referenced in the verses I just read, and I'd like to say a word about each.

On the eighth day, along with circumcision, our Lord received his name: Jesus, and we are reminded of how an angel visited Joseph in a dream, and gave him this instruction on what to name his future son, by saying of Mary: *and she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus; for he shall save his people from their sins.*

In English, we of course refer to our Lord as Jesus. But the Hebrew name he would actually have been given by the angel was Jahoshua, which literally means: God is salvation. Thus the angel literally tells Joseph: Mary will conceive a son, and you will name him God is salvation, for he will save his people from their sins. But what I want to point out is that the Hebrew name Jahoshua is at a deeper level related to another Hebrew word - shalom - which means 'peace.' Even today the word is commonly used among Jews and even some Christian folks as a word of greeting or farewell, and the peace of the Lord that we and others share during our service is often called the *shalom* moment. And I think that sets the stage for what follows in our reading for today.

The rites of circumcision, redemption and purification that Jewish firstborn males had to undergo may seem strange and foreign to us, perhaps even a little barbaric. But when you strip away the cutting of the flesh and temple tribute and the animal sacrifice, and look at the thought reflected in these old ceremonies, what you find is that they are all ways of expressing that the child is fundamentally a gift of God. From the heavenly point of view, every child essentially belongs to God. And what is true of the child remains true of the man or woman each child becomes; it is the

recognition and acceptance that each of our lives is itself a gift from God. We are not simply random results of physical couplings and random chance: we are uniquely imagined and designed creations of God, gifted first to our parents for safekeeping, and through them to the world of God's creation. And that recognition and acceptance, I suggest to you, is the first stage on the road to realizing God's peace, God's shalom.

During their visit to the temple for the ceremony of purification, Mary and Joseph with their newborn son meet two people. The first is Simeon. So let's read about that together.

2: 25-35

Simeon was evidently a member of a small group of pious and devout Jews who believed in a life of quiet watchfulness and faith as they awaited the long hoped for Messiah, and he had been given a special revelation by the Spirit that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. On seeing the baby Jesus with his parents, the spirit of God lifts the veil from his eyes and enables him to see that Messiah, that bringer of salvation in the newborn child, and in response, he breaks into one of the great and precious hymns of the church, saying : *Lord, you are letting your servant depart in shalom...for my eyes have (now) seen your salvation.*

And in verse 34, he gives a sort of summary of the road that will lead to that peace. He says: *Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rising of many...and for a sign which will be spoken against.*

What he is saying is that the road to peace has a fork, and that fork consists of the reaction which people will have to this Messiah. It's the same point that Jesus himself will make on another occasion, when he said”:

34 “Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. 35 For I have come to ‘set[a] a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law’; 36 and ‘a man’s enemies will be those of his own household.’ (Matthew 10: 34-36)

The history of human civilization is a history of war, with the rare and brief moments of human peace simply being the result of conquest and subjugation and oppression. What Simeon glimpsed in his moment of revelation was that the true path to peace, to spiritual peace, to heaven's peace, is not the road of conquest, but the road of surrender, surrender to the leadership of Christ. Those who resist Christ's love are thrown back onto the hopeless human path of envy and violence and the will to power; those who surrender to Christ, are led farther onto the path of complete and eternal peace, of peace with God and, most importantly, of escape from their own warring instincts.

So, the first stage of spiritual peace for every single human being is the recognition that she or he is a creation of God's love and belongs to God. The second is the acceptance of that revelation by surrender to Christ. And that brings us to Anna, and the third stage of true, eternal shalom. So let's finally read about her encounter with the baby Jesus.

Luke 2: 36- 40.

Like Simeon, Anna was one of those few who had chosen a life of faithful and quiet faith. Widowed at a young age, she had known sorrow and disappointment, but it had not made her bitter and hard and resentful and rebellious against God. On the contrary, it had led her into years and decades of worship in the temple and constant prayer and supplication. And as such, she models for all of us the third stage of the road to heavenly peace.

Age of course can take away the bloom from our cheeks and the strength of our bodies. But it can do far worse than that. The sorrows and disappointments and failures of our lives can take away the bloom and strength in our hearts until the hopes we once cherished die away and we become hopelessly resigned to the inevitable and unending warfare and strife and ultimate defeat that is the path of the world.

Anna chose another path. First, she never ceased to worship in the Temple. She spent her life in God's house, observing the ways of God's people. And the lesson for us is the importance of our church. Jesus gave us his church – this Christian church to which we all belong and in which we sit this morning – to be our sanctuary of faith. Jesus did not intend us to walk the path of peace alone. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, he Himself modeled for us the life of mutual love for one another, of mutual support and sympathy for our brothers and sisters in Christ as we as we continue faithfully on that path.

But second, Anna always continued in prayer. Public worship is wonderful and necessary, but so is private worship. As we need two legs to successfully walk one

of the world's roads, so we need private prayer as well as public prayer to successfully walk the road of peace back to God.

And so there we have the three stages of the road to eternal life. The first is the intellectual recognition and acceptance of the fact that our very lives are a gift from God. The second is the surrender of ourselves to the ownership, to the model, to the instruction and to the unfailing love of Christ. And how is that accomplished? Through the third stage of willful discipline in sharing the lives of our fellow Christians in the sanctuary of Christ's church, and of spending some part of our private lives alone with God.

Can these things be done, or is this all really just a pious-sounding pipe dream? The answer is that it can be done, but we must always remember, lest we lose heart because of our human weakness and imperfections, that all of us are still babes in Christ, that our steps are like the first small faltering steps of toddlers still mastering the skill of simply putting one foot in front of the other, still weak and frail, still uncertain, still often falling.

As always, Saint Paul put it best, when he wrote to the Philippians:

12 Not that I have already attained, [a] or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. 13 Brethren, I do not count myself to have [b]apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, 14 I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (3: 12-14)

And so, heavenly father, our prayer for this morning and the beginning of a new year, is that under the guidance and with the support of Your Holy Spirit within each of us, we may rest ever more securely in our dependence on you, that we may surrender ever more and more of ourselves to You, and that in the coming year we may grow ever closer together with each other and with you, as we follow along the road of peace in the footsteps of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.