

Sunday, December 27, 2020

Rev. Robert W. Brown
Signs of fulfillment

This morning's Scripture is from the Gospel of Luke. Scholars will point out that Luke often uses "sight" as a metaphor for perceiving God's presence. As the hymn goes, "Was blind but now I see." Luke is the only Gospel writer who chose to include this story about a man named Simeon and the elderly prophet Anna who, seemingly by chance, encountered Jesus as an infant. Instantly, they were both able to somehow recognize that this utterly dependent little baby, under the care of ordinary, working class parents, was, in fact, the promised Messiah. They are both great examples of people who could see the signs of God's presence and promise fulfilled before their eyes, but they also knew how to see with the eyes of their heart, soul and minds.

Hear this reading from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 2, verses 22 through 40...

Luke 2:22-40

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 (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons."

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. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. 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, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
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."

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. 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 so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

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 for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. 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.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

This week, between Christmas and New Year's Eve, is always a strange one. It's like a huge easing of the tension we feel during Advent's waiting and hoping. Our expectation is fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. Our gifts have been given and received, meals digested, and family zoom gatherings completed. I often lose track of what day it is between Christmas and New Year's Eve. I'm glad I remembered today is Sunday! And now, with a most unusual Christmas behind us, we stare at the beginning of 2021 with a similar expectation of redemption and rescue. As we have learned this past Advent season, hope is always linked to memory. These are days to reflect, to remember the events of this most historic year and anticipate what may be ahead. We know it will be different. We have all been changed by the pandemic and enter the new year, hoping for a better day. What expectations do you have for this year? As we head into a post-pandemic year, what new thing might God be doing among us? God is always doing a new thing and our job is simply to watch for the signs that God has placed in front of us. Together, we will discern and follow that path, trusting in the fulfillment of God's promise.

Please pray with me.

God of fulfilled promise and continual hope, on the cusp of a new year we want to be alert for the signs that will guide each of us in the right direction. Sharpen our spiritual vision and soften our shielded hearts so that we might walk in harmony according to your perfect design. Now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, our God, our Rock, our Redeemer Christ, AMEN.

In 2014, during my sabbatical, my wife Natalie and I walked an ancient 500-mile pilgrimage in Spain called *El Camino De Santiago* or *The Way of Saint James*. I pondered the phrase, "the way" along much of the journey. As I walked each day, it soon became quite clear to me that this 40-day pilgrimage was truly a microcosm of my wider life. The reality is that we are always on "the way".

Each day on the Camino, we would begin with only a vague idea of what the day ahead would hold. There was more unknown than known. Who would we meet? What would we see? Would it be a hard day? Would our bodies hold up? Would the next shelter be open to us or would we have to keep walking? I began to think of how I normally schedule and plan each day of my life, often each hour, but the reality is, I have no idea what each day will bring. Sure, my calendar lends a certain order and perceived sense of control, but frequently, unexpected things beyond my control topple my attempt to serenely walk a well-ordered life. Sometimes there are wonderful surprises and occasionally quite difficult events will turn me in a different direction than I had planned.

Either way, when things don't go according to MY plan, I get frustrated and often anxious. But I am learning to release the firm hold on my slavish calendar-driven life. I want to be more open to the unexpected path that might be drawing me in a new and better way. But as you know, not every way is a good way. I need direction and assurance beyond my own plan for the day.

This is where another pilgrimage lesson comes into play. All along the Camino, there are painted yellow arrows, signs that point to the right direction. From our first step in Irun to the very door of the cathedral at Santiago De Compostela, these little arrows direct our path through crowded cities, wooded paths, mountainous ascents, village streets and winding goat paths. All we had to do was follow the arrows, believing that these signposts would guide us faithfully along the way. Here is a clip from the short film I made about our adventure...

(RUN TIME: 1:45 OUTCUE: *And the adventure continues.*)

We learned to trust the arrows more than maps, compasses, or even alternative suggested directions. But quite often we would lose the path. The arrows would simply disappear, and we would get increasingly anxious wondering if we were going the right way. We needed a sign, some confirmation that this was the path we were supposed to be on. More than once I made a firm assumption that this direction must be the way to go because I could see the village in the valley below or I choose a path that I assumed to be the way ahead only to find that I should really pay more attention to following the simple yellow arrows rather than my own well-reasoned plan for the day. I learned quickly not to make assumptions. Sometimes I might blindly follow another pilgrim ahead in the distance that I thought must know the way, but that didn't always work either. There were many ways to get on the wrong path, and the further I went down the wrong path, the harder it was to return to the right way. But let me tell you how good it was to work our way back and see the yellow arrows once again and feel that sense of right direction.

Having a plan for your life and a sense of direction is important. We need to plan to walk the good path. My dad used to say, "When you fail to plan then plan to fail". We all have to make appointments, keep schedules, be accountable and have a view toward the future. But we also have to keep our eye on the signs that might point us in a new direction, or onto an unexpected path, or maybe even warn us that we are going the wrong way. The Spiritual life is bursting with signs, but we have to walk each day with the expectation of seeing them.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking for signs that would point to the time when Israel and the Hebrew people would be liberated once again. He was on the alert for the new thing God was going to do. It was clear to everyone that the Holy Spirit of the Living God rested on him. He was humble, kind and devout. Even in his advanced years, Simeon was hopeful and optimistic because it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Frequently he walked to the temple looking for a new sign from God that the Messiah had come. I'll bet that this guy treated everyone he came across as if they were the beloved messenger of God. And that is how it came to be that when Mary and Joseph came to the temple with their newborn baby that Simeon recognized Jesus as the one he had been waiting for. It was his trust and devotion to following in the way of God that allowed him to see the unexpected surprise of God in flesh appearing. The messiah, the liberator of all human kind, came not as a priest, not as a political leader, not as a rich influence peddler, but as a helpless little child cradled in the arms of a young peasant girl. Simeon had eyes to see God's unexpected way and was overcome with emotion. Huge tears welled up and silently rolled down his face as he prayed,

*"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
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 2:29-32)

Witnessing this moment from a distance was the elder prophet Anna, who also walked in the way of God. At first, she noticed Simeon talking to an ordinary couple holding a newborn. He suddenly appeared to be disoriented and a bit confused. As she drew nearer, Anna heard his prayer, and looking down at the child she also recognized the face of almighty God, tenderly poking through a tightly wrapped swaddling blanket. Anna began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Israel.

Simeon and Anna saw their hope come to life. Laying their eyes on this baby Jesus, triggered a profound peace, a definitive sense of fulfillment, and a spiritual contentment they had been seeking for decades. By simply trusting and following the signs that God put before them, and letting go of assumptions, they were able to recognize this new and unexpected thing that

God was doing. Seeing Jesus was the climactic end of a lifelong journey, and they had come to this holy moment by daily walking step by step along a simple path, following the signs God put before them.

Living with this kind of faith and hope is more than wishful thinking; it is an experiential hope, an active hope filled with substance and expectation. This kind of hope is nurtured and fueled by intentionally studying the scriptures and the walking humbly in the Spirit of God. We all have a choice in what direction to walk, and you don't have to be on a pilgrimage, or be a mystic, a prophet, a hermit, or a Jesus freak to walk along the path God sets before you. The signs are plentiful when we begin to adjust the eyes of our heart, soul and mind to see differently, and choose to walk along that path.

The New Year is a good time to try a new approach, to intentionally make different choices. I have a list of [simple suggestions](#) that might help guide you in a right direction. In years past we have made cards to hand out, but this year Marcia will post a link in the chat feature if you want to download them. She will also post a link to the full 20-minute version of our [Camino film](#). If you are watching on YouTube, you can get these links by going to triconchurch.org and clicking on "sermons."

Like walking the Camino De Santiago, walking in the way of Jesus is both quite simple and yet often quite hard. The way is clearly marked but you're not sure you can actually do it. But I believe we can all take the next single step. None of us will walk perfectly through this life journey, but there are always signs that guide us faithfully back home.

Scripture teaches us that each and every person is a gift of God who has the potential to play a role in the fulfillment of God's promise. Simeon saw the signs that pointed to Christ in the eyes of an infant! Perhaps it was because he was so practiced in seeing the Divine Spark in others that he recognized the fullness in the baby Jesus. Wouldn't it be great if each of us could see the Christ in one another, and in every single person we meet? Wouldn't that transform our relationships, our church, our families, our nation, and the entire world? *Good Christian friends, rejoice with heart, and soul, and voice.* Beginning today, let us each take that first step along "The Way" and follow the signs that will lead us home, in the Way of Jesus. – AMEN

Here are some choices we can make that will always guide our path:

Resolutions for the New Year

Choose to love	rather than hate.
Choose to smile	rather than frown.
Choose to build	rather than destroy.
Choose to persevere	rather than quit.
Choose to praise	rather than gossip.
Choose to heal	rather than wound.
Choose to give	rather than grasp.
Choose to act	rather than delay.
Choose to pray	rather than despair.
Choose to forgive	rather than curse.

(author unknown)