

Christmas Day Family Communion

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Date: 25 December 2004

Preacher: The Venerable Daniel Gifford

[0 : 00] Please turn in your Bibles to pages 55-56, the passage that was read to us as our lesson today.

In my youth, there was a ballad, often sung on the radio, titled Wishing. And if any of you are my age, which I suppose some of you might be, you may remember it yourselves.

It started like this. Wishing will make it so. Just keep on wishing and cares will go. Dreamers tell us dreams come true.

That's no mistake. And wishes are the dreams we dream when we are awake. True so far, and a lot of us waste a lot of time daydreaming about what we would like for ourselves in the future, and the time would be much better spent in other ways.

And then it ends like this. So if you wish long enough, wish strong enough, you'll come to know that wishing will make it so.

[1 : 20] And that's piffle. And we ought to be very glad that it's piffle. Because in our foolishness, we wish for a lot of things, which if we got them, would make us very unhappy.

Do you know W.W. Jacob's classic horror story, The Monkey's Paw, written, I suppose, a century and a quarter ago?

Two old folk presented with a rabbit's foot charm. But it isn't a rabbit's foot. It's a monkey's paw. And they're told that the paw is magic and has in it three wishes.

You hold the paw in your hand and wish. The old man wishes, quite specifically, for money.

It can't do any harm, he says. So he says, I wish I had such and such a son. Before very long, there comes to the door a representative of the factory at which his son works.

[2 : 37] The son has been caught in the machinery. He's dead. Body terribly mangled. You wouldn't want to see him, says this gentleman. And we've come to tell you that in compensation, the firm is going to give you, and there it is, the sum of money that he'd wished for.

Then his wife begins to get hysterical and rises in her tension and distress to the point of saying, I'd give anything to see my son again.

And she grabs the monkey's paw and wishes that she might see her son again. Her husband says, don't you remember what they said? What said it happened to him?

She said, I don't care. Then there's an enormous banging at the door. And just as his wife runs to the door to open it, the old man grabs the monkey's paw and makes the third wish.

And so there's nobody at the door when she gets it open. Some wishes are best not fulfilled, you see. Well, what are you wishing for, I wonder, in your immediate and long-term future?

[4 : 08] That question hangs over the whole of this message. I shall be asking you that again as we move along. I did once myself get a fortune cookie in a Chinese restaurant, which said, your dearest wish will come true.

And it made me ask myself, what is my dearest wish? And, of course, that's a very serious question. But now, in this story, we are going to read about Simeon and Anna, two persons who were quite clear what they were wishing for and wishing for more than they were wishing for anything else.

They wanted to see God fulfilling his promises of salvation, bringing himself honor and glory, setting up his kingdom, sending his Messiah, the Savior King, for whom Israelites were looking.

And that was a wise wish. Here's the story. A couple, a young couple this time around, in the temple in Jerusalem, holding a baby, up comes an old man and says, I suppose, may I hold the baby?

and the mother lets him hold the baby. And this is Simeon, to whom, so we're told, God had promised that he wouldn't see death before he'd seen the Lord's Christ.

[6 : 00] Verse 26. He was a man looking for the consolation of Israel, as we see in the previous verse. And the Holy Spirit was upon him, and this was a special message, just for Simeon, which the Holy Spirit had brought him.

And inspired by the Spirit, we read he came into the temple and took the baby and did two things. Blessed God, verse 28, and blessed them.

Who's them? This is verse 34, by the way, that I'm jumping to. Well, then, of course, it's Joseph and Mary. They were there in the temple to offer the two sacrifices that the Old Testament ritual law required in circumstances like theirs.

A purification sacrifice for Mary, the mother, and a sacrifice acknowledging God's ownership of the child.

That sacrifice had to be offered for every firstborn son. And Luke says, no less than five times in the passage, check it out, after the sermon's over, no less than five times that they were doing this according to the law of the Lord.

[7 : 28] What he's telling us is that they were extremely faithful, God-fearing, devout young people. And I say young people, Mary may not yet have been out of her teens, and Joseph was probably in his early twenties.

Well, that's what they're there for. And they weren't expecting anything like what happened. But here is Simeon, venerable old gentleman, holding the baby and blessing God.

Now, what does that mean? Well, you bless God or man, either, by honoring God in what you say.

If it's God himself that you're blessing, you honor him by praise and thanksgiving. And if it's man that you're blessing, well, you bless people, as we clergy do in church.

By petition, we ask for God to enrich the people spiritually. And, as we shall see in a minute, Simeon blesses Joseph and Mary not only by doing that, but by giving them a preview of what's to come in the plan of God for them.

[9 : 04] And as we shall see, that is bittersweet. but I'm anticipating. This is what happens. And you may ask, well, this is very interesting.

I wonder where Luke got it all from. That isn't actually a difficult question to answer at all. The first two chapters of Luke's Gospel are very obviously Mary's story.

And we can guess when Luke was able to take it from Mary. Luke, you know, was the beloved physician who accompanied Paul on some of his journeys.

Luke had come with Paul to Jerusalem in the year of grace 59. Well, you know what happened. Paul was arrested and very soon he was shot off to Caesarea and kept in custody in Caesarea for a couple of years until finally he was sent to Rome to be tried there.

And during those two years, Luke would have been able to move around Palestine and talk to all the people whom he wanted to talk to collecting material for the Gospel he was going to write.

[10 : 25] Mary would have been an old lady late 70s or early 80s perhaps living at John's home. This is John the Apostle if you remember.

One of Jesus' words from the cross tells John to look after Mary. And John writing the Gospel says the disciple to whom Jesus had spoken took Mary into his own home.

So Luke is able to get Mary's story from her in detail and the first two chapters are Mary's story as I said and it does say in verse 51 Luke indicating his source I think that Jesus' mother kept all these things that is all the things that have been recounted so far in the first two chapters I think his mother kept all these things in her heart and now Luke knows them Luke writes them and we have them.

Now what I want us to do is to look at the three things that Mary quite specifically Mary heard from Simeon regarding her and her baby.

The first thing she heard as this old man spoke blessing God was salvation for the world.

[12 : 08] If we Anglicans came to evening prayer indeed if there was evening prayer for us to come to more regularly well we should know these words off by heart.

Simeon uttered what we call the Nunc Dimittis it's a canticle which is part of evening prayer quite regularly Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace according to thy word for my eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to thy people Israel.

That is something for Israelites to boast about because it's a glorious privilege that's come to them. That's verses 29 through 32.

The baby is in Simeon's arms and Simeon says my eyes have seen your salvation. The Greek form of the word salvation is one which signifies means of salvation rather than substance of salvation.

Means of salvation is the thought here. This baby is going to bring salvation. That's Simeon's meaning. And what's salvation? salvation. Well, rescue is the English word that best expresses it.

[13 : 47] Rescue from trouble and jeopardy. Rescue for happiness, for new life, for joy, for a life worth living in every sense.

salvation in the New Testament has three tenses. Rescue from the past, you have been saved from your sin and your guilt.

Rescue in the present, you are being saved from the power of sin in your life. And rescue for the future, you've been saved for a glorious eternal life with God when you leave this world.

Yes, Simeon has something to rejoice in, doesn't he, when his eyes see the means of God's salvation. We know because we so regularly hear from this pulpit and so regularly meet in our prayer book worship, the thought that it's through Christ's cross and resurrection, through his heavenly reign and the sending of the Spirit and finally his coming for us to take us home at the end of our earthly pilgrimage, it's by those means that he brings salvation home to us.

Simeon goes on when he blesses or begins to bless Joseph and Mary to say this and it's in verse 34, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel.

[15 : 45] And that phrase fall and rising surely refers to the way that salvation comes to us or shall I say the way that we come into it.

fall points to the fact that our good opinion of ourselves is punctured and we have to face the fact that we are fallen.

Fallen in the Christian sense of that word. We are sinners. There's sin in our system. So we're guilty. so we are perverse.

So our instinct is always to go the selfish way rather than God's way. And that's how we've been living and we have to face that fact.

And as I said, it's quite a fall from the good opinion of ourselves that we may have had before. forever. But then there's a rising that follows the fall.

[16 : 55] As we acknowledge that we need forgiveness and help from God, we need to be changed and we need the ministry of His Holy Spirit to do it.

so we find rising because the gospel points us to the living Christ risen from the dead and says, go to Him for He's coming to you.

And when in faith we go to the Christ who has come to us to call us to Himself, then we find pardon and peace and new life.

A peace in which Simeon said that he would now be departing. Peace with God, peace in one's heart, in one's life, peace as one looks into the future, peace all the way.

And one is in a new life in which one testifies as Paul testified. Maybe you know these words from Galatians chapter 2 and verse 20.

[18 : 16] I have been crucified with Christ. Nevertheless, I live. And yet, not I, but Christ lives in me.

That's the new life. That's what's happened. The old life has ended through the cross of Christ, just as truly as his life ended, in one sense, when he was crucified.

But that isn't the end, although I've just made it sound like the end. Nevertheless, I live, says Paul, and nevertheless I live is what the Christian says.

I'm in a new life. The life that I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

Wonderful. And we live in peace, and we depart in peace, and we walk with Christ, in Christ, all the way.

[19 : 24] It's a new life of glory indeed. Glory that Simeon announced for God's people, Israel, that glory is now ours. Well, that's salvation.

And, brothers and sisters, I hope, I pray, that this, this salvation really is your dearest wish at this moment, is it?

Make it so, brothers and sisters. wish for salvation, and for more of that salvation. That's the wise wish in this life.

And that's the wish that brings the most glorious consequence that can possibly be desired. But this isn't all.

Mary and Joseph hear about salvation for the world, this wonderful gospel, which is the news of new life for everybody, which they also hear about opposition for Jesus.

[20 : 41] Verse 34 again. This child is set for a sign that's spoken against. Sign of what?

Sign of the kingdom. this is the Lord's Christ. Sign of new life. Sign of salvation.

Sign of new birth. Sign of glory. But Jesus is going to be spoken against. The sign won't be accepted gratefully, as it would be if people had sense.

No, it's going to be spoken against by folk who, alas, don't have sense. The Pharisees are going to speak against it.

Why? Well, because they thought they were doing wonderfully well. And Jesus pinpoints the trouble with their hearts.

[21 : 48] Hard, selfish, proud, vainglorious. and they won't have it. They treat that as an insult.

The Sadducees are going to speak against Jesus. They, remember, were the minority of folk in Palestine from whom the high priests were, was taken and they had the power.

They thought of themselves as the top people in power terms and they saw Jesus as a threat. They took very seriously the fact that people were wanting to make a revolutionary king out of him, if they could, and they thought and said, we've got to get him out of the way, lest our own position be damaged.

So, in order to maintain their position, they arranged for the betrayal and the death of Jesus the Savior, thereby fulfilling the plan of God, though they didn't know it.

In the deepest sense, they had no sense. Then Pilate was going to do the same. Pilate was happy to agree, with half his mind anyway, that the prisoner in front of him was a revolutionary, although deep down he knew it wasn't so.

[23 : 31] But anything for a quiet life, that was clearly Pilate's motto. The Jews want him crucified, oh, let's give them what they want. And so he does.

And Jesus is crucified, and thereby Pilate lines up with the others who had no sense, realize what Jesus had come to bring to the world.

And so Simeon goes on, inevitably, and this is verse 35, and a sword will pierce through your own soul also.

Blance back to the beginning of verse 34, he's speaking particularly to Mary, Jesus' mother. And he says a sword, it's a word, a technical word, for a great military broad sword.

That will go right through you, says Simeon. It's a most ominous sounding statement. Just imagine a broad sword being brandished at you to be driven right through your chest.

[25 : 01] That's the picture. sword will pierce through your own soul also. So there's pain being predicted for Mary herself.

Salvation for the world, opposition for Jesus, which will actually bring about the cross whereby salvation for the world will be finally won, and pain for Mary.

His mother, who will have to go through it all with him as a spectator, and with a mother's feelings at each stage of what happens.

She'd had it hard already. A premarital pregnancy is always hard for the woman, and she's going to have it harder, so says the prophet.

God, and from now on, therefore, this young woman has to live in expectation, just looking to see when the really disastrous thing is going to happen.

[26 : 19] Mary did not have it easy. Those who say to God, be it to me according to your will, don't have it easy.

That's the standard way that it plays out. God uses the pain and the suffering and the distress that comes to all disciples of Jesus, sooner or later.

he uses it in all sorts of ways for our blessing and for the blessing of others through us. We can't go into that now. I'm just making the point that like Mary, who I always think of as standing at the head of the line of saved saints.

Remember? My soul magnifies the Lord and the spirit rejoices in God, my Savior. That was how Mary's song began.

she had it hard, not easy, and we, further down the line, should not expect anything different for ourselves.

[27 : 33] No disciples will be shielded from pain in some form or other. Which raises the question, doesn't it, of what kind of a year we're expecting in 2005?

Christmas, as far as the world is concerned, has become a time of whooping it up in all sorts of ways, a few days of escapism, really, from life and its burdens and its pressures.

For most people, the Christ has gone out of Christmas, and Christmas is a few days of getting away from the strain and the pain.

But for Christians, Christmas ought to be a time of realism about life when we are reminded of the sufferings, sufferings of Jesus, sufferings of Mary, sufferings that will come to us.

It's all part of the package of God's salvation. Oh, he will see us through, the Lord will walk with us by his Holy Spirit, he'll uphold us, and as I said, he will use the pain and the grief in extraordinary ways.

[29 : 05] He does that over and over again. But it won't be fun while it lasts. And who knows how it will be in the year 2005.

Jesus himself foretold that there would be wars and rumors of wars, and there would be earthquakes, and men's hearts would fail them for fear, just like on the news this morning.

What's in store for us here in cozy Vancouver in the year of grace 2005, we don't know. But God grant that as we go into the unknown of 2005, which may well be a very painful year for some of us, our dearest wish all the way will be as it was for Simeon, and as it was for Anna, the old lady who came in after Simeon had finished, and we're told was looking for the consolation of Jerusalem, and confirmed all his words by what she said, as it was for them, and as it had been for Mary all along, may it be for us that our dearest wish, yours and mine, is for the fulfillment of what we ask in the Lord's prayer.

Thy kingdom come in my life. Thy will be done in my life. life. That's what I'll seek.

That's what I'll look for. And that's the star that I'll steer by. Thy way, not mine, O Lord, says the hymn.

[31 : 13] However dark it be, lead me by thine own hand. Mark out my path for me. Smooth may it be, or rough, it will be still the best.

Winding or straight, it leads right onward to thy rest. I dare not choose my lot. I would not if I might.

Lead me by thine own hand, then I shall walk aright. Amen. God bless us all. Gill.

God bless us what you said to me. Yes. Dear to all set. crimine our salty, goo Dass. God bless you at olha.

Lot's blood. Together I get it out of the blood. Eugene. Hello. God bless you.

[32 : 16] May wish you God bless you. May wish you your best. God bless you.■■■■ I