

My Eyes Have Seen Salvation

Rev. David Horton

December 29, 2019

Luke 2:22-32

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 turtledoves 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.” Luke 2:22-32 (NRSV)

Would you pray with me? Loving God, we pray that you would open up our ears that we might hear you today. And open up our hearts so we might receive you today. God, please open up our eyes that we might see you. Open up our mouths that we might proclaim you. God, please open up our hands that we might be doers of your word and not hearers only. And, God, please move our feet so we might walk in your way all week along. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

It is the Sunday after Christmas and somehow [the radio station] 99.1 is still playing holiday music. Actually I had to re-write the entire opening of the sermon because I've really thought they'd be done by now. I turned it on on the 26th, and they're still going strong! They've been playing holiday music since November 18th of this year. That's a tenth of the year!

Imagine working for one of those radio stations like 99.1 and you've played "Jingle Bell Rock" 10,000 times since Thanksgiving. And Christmas comes and goes. And you have to play that thing again. Also, you have to tell people you like it.

The only way that radio stations like that can keep playing Christmas music over and over again is because people keep making covers of the same original songs. A cover of course is a remake of an original song, and when you think about it, there are only a handful of original Christmas songs. So they think that they'll just keep making covers of these things. It's not like 99.1 is playing different songs all day; they're actually playing different covers of the same songs all day long. For example, Taylor Swift has a cover out for "Santa, Baby." That came out in 1953 and there's like a new cover every year. The band Cold Play has a cover out of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" and that came out in 1943. It's like there's a new cover every year. Everyone who makes a cover of an original song put their own unique spin on it, their own take on it. It's still the same basic song.

Listen, in the New Testament there's really only one song, and what we have from all these different writers and characters in the New Testament are different covers, different spins on this one original song. And here it is - Jesus is the Savior. Jesus is the Savior. That's the basic song, the basic proclamation of the New Testament. Really the same song that the church has been saying for 2000 years, we've never released new music. This is it. Jesus is the Savior.

We celebrate Christmas, friends, because Christmas is like the release date of this new song into the world. Whenever an artist releases new music we say, "they have dropped new music." That is the release date when they "drop new music." Christmas is like when God drops new music into the world. It's the first time anyone has ever said that Jesus is the Savior. Christmas is our release date.

The Christmas story really is a collection of covers of this one song. The Angel Gabriel shows up to Joseph one day and probably scares the poor guy out of his mind. He tells Joseph, "Hey, you're going to name this child Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." The choir of angels shows up in the middle of the night to the shepherds and probably scares them, too. They say, "Unto you is born this day in the City of David, a Savior."

When Mary finds out she's pregnant she has to run away from her home town of Nazareth. She's an unwed pregnant teenaged girl in a culture that does not look kindly upon unwed pregnant teenaged girls. She goes south into the hill country, to her cousin Elizabeth's house.

Elizabeth welcomes her and takes her in and comforts her. She reminds her of what kind of child she's carrying, and Mary rejoices saying, "My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God *my Savior*."

Zechariah the priest is one day visited by an angel - it's biggest day of his life when he's making the sacrifices inside the temple. The angel tells him, "Hey, your wife is going to give birth to a son, and you will name him John." This is John the Baptist. Then the angel goes on, "This child will bring knowledge of salvation to his people."

The name Jesus itself also means "God saves." Jesus is the Savior, and friends, that is our song. That's our song and everything we do and everything we say as Christians is a cover of that one song. You're a cover artist. We're all cover artists here, making covers of this song by our lives, by the way we live. Jesus is the Savior.

We read our Scripture today from Luke chapter 2 and it's the tradition to read it on the Sunday after Christmas. This is the only chance we get to hear it in the life of the church. It's about this prophet named Simeon. And who's Simeon? That's a hard question to answer because this is the only time we get to hear about him in the four gospels. It's the only time he shows up. He's from Jerusalem, and he's approaching death and knows it. He knows that God made a promise to him that he would look upon the Savior with his own eyes before he has to meet his Maker. So he's been on the lookout for the Savior his entire life. Every day he'd be going in and out of the temple, looking for this Savior.

Essentially, Simeon is all of us at 11:59 p.m. on Christmas Eve. It's been a long month of day one of Advent and Simeon's had a long life. But he has a promise, and it's the same promise we have at 11:59 p.m. on Christmas Eve. At least we get to see the Savior. He's on his way.

Every time I read this story, and every time I teach it, I think about all of the babies who Simeon has seen in his life, going in and out of the temple. Babies who *could have been* the Messiah. All of the possible baby Messiahs who could have been the one - but they weren't.

According to the Jewish law, every first-born baby boy had to be dedicated to the Lord. That meant that they were to be handled over to the temple and that boy was to grow up in the temple, work for the temple for the rest of his life. That was going to be his job since he was dedicated to the Lord's service and to the temple.

However, there was an "out clause" in the Jewish Law and it's called "Redeeming the Firstborn Son." You could buy that baby boy back. There was an appropriate sacrifice for that and if you couldn't afford that sacrifice, if you just didn't have the cash on you you could offer a pair of turtledoves or two pigeons. That's what Mary and Joseph did, so we know what kind of home they come from. They don't have much money stowed away. Mary and Joseph are in the temple that day in Jerusalem to buy back their baby boy so they can take him back home to Nazareth, this baby who one day will buy them back from sin and death. And I think about all the other thousands of young parents who've come through the temple to make this same sacrifice for hundreds of years. So he's seen these newborn babies and these young parents, and I bet he's gone up to hundreds of them thinking, "This is it. This is the one. This is the Messiah. This is the Savior, only to be let down time after time."

Finally he's not let down. This one is the one, and I wonder today, what makes this baby different? How is Mary and Joseph's baby different? When you think about it, what makes this one baby born on the other side of the planet 2000 years ago to people we would never have heard of... what makes him different?

Do you know how many babies are born every year? In 2017 it was 130 million. That is 250 babies a minute. That's a lot of babies. What makes this one different, this one baby out of those 250 born every minute - this one just happens to be the Savior, the one that Simeon and all of us have been looking for. He's it!

Now what does this mean the Sunday after Christmas? Friends, here's my prayer for you today - for your family and for my family. I really want Christmas to happen to you today and every day in 2020. And it can and I hope it does.

Christmas happens to Simeon, even though it's not really Christmas Eve or Christmas day for him. Actually according to custom, you would dedicate the firstborn male on the eighth day of that baby's life when you would bring him to the temple. It wasn't Christmas Eve or Christmas day, you were eight days removed from that. Still, Christmas happened to the man. I really want Christmas to happen to you.

So what does that look like? We have to talk about what happened on Christmas. Well, the first thing, God came *to us*. The idea is that there was a time when God was not here. God was somewhere up there. God was at least somewhere else.

Christmas means God came to us - to you. That doesn't mean that God isn't up there, too. You know how when you place an order on Amazon you have your billing and your shipping address, and they may not be the same thing. Well, what Christmas means is that God's billing address may be up there in heaven but here this is God's shipping address. This is God's physical address. Here is God's permanent residence - with you, in your home, with your family. You are where God gets God's packages. God has come to you.

Now what does that mean for us? What's the big deal?

You know that Christmas is a really big deal for us who are not okay, who are not *fine*, and who need help. That's how we start normal conversations. We say, "Hey, how are you?" and we respond, "I'm fine." Well, what if you're not fine this Christmas, this New Year? Maybe Christmas has come and gone and you're not fine. You need help. I want you to know that help has come to you.

We all have times in our lives when we need somebody who loves us enough to bring the help to us, when we cannot get to the help. Who will bring the coffee to us? Who will bring the casseroles and groceries to us? Who will hop in the car at a moment's notice and bring the help to us? We can't expect anyone to go to the help; the help's got to come to you. God cares enough about you to bring the help to you.

On Thursday of last week just before Christmas, my wife Brandy was involved in a pretty serious car accident on the Westpark Tollway. She's okay and so's the other guy. He hit her from behind, spun her out into a ditch. It's just one of those things that you wonder how everyone walked away, but they did.

My wife called 911 first and then she called me. As you can imagine she was really shaken up, and really upset. She asked of me on the phone: "Hey, I need you to go to Caroline's Christmas Party at school." We have a two-and-a-half-year-old daughter named Caroline and she's here in the St. Luke's Day School. That day they were having their little toddler Christmas party at school, she was on her way here and I was going to meet her here. Well, now she can't go, so she wanted at least one parent to show up.

I told her, "Honey, I really think I need to go to you." So I got on the phone and called one of our best friends, Katie Montgomery Mears, who's one of the pastors here, and she went to the party in our absence. That way Caroline had kind of a parent there.

Here's the point. I have two girls: I have a wife and I have a daughter, and in that moment, I really needed the help to go to them. They were not going to get to the help, even if they wanted to. They needed the help to go to them.

My little girl didn't know what was going on. She didn't ask or expect this help. She didn't know why this help showed up; help just came to her. Christmas means that help has come to you for those times when you need it and for those times when you don't. It's there. It's not that the help is on the way, the help is here. For you and your family.

Here's a second thing today. Christmas means that God has come to us so that God could be *with us*. We say on Christmas that Christ is Emmanuel, which means God is with us. And that, too, may not seem like a huge deal. What does God's near presence do for us? What does it matter that God is present with us?

I was having a conversation with my wife this week and I'm trying to convince her to leave up the Christmas tree all year round. It would save us a lot of time at Thanksgiving. Here's the deal - I really like the way a house feels with a Christmas tree present in it. The place just feels different. I like it. Something changed in our life together when this thing was present in our lives.

This year was a big year for our family in that this, for the first time, people had come to us for the holidays. We had my in-laws at our house for Thanksgiving. My life was different with my in-laws in it. Our lives have a way of changing when someone or something comes into our lives just to be with us, to be present with us. The mere presence of someone or something can make all the difference in our lives.

I want to do something different today. You're going to hear an audio clip and the first thing you're going to hear is the voice of a teenaged girl. She's just won a competition to sing the national anthem at an NBA playoff game. Then you're going to hear a man's voice. His name is Maurice Cheeks and he was the head coach of the Portland Trailblazers at the time. And you'll hear why he's in the Hall of Fame.

[Tape - Girl starts singing national anthem, misses lines and coach helps her complete it]

That's like myself - the poor guy can't sing! But he's not there to help her sing better, he's just there to help her sing. When you see this on YouTube, he gets up off the bench - remember, he's a professional NBA coach - and he puts his arm around her, and he stays with her for the entire song. Singing *with* her. He doesn't want to help her sing better, he just wants to be there to

help her get through it. It is his presence in her life that makes all the difference for her. It is his solidarity. His presence, his "with-ness" changes her life and makes all the difference.

In the church we talk a lot about witnessing to others. Christmas is about a "with-nessing" where at Christmas, God "with-nessed" to us. God is still "with-nessing" to you. And there's nothing that would make God want to "with-ness" to you any less or really any more. God's already "with-nessing" to you, to everyone. You may have not asked for it, or even know it, God is still "with-nessing" to you. It's God's "with-nessing" that can make all the difference in your life and in the life of your family and if you let it, into the life of the world.

Here's the third thing. Christmas means God is now going out from us. God came to us so that God could be with us, and so that God could go out from us.

The prophet Simeon in our passage today says that this Christ child would grow up to be a light and a revelation to the gentiles. "Glory to his people Israel." That word glory - comes from the Greek *doxa* and it simply means *glow*. It's that word for light whenever it glows and has a radiance around something, for that halo effect around our lights. It's the word for light going out, light just has to go out. That's *doxa*, glory.

On Christmas we say that Jesus is God Incarnate, that the fullness, the light of God is *in* this person. It's not like this light can just stay tied up inside of him. It just has to go out. This baby just has to glow, the light has to go out. It can't stay in. It can't help it. And the open secret on Christmas Eve is that the light from the Christ candle went into you, too and now you really can't help but glow. You can't help but take this light and turn it inside out.

On Christmas Eve we go to church and we hand you these little candles. We light them up during Silent Night. This felt different for us at Gethsemane this year and let me tell you why.

On March 10 of this year there was a 14-year-old boy named Brian and he was stabbed and murdered a block from Gethsemane at a gas station across the street from a middle school. To make matters worse, it was another 14-year-old boy who did it. That Sunday afternoon we had a prayer vigil for both families, and for the entire community, in our sanctuary at Gethsemane. I was expecting just a few people, maybe 20 to show up. Hundreds of people came. It was standing room only. We'd never seen most of these people before. They were from the community. At the end of the service, we left the building and kind of formed a caravan or a parade. We walked down the sidewalk and we handed everyone a candle, the exact same candles that we would in a few months hand out on Christmas Eve. We paraded to the site of the

violence. We lit those candles and lifted them up in the air like a torch. We said a prayer and here's why. It was our way of reclaiming that space back from the darkness and putting light back on the throne again. It was our way of pushing back the darkness from that space. It was our way of putting the darkness back in its place. It has no place there anymore, that place doesn't belong to the darkness anymore. It belongs to that light.

On Christmas the light of the world has come into the world and to you and me. You know where you and I come in? We're to be those torch bearers, showing the darkness where it does not belong. We're to be those torch-bearers pushing the darkness back, putting the light on the throne again in this world. The light cannot help but go out, it just does.

That's why we're renovating our children's wing over at Gethsemane so that we can have a preschool there next year. It will be free of charge for those families in the neighborhood who need it. It's because the light that's in us just has to go out. It just can't stay tucked up within a curtain. It has to go out.

That's why we gave all our offering from Christmas Eve this year to Amazing Place. It's because the light from the Christ candle on Christmas Eve can't stay within the walls of this church. It just has to go out, it can't help it.

Friends, I want you to know that the real candle on Christmas Eve was you. It was you - and me. The light that the darkness cannot overcome you got it, and all you have to do the rest of the year is glow.

Let us pray. *Eternal God, you are the light of the world. Help us not to hide your light under a bushel but help us to be like a city on a hill, shining your light into the darkness. May it make a change in our lives, may it push the darkness out of our own hearts. And through us help us to shine your light into the darkest corners of this world. Help us to glow. We pray this in the name of Jesus, Amen.*