SIMEON SAYS

Luke 2:22-40

December 27, 2020

Guilford Park Presbyterian Church

In a certain town, there lived two brothers, 8 and 10 years old, who were exceedingly mischievous and always getting into trouble. Their parents were at their wits’ end trying to control them. So, they decided to ask their minister to talk to the boys. The minister agreed, and he asked to speak to the youngest boy first. So, the mother sent him to the minister’s office.

The minister sat the boy down across his huge desk. For about five minutes they just sat there and stared at one another. Finally, the minister pointed his forefinger at the boy and asked him: “Where is God?” The boy looked all around but said nothing.

Again, louder, the minister pointed at the boy and asked: “Where is God?” Again, the boy said nothing. A third time, in a yet louder voice, the minister leaned across his desk, putting his finger almost to the boy’s nose, and asked: “Where is God?”

The boy panicked and ran from the office and hurried home. Finding his older brother, he dragged him upstairs to their room and into the closet, and then said to his brother: “We are in BIG trouble.” The older brother asked: “What do you mean, BIG trouble?”

And his little brother replied: “God is missing, and they think we did it!”

Well, God is surely not missing on this First Sunday of Christmas in our church’s liturgical year. We have had to curtail many of the ways in which we celebrate the opposite – which is the coming of God into the world as a flesh and blood human being. But God is not missing. God is with and within us all. This is a fundamental message in our holy Scripture and in our faith: God is with us as Creator in the beginning and sustainer throughout the time frame of our Bible; God is with us as Jesus, called “Emmanuel,” which means “God with us;” and God is with us as the reality of the Spirit of God dwelling within our very souls. God is not missing – whether we have awakened to God’s presence yet, or not. God is with and within us all – and today we read of that fundamental truth in the story of Simeon, who says in so many words that this baby born on Christmas day is the real presence of God in our world.

And Simeon says that this real presence of God is the “salvation” for our world. This, I believe, is the true meaning of salvation. That is, salvation is the real presence of God in our world, here and now – not in some future escape into heaven. And we receive that salvation when we wake up to it – when we wake up to the reality of the real presence of God. We then foster that salvation in and for our world when we do something about it – when we take what I am calling today “right action” as children of God, as ambassadors of the love of God. Wake up to divine presence and then do something about it – that, is salvation.

So, that is the gist of what I want to talk about today in this sermon, based upon our lectionary text for today from Luke. I want to talk about: (1) divine presence; and (2) right action. Think of it as a game of “Simon Says,” except in this case, it is “Simeon Says,” in which we take right action on the basis of the truth of what “Simeon Says.”

And this is what Simeon says: “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.”

What Simeon says appears in our hymnal, #545, as “The Song of Simeon.” It has come to be known as the “Nunc Dimittus,” Latin for “now dismissed,” and has been part of the regular prayers of the church since the 4th century. The context for what Simeon says in our text is Simeon’s encounter with Jesus in the temple at Jerusalem.

Jesus is there in the temple because Mary and Joseph have brought him there in order to present him to the Lord. They are following and obeying their own Jewish law, as stated in Exodus 13: “The Lord said to Moses: Consecrate to me all the firstborn.” And Mary herself is there for her purification following the birth of Jesus – again following and obeying their own Jewish law, as stated in Leviticus 12. You can look that up if you are interested. In any case, Mary and Joseph and Jesus go to the temple in obedience to Jewish law.

Not much is known about Simeon, other than he is a man of Jerusalem who is “righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel.” According to Luke, the “Holy Spirit” rested on Simeon, and had revealed to Simeon that he would not see death before he had seen the Messiah.

Note as an aside, if you will, the central role of the Holy Spirit in the action of this story. The Holy Spirit is an important character in Luke’s gospel – and an even more so in Luke’s book of Acts – in which he tells the story of the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost – well after this story about Simeon. Luke, as all gospel writers do, writes on two levels: from his own context – some 50 years after the time of Jesus – as well as at the context of the actual time of Jesus. So, Luke is quite familiar with – and surely experiences himself – the “Holy Spirit” – and it plays an important role in his gospel.

So, Luke has this “Holy Spirit” lead Simeon into the temple to meet Jesus. For Simeon, God is no longer missing. God is right there nestled in his arms. Simeon then recognizes for the reader of the gospel who this child born to Mary really is. This child is divine presence – the real presence of God in the world – for everyone – for both Gentiles and the people of Israel. The purpose of this story in Luke is to proclaim that truth.

The story also points to some of the ramifications of that truth – for example, Simeon saying that a sword would pierce Mary’s soul – likely a reference to the crucifixion of Jesus. And people would oppose and deny Jesus – during his lifetime – and beyond – even to our day.

Nevertheless, God is not missing. Sometimes we are – but God is not. And God calls us – to be sure – to live our lives in divine presence – and to take right action, as I put it earlier, as children of God.

So, what is this “right action” about which I speak? In a word: love. In a phrase: The Great Commandment. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” a lawyer asks Jesus later in the gospel of Luke. (“Inheriting eternal life” is but another way of saying “achieving salvation” – and, you may remember, I am defining salvation as awakening to divine presence, here and now, not escaping to heaven sometime in the future.) “So, what must I do?” asks the lawyer.

Well, mister lawyer, the first thing you must do is wake up to divine presence. That is how you “inherit eternal life.” The next thing you must do is take right action – which is this: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

That is right action. And, according to Jesus, everything else one does, or says, or even thinks, is to be grounded in this “right action” of love.

The apostle Paul also offers many examples of right action. For example, Paul writes to the Philippians, and, by extension, of course, to you and to me: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit. In humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”

Paul also writes to the Colossians about right action: “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

Now, that is right action – in response to awakening to divine presence – which is salvation – which is, as Simeon says, what God “has prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

So, all this is what I hear in the context of the Song of Simeon in our lectionary text for today from Luke. I believe that the fundamental concept in this text is divine presence – the awakening to which is salvation. And I propose that the contemporary application of that concept is right action, based on love. Our life as followers of Jesus the Christ is a game of “Simeon says,” in which we take right action on the basis of the truth of what “Simeon Says.” Let us hear what Simeon says – and respond – this day and every day.

Let us pray: God who is Love: open our eyes to see you; open our ears to hear you; and open our hearts and minds to know you, with and within us all – energizing in us all our words and actions of love. Dismiss us now – in peace. In the love of Christ, we pray. Amen.