

Advent 1, 2016

Salvation Through a Babe

St. Andrew's Church, Jacksonville, Or

Matthew 21:1-13

By Rev. Mr. Bill Baker

“Then Jesus sent two disciples, saying unto them, Go into the village over against you, and straightway ye shall find an ass tied, and a colt with her: loose them, and bring them unto me...And the disciples went, and did as Jesus commanded them, and brought the ass, and the colt, and put on them their clothes, and they set him thereon. And a very great multitude spread their garments in the way; others cut down branches from the trees and strawed them in the way.” (Matt. 21:2,6-8)

Hmmm. Today's reading seems out of place for the first Sunday in Advent. You would think that in starting the new church year, our focus would be on themes surrounding Elizabeth, Zacharias and their son John the Baptist, Herod and the kings of the east and of course Mary, Joseph and the birth of Jesus. It does seem strange to have our first gospel reading this Advent season, concern an event that comes so close to the end of Jesus' life...and maybe that's the point. The human race has always been intrigued with the future and Advent is about looking forward, looking to the future...looking toward end times. Biblical prophecy has always been a defining force keeping the conversation about Christ and salvation alive...we could even say that prophecy is God's voice opening the hearts of the faithful. After all, it is Old Testament prophecy that identifies who the Messiah would be.

So, to start our Advent season this year, I would like to once again, as I did two years ago, take us on a journey. I would like us to go back in time to look at a future event that has, for us, already taken place. We will once again be looking through the eyes of Simeon. Do you remember Simeon? He is described in the Gospel of Luke as a man 'just' and 'devout' waiting for the consolation of Israel...the Comforter. The Holy Ghost came upon him and revealed to him that he would not see death until he had seen the Saviour. Soon afterwards, while he was in the temple, Joseph and Mary came with Jesus to satisfy local customs and that which pertained to the law. The infant Jesus is placed in Simeon's arms and by the Holy Spirit, Simeon recognizes God's salvation through this tiny babe. In blessing God for this gift, Simeon speaks these words: (see if they don't ring a bell). *“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: for mine*

eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou has prepared before the face of all people; A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.”
(Luke 2:29-32, Nunc dimittis 1928 BCP)

The Holy Spirit opened the eyes of Simeon’s mind to see the consolation of Israel and the Salvation of the world. Advent is a time to look at end times, to focus our minds on the future and what it may hold. For Simeon it was the end of wondering, of not knowing when the Messiah would come. For us, we can see in hindsight the Salvation of the world gained by the birth of Jesus. But, for those of that day, they had not the luxury of hindsight and many missed the sign, but Simeon, having the luxury of foresight, did not miss the promised prophecy come to light. But, what did he see? We are not given any insights as to what it was that opened Simeon’s eyes but, we do know that Simeon died knowing the prophecies of the coming messiah were accomplish in the babe that lay in his arms.

So, I am going to ask you to put yourselves in Simeon’s place; sitting in the Temple over 2000 years ago with the baby Jesus resting in your arms; the Holy Spirit guiding your mind to see the salvation of the world. So, let us step back in time to witness this salvation unleashed.

The consolation of Israel and the saviour of the world rests in your arms. How old do you think this babe is? Only days right? After 8 days he is circumcised and after the proper amount of time for Mary’s purification Jesus is presented at the temple. It is a baby that lay in your arms...at this point in His earthly life do you believe he knows all things...does He know that he is God Almighty? I am confident that, although Jesus was born divine, it would take His humanity some time to grasp this realization. Mary and Joseph know the truth but, they cannot predict the path that lay ahead and Jesus will have to overcome many obstacles and temptations. It is hard to imagine but, Jesus has much to learn at this point...He cannot yet even walk. And it is here, early on in the life of Jesus, that the biblical narrative demands we flash ahead 12 years, the early childhood of Jesus left to mystery and legend.

“And when he was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem after the custom of the feast. And when they had fulfilled the days, as they returned, the child Jesus tarried behind in Jerusalem; and Joseph and Mary knew not of it.” (Luke 2:42-43)

Now we come to a pivotal point in Jesus' life; the humanity of the babe that you are holding is maturing rapidly. He is divinely predisposed to the Father's Will and by the guidance of the Holy Spirit He is closing in on the ultimate truth of who he is. After three days, a frightened and worried Mary and Joseph find Jesus in the temple...not only listening, but speaking in answer to the questions of the temple teachers. Joseph and Mary, in their sorrow, lash out at Jesus, "*Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously* (Luke 2:48). ...How would expect a 12 year old boy to respond to a worried mother's inquiry? Listen to a 12 year old Jesus, "*...How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my fathers house*" (Luke 2:49)? It's not a claim to Kingship but, something is happening...Jesus is, at the least, realizing there is something more going on, something more crucial to His existence. And we know as we read on that "*his mother kept all these things in her heart.*"

After this small glimpse into Jesus' childhood the biblical narrative skips once again, this time approximately 18 years to a very mature Jesus. The babe you are holding is now entering his thirtieth year and the evidence that He knows who He is, is everywhere. By the power of the Holy Spirit Jesus is healing multitudes of sick people, bringing the dead back to life, feeding thousands from mere morsels. Can He deny who He is at this point? And the most outright admission came through Jesus' own words in response to Peter's claim: "*He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am : And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.*" (Matt. 16:15-17) Jesus knows who he is...

And now, from our reading today, we see the babe that lay in your arms once again entering Jerusalem, but this time riding on an ass. Garments are being thrown on the road, branches are being cut and laid in the Way. Is this a man or a king? What does all this mean! Christ enters Jerusalem not as a king but as a servant in all humility...riding on an ass without possessions; trampling underfoot the garments and branches that symbolize two opposing sides of the same coin; On one side trampling down faithless nations, and on the other, covering the true path with the branches of grace given to those whose sins are covered. In the Garden, Adam and Eve's sin was covered by branches from the fig tree... and for us...our sins are covered by laying down our garments and the coverings once given to us, now represented by the palms laid down on the true path that Jesus treads.

Every beginning has an end. Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming of a messiah ended with the birth of Jesus and the words of St. Paul should be resounding in our hearts, *“And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness and let us put on the armour of light. Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provisions for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof.”* (Romans 13:11-14).

Every beginning has an end and Christ being the end of Old Testament prophecies is now the beginning of new prophecies concerning the last things as we ready ourselves, not for a babe in a manger, but a King who now wears a crown! Let us have eyes to see as Simeon so long ago. It was his undeniable faith that opened his eyes to see what others could not. When we look at the first biblical prophecy recorded in Genesis 3:15, when our Lord is speaking to Satan, we can see how far we have come, *“And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.”* Here we see the stage set for the future of mankind’s history and its relationship with the divine. The road has not been easy, nor is it over, but at the end of all things we can find the words in the final chapter of the book of Revelation very comforting, *“I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last. Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city”* (Revelation 22:13-14). Jesus...the Tree of Life. May we too have eyes filled with the light of Christ as we acknowledge that biblical prophecy is not something of the past, but a way in which God still speaks to those of faith.

Jesus Christ comes not to conquer by force as earthly kings, but by love, grace, mercy, through His own sacrifice for His people. His is not a kingdom of armies and splendor, but of lowliness and servant-hood. He conquers not nations, but hearts and minds. His message is one of peace with God. If Jesus has made a triumphal entry into our hearts, He reigns there in peace and love. As His followers, we exhibit those same qualities, and the world sees the true King living and reigning in triumph within each of us.

This first Sunday in Advent reminds us to look for last things...end times and prophetic announcements. Yes, death has entered the world. But!!! Look through Simeon's eyes as he glimpses the Salvation found in that babe...God has bailed us out...He has found a way to pay the price for our freedom...and through the blood of Jesus we have eternal life! Lay down your garments...spread forth those branches...prepare ye the way of the Lord. Open your hearts to see prophecy unveiled before your very eyes and may this season of Advent open those eyes to see the Salvation of your souls. That babe you are holding...now carries the burdens of the world and is too heavy for you to hold in your arms any longer...but not to worry...he now carries you in his.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.