

January 9, 2022

**The Gospel of Luke**  
**VI. My Eyes Have Seen Your Salvation**  
**Luke 2:21-40**

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So, Christmas is now well and truly over. There used to be one home in a neighborhood next to ours which kept the Christmas lights on and the Christmas decorations up until well into February – March, once or twice. But they were gone when I drove by this past Wednesday evening. Maybe the folks who lived in that house and who so obviously loved Christmas have moved on, to a new home or to their heavenly home. But I always admired their determination to hang onto Christmas for as long as they could. And I always liked the visual reminder their lit-up trees and eaves provided amid the dark January nights that the One who is the Light of Christmas really does continue to shine amid the darkness – and that the darkness shall never overcome that Light. I'm really going to miss that house's hold-out and hold-on Christmas lights this year.

But even if our celebration of Christmas is over for this year, in truth, the work of Christmas for this new year has only just begun. I've always loved that anthem our choir sings most every Christmas season, including this past one – the one featuring the beautiful words of Howard Thurman:

*When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among brothers,  
To make music in the heart.<sup>1</sup>*

Even if our celebration of Christmas is over, the work of Christmas now begins. I love the words of that anthem and the hope and truth they proclaim in response to our Savior's birth.

But this year my deepest inspiration about this season after Christmas has come from a different place than either Thurman's poem or that house of February Christmas lights. I like to read sermons by other preachers as a regular part of my morning devotionals. And this December,

I was reading through a wonderful series of sermons by Richard Lischer, professor emeritus of preaching at Duke Divinity School. And one passage from one of his sermons caught me up in early December and hasn't let go of me yet. Let me read that passage to you:

*And now we come to the hardest work of Christmas. What, you thought the hard work was done? You thought the hard work was finished in choosing the gifts, baking the cookies, cleaning the house, watching the diet, and otherwise surviving what one journalist calls "our annual ordeal of fun"? You thought the hard work was getting yourself or someone you love through the loneliness of this season that is only magnified by its artificial gaiety? You thought the hard work was reassembling your family like a stubborn jigsaw puzzle in the hope that all the pieces would fit together and stay together, if only for two or three days?*

*No, the hardest work of Christmas is believing that it's all true.<sup>2</sup>*

"The hardest work of Christmas is believing that it's all true." I've been thinking and thinking about what he means by that. And I think I've finally got it figured out. He is not talking about believing in the theological affirmations that we make about Christmas – the ones we say together each Sunday: ". . . was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary . . ." Lischer is not talking about mere intellectual assent to the doctrines of Christmas when he speaks of "believing that it's all true".

What he is talking about is believing that it's all true at the level of how we live, in what we hope, and in whom we trust with our lives. He's talking about letting the coming of Christ at Christmas actually penetrate into our innermost self – that thing at the core of us that is the essence of who we are, of what we understand our lives to be for, of how we see the world and our place within it. And how, finally, we come to live out the connection God has now made between our life in this world and God's world which is to come. Believing that it's all true in the far deeper sense of being willing to live as if it were all true.

Let me come at this another way, using a story from the life of that great launcher of the Reformation, Martin Luther. This story also comes from Lischer's sermon:

*It is Christmas Day 1521. Martin Luther is too sick to go to church. So, a group of parishioners goes to his house, where he preaches the Christmas gospel with incomparable power and beauty. In it he retells the story in the idiom of his day, rendering Mary and Joseph and the shepherds as down-to-earth and ordinary as a group of German peasants.*

*Then he deftly magnifies the simple scene and gives it cosmic significance. He asks us to imagine the Christ child in a manger bathed in light at the center of an otherwise darkened stage. The manger is surrounded by enemies and the forces of evil. "All else is darkness," he says dramatically, "save for this child." Then, as*

*if to pierce the veil that always exists between the storyteller and his audience, he leans into his listeners, including us, and issues a challenge: “Now, if this is all true, and it is true, let everything else go.”*<sup>3</sup>

*“All else is darkness, save for this child . . . Now, if this is all true, and it is true, let everything else go.”* That’s what it means to believe Christmas is true. It is, in the words of Christ Jesus Himself, to begin seeking *“first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness.”*<sup>4</sup> It means to start taking His yoke upon ourselves and learning from Him how to live.<sup>5</sup> It means, as Paul puts it, that we cease allowing ourselves to be carelessly conformed to this world around us, and instead to take up ways of living and thinking and being transformed by this encounter we have had with the Lord of the true and eternal world, that world which is to come.<sup>6</sup> And it is, above all else, again as our Savior put it, to take up our cross and to follow Him<sup>7</sup> – follow Him in His Way of living, according to the Truth of His teaching, in ever deeper desire to possess that gift He promises of Life, His Life.<sup>8</sup>

But perhaps you, like me, need a little more practical guidance as to what this would actually look like – a little more down at the level of our daily life example of what this would look like, this believing it’s all true, this letting go of everything else, this seeking first the Kingdom of our Christ. In which case, we are in luck. Because we meet in our Scripture lesson this morning two very fine real-life demonstrations of what truly believing in Christmas looks like – Simeon and Anna.

Mary and Joseph have come to the Temple in Jerusalem, with their infant child along with them, in order to accomplish two important rites. The first is Mary’s rite of purification, forty days after childbirth, as commanded in Leviticus 12. And the second rite is the presentation and redemption of their first-born child before God, as outlined in Exodus 13 and Numbers 18. But no sooner have they finished these rites when they are approached by an elderly man. He asks if he might hold their child – and perhaps something about the gleam in his eyes and the obvious joy written upon his face must have convinced Mary and Joseph to that it was safe to let him do so. And this old man, whose name was Simeon, cradles their child in his arms and then pronounces over Him an extraordinary blessing:

*Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,  
according to your word;  
for my eyes have seen your salvation  
that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
and for glory to your people Israel.*

And in those words, in that oracle of blessing, we find our cue as to what believing in the truth of Christmas really means, really can look like in a human life.

*“Lord, now let your servant depart in peace.”* Simeon had been promised by God that he would not die until he had seen God’s promised Messiah, the Savior of Israel, the Savior of all the nations. *“Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word – for my eyes have*

*seen your salvation.*” Peace, depart in peace. This is what believing in Christmas looks like, most of all, in a human life – peace.

The peace that comes from knowing God always keeps His promises. The peace that comes from knowing that God truly is now with us, always and in all things. The peace that comes from knowing that even though the world may look and seem unchanged and unsaved from day to day – knowing that, nonetheless, beneath it all, there is now the Divine Presence, the Divine Power, working quietly behind and beneath and within it all, bringing all things slowly but steadfastly in line with His eternal plan and purpose for salvation, for the restoration of all things. The peace that comes from knowing that God is now present in this world, in our lives, in every moment and in every circumstance, uniting us to Christ, uniting us in Christ, even now bringing all the things we must suffer and endure round to good.<sup>9</sup> And not letting anything, anything ever, separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.<sup>10</sup>

*“Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation.”* That’s what believing in Christmas, believing that it is all true, looks like in a human life on a daily basis. It looks like that attitude of peace, of assurance, and of joy we see in Simeon. It looks like having rested our lives, having rested our hopes and fears, having rested the whole of our life in this world, into the confidence that unto us really has been born a Savior – and that unto us has now been given the deep assurance that He really is already saving us and saving all things. The deep assurance, the unshakable confidence, the joyous peace of knowing day in and day out that *“all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”*<sup>11</sup>

To be able to live with that sort of serene confidence, that all-encompassing assurance and trust, that peace which surpasses all understanding – that is what it means to believe that Christmas is really true. Simeon and Anna both show us this – look at the joy on their faces, feel the contentment in their souls. *“Lord, now you can let your servant depart in peace.”* You know, there is a most interesting connection made in Scripture, and drawn in Christian thought, between Simeon’s prayer to now die in peace and our being able to lie down each night to sleep in peace, no matter what the worries of the day have been and no matter what fresh cares await us in the morning: *“Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep.”* Simeon, having now seen the Christ-child, having now received into his soul the full assurance that God is at work keeping His promises, keeping His Word, can depart this world in peace. But we, having also now seen the Christ-child and believing it all to be true, we can also now lay down our heads each night in that same peace and assurance – and for the very same reasons.

The Psalmist, Psalm 4, after recounting all sorts of difficulties and troubles and fears and worries, nonetheless says to God, *“In peace I will both lie down and sleep.”* And how can the Psalmist do so, in the midst of so many troubles? The very next line: *“For you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.”* When we know that God really is in control, when we really believe that His coming to us at Christmas means that nothing can now separate us from His love, when we are convinced by the life and death and resurrection of Jesus that God is not only capable of working all things round to good, but is even now at work in our lives and in this world doing precisely that – then we too, like Simeon, like the Psalmist, may in peace both lie down and sleep, in peace rise up and enter into the new day, whether in this world or in the next.

Tish Harrison Warren, whom many of you will remember from her time with us several years back after she had written a wonderful book about living out our faith in the ordinary activities of our daily lives, has now written a new book about finding the peace of Christ amid the dark moments of life. The book is entitled, Prayer in the Night – and I recommend it to you. In one section she describes a personal experience she had with this. She had gotten word that her father had had a massive heart attack while on a cruise ship in the Atlantic. She knew that he had survived, but it was very hard to get much more information than that. Finally, that evening, she learned that her father was going to be medically disembarked the next morning and transferred to a hospital in South America. But first, the ship was going to have to sail through the night to reach the port where all this could take place. And this is what she writes about that night:

*I remember lying in bed that night, thinking of my dad and mom rocking back and forth on a ship in the middle of the ocean. I knew I could not save them, visit them, or even call them. There was nothing I could do to make the ship move any faster. And with such a keen sense of my own powerlessness, I fell asleep quickly.<sup>12</sup>*

How in the world could she do that? How in the world, with such a great mortal worry hanging over her, could she fall asleep so easily and then sleep so peacefully through the night? This is the answer she gives – and it’s one Simeon could have given as well. And one we can also give once we have learned to believe that Christmas is really true. She says she was able to both lie down and sleep because she had long ago come to believe that:

*Each night, the revolution of planets, the activity of angels, and the work of God goes on just fine without us. For the Christian, sleep is an act of surrender – and a declaration of trust.<sup>13</sup>*

*“For unto to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”<sup>14</sup>* That is what Simeon and Anna illustrate for us about believing that this miracle of Christmas is really true – that it enables us to live in confidence, trust, serenity, and even joy, knowing that indeed we have a Savior. Knowing that because He has come to us, spoken to us, died for us, risen for us – that therefore *“all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”*

Or, to quote Richard Lischer one last time: *“Anyone can say it, dear friends. You don’t have to be a prophet or preacher, but only a person of faith: I have seen the future. And its name is Jesus.”<sup>15</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Thurman, “The Work of Christmas,” in The Mood of Christmas (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 23

<sup>2</sup> Richard Lischer, “The Dream of Arrival,” in Just Tell the Truth (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2021), p. 45.

<sup>3</sup> Lischer, p. 49.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 6:33.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 11:29.

<sup>6</sup> Romans 12:1-2.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 16:24.

<sup>8</sup> John 14:6.

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<sup>9</sup> Romans 8:28.

<sup>10</sup> Romans 8:35-39.

<sup>11</sup> Julian of Norwich, Showings (Paulist Press, 1978), p. 149.

<sup>12</sup> Tish Harrison Warren, Prayer in the Night (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), p. 91.

<sup>13</sup> Warren, p. 91.

<sup>14</sup> Luke 2:11.

<sup>15</sup> Lischer, "I Have Seen the Future," in Just Tell the Truth, p. 44.