



A God-Revealing Light

Luke 2:22-40 & Joshua 24:14-15
A sermon by William M. Klein

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14 "Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. **15** Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." (Josh. 24:14-15 NRSV)

22 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 **23** (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), **24** and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." **25** 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. **26** It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. **27** 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, **28** Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, **29** "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; **30** for my eyes have seen your salvation, **31** which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, **32** a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." **33** And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. **34** Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed **35** so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too." **36** There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, **37** then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. **38** At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. **39** When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. **40** The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him. (Lk. 2:22-40 NRSV)

1

What is your heart's deepest longing? Think carefully about that question because when you locate your deepest longing you also will have located your "god." Your words and mine may declare the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is our God...but unless God really is our deepest longing then we are deceiving ourselves.

So let me pose the question again. What is your heart's deepest longing? The first Sunday after Christmas is either the most peculiar or the most perfect time to ask what you want more than anything else in the world. A million dollars? Domestic bliss? A meaningful and rewarding job? The University of Alabama to win the national college

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football championship? Peace of mind? Happiness? Health? World peace? What is it you want more than anything else in the world?

When I was a boy my friends and I used to play the wishing game. The rules of the game were simple. We each simply had one wish...so we had to be very thoughtful. I remember thinking I was quite clever when my wish was that every wish I wished would come true.

Adults play the wishing game, too, don't we?...but not out loud. We keep our wishing to ourselves - not wanting to appear childish. Perhaps the major difference between childish and adult wishing is that we know we cannot merely say, "star light, star bright..." and have it magically come true... not even if we wish upon the Bethlehem star. Some effort on our part is necessary...some assembly required. We cannot wish for our children to be happy and healthy and well-adjusted if we never take the time to provide them fertile opportunities. We cannot in good faith wish our elected officials would practice greater civility when we don't. We cannot say much about our children's lack of interest in the church when our own involvement is half-hearted and sporadic. We cannot honestly wish others would be better Christians when we lack the maturity to live for Christ.

Wishing alone is not enough, is it? We must do our part. We must work so our wishes come true.

2

Believe it or not, people we read about in the Bible wished, too. Simeon was not too old or too sophisticated to wish. A simple, God-fearing man, he had but one overriding wish in life. Know what that was? He wanted above all else to see the Messiah with his own eyes. Why was this Simeon's one obsession? He believed that if the Messiah came, Israel would once again truly be God's people.

You may ask - what in the world did Simeon do to help make such a wish come true? He thoroughly committed himself to prayer. He did not simply wish upon a star and then go about his merry way. He committed himself to the task. Prayer and worship become his way of life.

Was this a fool's errand? In a sense, yes. Anyone who takes faith seriously is considered foolish. So, yes, he was a fool. Sure he was. There had been faithful Jews before Simeon who wished and prayed to see the Messiah and it never happened in their lifetime. There were people in Simeon's day who prayed to see the Messiah and yet rejected the Messiah when God sent him. Not everyone who commits her or himself body and soul to even a just and worthy wish has that wish come true. And yet...I suggest to you it was Simeon's commitment to pray for the coming of the Messiah that made it possible for him to recognize the Messiah when he came.

3

One day when he was very old, his wish came true. This is how it happened. Joseph and Mary brought their son, Jesus, to the temple for the Sacrifice of Purification. Just like thousands of other families of modest means who took their faith seriously... Joseph and Mary offered two turtledoves.¹ So, to the eyes of those who observed this familiar scene in the temple, they appeared as just another faithful family doing what the law required. They were not the kind of family anyone would have noticed.

But Simeon noticed. I'm sorry I can't tell you exactly how he noticed. Someone once told me that if Jesus literally stood before her she would know him in an instant. "How can you be so sure?" I asked her. "Very few people in Jesus' day realized who he was. What makes you think you'll know him beyond a shadow of a doubt?" She said, "Because God will make sure I know."

I don't think that is how it worked in Jesus' day and I don't think that is how it will work when he returns. I wish I could give you a failsafe method that will allow you to detect Christ's presence. But, what do I know...maybe she is right...because I don't know how else to explain Simeon.

Prompted, I suppose, by an impulse from the Spirit of God, Simeon followed Joseph, Mary, and the infant into the Temple where he took the boy into his arms. And that instant not only was his prayer answered...he knew his prayers had been answered. Here in his hands he held the consolation of Israel. He was happy - so happy, in fact, he was ready to die. Here is how he put it...

Now you (O God) can let your servant go in peace because my eyes have seen the salvation you have prepared for all the nations to see - a light to enlighten the pagans and the glory of your people Israel.²

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But before these words were out of his mouth he knew there was something unexpected about this boy. Jesus was not exactly what Simeon imagined. This child would not be the kind of Messiah he or anyone else expected. Jesus would be different. "Behold," Simeon said, "this child is set for the rise and fall of many in Israel..." He and everyone else expected the Messiah to cause the *rise* of all in Israel and the *fall* of everyone else.

This sudden revelation must have been a shock because as he held the boy in his arms, he realized the Messiah would not be who he expected him to be. At some level he was wise enough to realize Jesus would be far greater than he had ever imagined.

I remember well when Deb and I finally had our first child, Hannah was not what we had anticipated at all. I'm not sure I can say what we expected...but she was far more than we ever imagined. She was herself...entrusted with her own unique, God-giveness. She was not who we expected her to be...and that has been great joy to us.

A dilemma rested upon Simeon, though, a dilemma we all must face. Would he believe or not? If he allowed himself to believe Jesus was the Messiah this meant he had to accept the fact he had spent his life wanting and expecting the wrong thing. Could Simeon take such an enormous leap? Could he abandon what he'd always assumed and expected in order to make room for the real thing?

I can't help wondering how many times we've missed the Lord because we believed the Lord could only behave in a certain way, could only look a certain way, could only care about the programs we care about. In his book [American Gospel](#), Jon Meacham writes about religion's influence upon our nation...and about how our beliefs and priorities have influenced our religious beliefs.³ This student of history gives us an opportunity to see the degree to which over and over again we have allowed faith to be shaped and reshaped by the prejudices, fears, and desires of the day.

Some of you will remember the 1987 movie, *Wall Street*. The character played by actor Michael Douglas says: "Greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit." That observation made 25 years ago was meant to be a warning...but it seems to have become a mantra written into the fabric of American life.

Jon Meacham's insights are a challenge to every kind of religious certainty...and a call for a healthier dose of honesty and humility when it comes to defining what it means to be a person of faith. We need to be aware we read the Bible through glasses of a particular prescription. That prescription may well help us see some things very clearly... but it may also blind us to the Lord's presence right before our eyes. It may close our hearts to the Lord's purposes. We may be so sure about our views that we turn a deaf ear to the voice of one through whom Jesus chooses to speak to us. If Jesus stepped from the shadows into our midst would our expectations keep us from noticing him?

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Well...Simeon chose to believe the child in his hands was the One. Why did he make such a huge leap? A cynic may say - because he was getting old and this boy in his arms was his last hope. There may have been some truth to that. But it was also true that Simeon's commitment to pray for the coming of the Messiah may have helped him recognize the Messiah when he came. Perhaps it was his openness to God that allowed him to be open enough to receive even an unexpected Messiah.

We all have our own ideas about the faith and about the Lord. How important are your expectations - your presumptions - your preconceptions? Are you capable of setting them aside? Are you willing to let Jesus reshape your hopes and dreams according to his will? Are you willing to be the kind of disciples he calls you to be?

These are not just casual questions. These are the questions we should constantly shout in our sleep - and the ones we should take time to ponder as we enter a New Year.

Why? Why should we call our expectations into question? Because Jesus is the answer God gives to our deepest longings. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life...and unless we are willing to trust him more than our expectations and assumptions and personal desires, then we may not see him or love him or serve him. We may turn a deaf ear to the voice of the one through whom Jesus is speaking to us. Our eyes may well miss the salvation prepared for us by our great God.

What is your heart's deepest longing? What do you want more than anything else in the world? My prayer for you and me in the New Year is that we may answer as did Joshua when he said to his fellow Hebrew children after entering the promised land. "I don't know about you," he said, "but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."⁴ Amen.



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Endnotes:

¹ Bartlett, David L. & Taylor, Barbara Brown, ed. 2008. Feasting on the Word. Year B, Vol. 1. Louisville: WJK Press, 166. The Mosaic law required this ritual of coming to the temple and offering a sacrifice. Different sacrificial offerings were acceptable, depending on the parents' economic ability. In this case, given the modest, if not poor, circumstances of Mary and Joseph, the acceptable sacrifice was a pair of turtledoves.

² Jerusalem Bible translation of the text.

³ Meacham, Jon. 2006. American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation. NY: Random House.

⁴ Joshua 24:15.