

Looking Back and Looking Forward
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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.”*

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. 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 so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” — Luke 2:25-35, NRSV

Probably, as much as any time during the year, New Year's Day is one that is filled with symbolic acts and rituals. Some have suggested that because it is the first day of the year, we somehow think that what we do this day has symbolic value that predicts how the rest of the year will go. So, we do things like eating greens and black-eyed peas, or kissing someone we love at midnight, or some other symbolic act in the hope that our year will go well. For some of us, the ritual for the day is watching football games.

Even the name of this first month of the year has some symbolism related to the ending of the old year and the beginning of the new. The month of January was so named by Julius Caesar when he began a new calendar back in 46 BC. It is named for the Roman god, Janus, who is often pictured as having two faces. One face looks forward and one looks back – which some see as relating to the past and the future. You can see why it was chosen as the name of the first month that ends the old year and begins the new.

This also reminds me of when I taught my daughter to drive and I was preparing her for her driving test. It used to be that you just showed up, but now you have to make an appointment weeks in advance. As we were arriving at the place you take the driving test, I was giving her all of the last-minute advice you give – probably too much of it. I did tell her about one of the tricks I heard one driving instructor always tried with those taking the test. Before they started, the driving instructor would ‘accidentally’ hit the rearview mirror, observing if the person taking the test was paying enough attention to re-adjust the rearview mirror. He was even known to have flunked someone who failed to do this. The point was not only to pass the test, but to remember

how important it was to be able see, look in the rearview mirror to see behind you, as well as out the windshield to see in front. It is also a good life lesson as well.

We often see this same theme in the symbols of the old and new year represented by an old man and a baby. The symbol of the baby representing the New Year actually goes back to ancient times with the Greeks, the Egyptians, and then the Germans who brought it to this country. The old man represents the year that has just ended and the baby represents the year that is beginning.

Today's passage also tells the story of an old man and a baby. And while these two figures do not necessarily represent the ending of the old year and the beginning of the new, as we think about how we view our lives -- the end of another year of our lives and the start of a new year -- there may be something here to help us live our lives with a more faithful outlook.

The story takes place after the birth of Christ. It is how Luke brings the Christmas story to an end. Eight days after the birth of a Jewish male baby, he was brought to the temple to be circumcised. Then, forty days after the birth, the mother is to come to the temple for a ritual of purification because in the Jewish tradition, she was believed to be ritually "unclean" after birth until this ritual is performed. The ritual included bringing a sacrifice to the temple, normally a lamb; but if you did not have a lot of money, as Mary and Joseph did not, you could bring two turtledoves instead.

As Mary and Joseph approach the temple, an old man named Simeon is there, perhaps on the steps, and Luke tells us some interesting things about him. He is a righteous and devout man who has spent his life looking forward to the hope for Israel of the coming of the Messiah. Luke says the spirit of God rested on him and through this Holy Spirit, Simeon has been told that he will not die before he sees the Messiah. This day, the spirit of God has guided him to be at the temple at just the time that Mary and Joseph are bringing Jesus. Simeon sees the child, asks to hold him in his arms, and this old man offers a prayer to God because somehow, he knows that this baby is the Messiah.

His prayer is recorded in Luke's gospel. In the Latin Vulgate version of the Bible, it begins with the words "Nunc Dimittis." This prayer is referred to as the "Nunc Dimittis" – which means "Now dismiss . . ." in Latin. Because Simeon has now seen this baby, God is letting Simeon "off his post", so to speak and now he can depart or be dismissed in peace. Simeon also speaks of this baby as the hope for the whole world – Jews and Gentiles alike. But then he turns to bless Mary and Joseph, and he tells Mary some hard words – that this child will not only cause some to rise up, but cause others to fall. Also, that he will be a "sign" that will be opposed by others and that it will be painful being the mother of this child. These are all things that would be born out in the life of Christ.

In this one scene, we see an old man holding a baby and *looking back* at what has been promised to him through God's Spirit. We also see him *looking forward* to the hope that's to come. It is a symbol of someone who is looking back and looking forward. I wonder if Simeon helps us to think about how we look at our lives this first day of the New Year. It is a time that many of us find ourselves looking back and looking forward.

I don't know about you, but at the end of each year, I try to set aside time to look back over the year and review what has taken place in my life. I also do it as the pastor of this church and look over all that has happened in the life of the church – especially those good things that we have done together. Taking time to look back at the good and the bad of the previous year is an important thing to do, perhaps because it gives us a sense of what our lives are about. And it helps expand the foundation of our lives going forward.

The other side of this looking back and looking forward exercise is to take time to think about the New Year and what lies ahead of us. What new challenges will we face in our lives and in the life of this church? Where is God in all of that? What new things does God want us to do in our lives? What will the post-pandemic norm look like? What will return to normal and what will be changed forever? What do we hold on to and what do we let go of? Those kinds of questions are good to ask. But it is the balance of looking back and looking forward that allows us to see what God wants us to do in the present – in the here and now.

Here at Johns Creek Presbyterian Church, we may come from many different backgrounds. But those of us who come from a Presbyterian background may remember that one of the watchwords of that tradition is the phrase, “Reformed, yet always being reformed.” What it means is that in one sense, we live as those who have a past that shapes who we are today. We are spiritual descendents of those who have gone before us, and those understandings of the Christian faith and those who have gone before us shape who we are today. “Being reformed” honors the past.

Yet, “always being reformed” reminds us that we are not to get “stuck” in the past, always trying to get back to perceived “golden years” (that really weren't that “golden” if you look at them closely.) “Always being reformed” reminds us that God's Spirit was not just at work in the past but is still at work now in our lives and in our world, helping to shape us into the women and men God wants us to be. God is always doing “new things” in our lives and those new things bring dynamic change that keeps life moving forward. So past, present, and future are all spheres in which God's spirit works.

This morning, I want to invite each of us to think, first of all, about the year that has just come to a close – “#2020.” Later on, you may want to sit down with pen and paper or at the computer and simply list what has taken place in your life over the past year. Your list will probably have both good and bad things – most of our lists would. I want to invite you to take time to “bless” the good things in the past year that have been a part of your life. Thank God for them and see them for what they are – gifts from God.

Then, I want to invite you to look at the things that did *not* go the way you had hoped, and then simply to turn these over to God and let them go. You may even find some good in the bad. And many times, the events of our lives are not all good or bad, but a mixture of both. You may find yourself blessing some things you may not have wanted, but something good came out of them anyway. Yet, in the very act of blessing them and letting them go, it may give you some closure that will allow you to move on with your life.

The second thing I would invite you to do is to think about this New Year that has just begun. What would you like to have happen in 2021? What do you think God wants to happen in your life this year? Think about what this year would look like if you intentionally dedicated it to God. What would be different – in your relationships, your work, and your family? And what would you need to do to make a difference? That simple exercise may become a ritual and a symbolic act that God uses in your life to enable you to look back and to look forward in a way that brings purpose and meaning to your life.

I came across these words about the New Year we have each begun:

I am the New Year. I am an unspoiled page in your book of time.

I am your next chance at the art of living.

I am your opportunity to practice what you have learned about life during the last twelve months.

All that you sought and didn't find is hidden in me, waiting for you to search it but with more determination.

All that you dreamed but didn't dare to do, all that you hoped but did not will, all the faith that you claimed but did not have -- these slumber lightly, waiting to be awakened by the touch of a strong purpose.

I am your opportunity to renew your allegiance to God who said, "Behold, I make all things new."

When we live life like that, it makes a difference. Recently, I came across a story of someone who lived his life like that:

A university professor tells of being invited to speak at a military base one December and there meeting an unforgettable soldier named Ralph. Ralph had been sent to meet him at the airport. After they had introduced themselves, they headed toward the baggage claim. As they walked down the concourse, Ralph kept disappearing, once to help an older woman whose suitcase had fallen open; once to lift two toddlers up so they could see Santa Claus; again, to give directions to someone who was lost. Each time he came back with a smile on his face. "Where did you learn that?" the professor asked. "What?" Ralph said. "Where did you learn to live like that?" "Oh," Ralph said, "during the war, I guess." He then told the professor about his tour of duty in Vietnam, how it was his job to clear mine fields, how he watched his friends blow up before his eyes, one after another. "I learned to live between steps," he said. "I never knew whether the next one would be my last, so I learned to get everything I could out of the moment between when I picked up my foot and when I put it down again. Every step I took was a whole new world, and I guess I've been that way ever since." (as told by Barbara Brown Taylor in *Leadership*)

I learned to live between the steps. . . I learned to get everything I could out of the moment between when I picked up my foot and when I put it down again. Is that how we live our lives? Friends, I believe that if we will take the time to do this, then like Simeon in this story, we can leave the past behind and be dismissed into the peace that God wants to give to each of us in this coming year.

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.