

## **“It’s Still Christmas”**

Luke 2: 25-34a

Anne M. Cameron

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Lake Highlands Presbyterian Church

**Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ.**

**Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them. . .**

It’s almost the last day of 2008. If I were a betting person, I would bet the malls are going to be pretty full this afternoon. Most people are off work and there are lots of things to return and exchange, not to mention the chance to take advantage of the after-Christmas sales.

I admit I have been looking for some “after-Christmas” bargains, too. I went into a stationery store, hoping to find some Christmas cards to send, and they had already cleared all the Christmas stuff out. This is too bad because I like to write out my Christmas cards during this, the actual Christmas Season.

As I walked around Target, I was struck by this fact. Christmas is over. For the merchandisers, Christmas begins in October and Christmas officially ends when the cash registers close on December 24. Christmas is over in the retail world **before it has even begun** in the Christian world.

You are here today, the Sunday after the Christmas Eve services, following the special music and the Christmas pageantry, the processions and poinsettias, the twinkling lights and lit candles, because you know something. You have been waiting, and you know something. You are in on the fact that for us, Christmas has only barely begun. You are here because you know, somehow, deep down, there is

some One here for us. You are here, because in some strange way, the Holy Spirit has moved you to come.

You are here during this “low attendance” Sunday because you know the merchandisers don’t have it right. There is so much more to Christmas than the pageantry, so much more at stake than a boost for the economy. I might even go so far as to say you are here because you are waiting for a glimpse of the One who has been promised, and you know somehow that One might be found in the patient, week in and week out of worship, not in the mad rush to close the Christmas Season and get on with the New Year’s Eve parties.

Our church calendar tells us Christmas begins December 25. That is the day when all the carols come ringing forth. That is the day when the long awaited One has finally come.

It has become more and more popular in recent years for churches to skip Advent and do big Christmas musicals many weeks before Christmas. Some churches find themselves sliding toward the secular (and yet strangely!) wondering where Jesus went. There are those in the church who grumble when the pastor insists *O Come, O Come Emmanuel* instead of *Angels We Have Heard On High* in early December. These are sometimes the same people who squirm when we sing *Joy To the World* on December 28th. I think this happens for two reasons: we have been brainwashed by Madison Avenue and the Internet, and we have so little contact with scripture and our liturgical tradition.

This is the beauty of the liturgical calendar, which stands as a corrective to the secular calendar, which tells us the new year begins January 1. The church calendar says the new year begins the first Sunday of Advent. The Christian new year begins with waiting, not with celebrating. It is a long waiting such as known by Simeon and Anna. The Christian new year begins in self-examination and penitence, with purple paraments, revisiting Old Testament Prophecies and frightening apocalyptic imagery. We hear a lot from the Prophet Isaiah, whose words are echoed by Simeon in our gospel reading today:

*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem (Isa 40:1-2). For the Lord will comfort Zion (Isa 51:3); Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem (Isa 52:9).*

Our church calendar says Christmas begins on December 25 and carries us through twelve days into the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6<sup>th</sup>.

Don't be fooled by the ads and the internet and the culture. Christmas isn't over. It's only just begun. The Christ Child comes, the fulfillment of so many dreams; the promise to the people of Israel and a promise to a faithful old couple, Simeon and Anna.

I share a story with you written by Joe Roos, who was publisher for *Sojourners'* magazine at the time he wrote it. It is an experience that I as pastor and weekly sermon writer can well identify with. As I prepared to find words to share God's word with you this morning, I could find no better way to express this story than in Roos' own words. . .so I share them with you this morning. . .

"The week between Christmas and New Year's Day was usually a quiet one around *Sojourners* magazine. . . Nearly everyone would be present for our Christmas Eve celebration, which began with a joyous and fun-filled time with our children and ended with a quiet candlelight eucharistic service for the adults. . .

Christmas Eve was one of our favorite times together in the year. But on Christmas morning. . . many of us left town to spend a few days or a week with other family and friends.

One year I was one of the few who stayed around. While I missed those who were gone that week, the relative quietness also made it possible to get more work done than when everyone is around. So on the day after Christmas, I rose early to catch a bus to the magazine office, anticipating a productive day.

My mind was already in a distinctly post-Christmas *modus operandi*. My Christmas gifts had been put away the night before, the news on National Public Radio that morning was back to its normal routine, and, on the other stations, regular pop music had replaced the Christmas carols that had been playing just 12 hours earlier. Christmas was over, and it was time to start thinking ahead.

As I walked to the bus stop, I recalled that I was scheduled to preach the next Sunday. I decided to spend a little time thinking about what I might say. The gospel passage focused on the wise and aged prophets Anna and Simeon and their responses to the baby Jesus when Mary and Joseph brought him to the temple for purification rites. Both prophets gave thanks to God who allowed them, as promised, to see the Christ child before their deaths. Simeon then prophesied that "this child is set for the rise and fall of many," and Anna "spoke of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem."

I wasn't making much progress on a sermon approach when the 8:18 a.m. H-2 bus arrived right on time, a minor miracle of sorts if you know anything about adherence to bus schedules in the District of Columbia. Since it was the day after Christmas, very few people were on the usually crowded bus. In fact the bus was nearly empty, with the exception of some developmentally disabled people who ride the H-2 line on their way to jobs elsewhere in the city. A young woman and a couple of older women sat near the front while three younger men were seated toward the rear. They were busily and happily talking with each other. As the bus moved along its rush-hour route, I continued to think about Simeon and Anna against the backdrop of their chatter.

Since my thinking about the sermon was not bearing much fruit, I decided to set the passage aside until another time and listen to the conversations going on between the front and back of the bus. The passengers were very excited and animated as they told each other about their Christmas experiences, what they had given each other, what gifts they had received, what they ate for Christmas dinner, and so on.

As the conversation died down, one of the young men in the back started to softly sing "Silent Night." He had just finished the first verse when one of the women in the front turned to him and harshly scolded him, saying, "Shhh! Shhh! No, no, stop singing that. That's for Christmas. That was yesterday. It's over with now." I was somewhat reluctantly agreeing with her logic when the young man ever so gently, but firmly, replied, "No, no, that's not true. It's only just beginning."

In the silence that followed, I suspected that each of us on the bus was acknowledging in our hearts the profound truth in that young man's words. At least I knew I was. One of God's children had put me to shame and taught me that Christmas wasn't over simply because it was now Dec. 26. It was only just beginning. And as I stepped off the bus, I realized that was what Anna and Simeon were trying to say, too. These two prophets of hope, coming to the little babe just days after that first Christmas, were promising that it's only just beginning, that the birth of this child is only the beginning of joy and hope, of redemption and salvation, of expectation and promise, of light breaking into darkness.

It is one of the mysteries of our faith that what was true 2,000 years ago is also true for us now. That vulnerable little babe, who still causes the rise and fall of many, can also still rekindle hope and joy for all who are looking for it and want to receive it. It's only just beginning.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "It's Only Just Beginning" by Joe Roos, published in Sojourners' Magazine, Dec. 1985.