

Welcome

Today is New Year's Eve. It's also the seventh day of Christmas - we're barely halfway through the Church's celebration of God coming among us!

This weekend, we've been wrapping up our last Christmas parties, getting in a little more travel to one more set of relatives, exchanging the last few gifts. We're also turning our attention to 2018. School's back in session in a couple of days, we return to our routines, and we hope this next year will be better.

So today, as we slide out of the Christmas season into the New Year, let's talk about the hope we have for the new year. Let's talk about a hope we find in the Christmas story.

Something that gets lost in the Christmas season is the global sweep of the Christmas story. In the joy and beautiful chaos of the holidays, we lose track of the fact that Christmas was a world-changing event, that the angels declared to shepherds that Jesus' birth was good news for ALL PEOPLE, a harbinger of peace for the whole earth.

What does it mean to celebrate Christmas with a global vision? What does it mean to look for peace on Earth and goodwill for all peoples? How can our anticipation of the New Year be laced with hope both personally and for the whole world?

Message

This is the final week of our Advent and Christmas series, To Be Continued. We've waiting with God's people for God to return to them, to rescue and restore them. We've been listening to Israel's prophets, who helped them wait well, and to stories from Jesus' own life and ministry.

[Scripture Slide 1] Today, both texts focus on what it looks like when God's promises are fulfilled. Turn with me to Isaiah 61. As we read this, keep in mind Israel's experiences in the Exile. They were completely devastated by Babylon. And they understood the fault was theirs.

Israel imagined their covenant with God like a marriage covenant. The Law God gave them was like marriage vows, and by choosing not to keep it, they were being unfaithful to God. They came to understand the Exile as just punishment for their unfaithfulness - after ignoring their vows for so long, their spouse left them, and the lovers they had taken proved to be monsters.

With that in mind, the words of Isaiah 61 are shockingly hope-filled. They paint a picture of a God who is faithful even though the people have not been, a God who never abandoned them, a God of second chances:

I am overwhelmed with joy in the LORD my God!
 For he has dressed me with the clothing of salvation
 and draped me in a robe of righteousness.
 I am like a bridegroom dressed for his wedding

or a bride with her jewels.

The Sovereign LORD will show his justice to the nations of the world.

Everyone will praise him!

His righteousness will be like a garden in early spring,

with plants springing up everywhere.

Because I love Zion,

I will not keep still.

Because my heart yearns for Jerusalem,

I cannot remain silent.

I will not stop praying for her

until her righteousness shines like the dawn,

and her salvation blazes like a burning torch.

The nations will see your righteousness.

World leaders will be blinded by your glory.

And you will be given a new name

by the LORD's own mouth.

The LORD will hold you in his hand for all to see—

a splendid crown in the hand of God. -- Isaiah 61:10-62:3

The prophet sees Jerusalem, the devastated capital, rebuilt more gloriously than ever. But the restoration of Jerusalem isn't merely good news for the Jewish people returning from Exile.

The prophet says that Jerusalem's healing will "shine like the dawn" so "the nations will see your righteousness." Israel's salvation will be good news for the whole world. Israel's Messiah will be good news for the whole world.

That's a bold claim for a little nation in the backwater of nowhere to make. In a world of giant empires and thousands of gods, for Israel to claim that their God of their country the size of New Jersey has something good in store for the *whole world* is amazing - especially when this nation has faced such a crushing devastation like the Exile.

But this is a key proclamation from Israel's prophets again and again. Going all the way back to Abraham, Israel has always believed that God chose them *in order to bless the whole world*.

Israel's story has never been just about Israel. Israel's story has always been global. God has *always* wanted to save the whole world.

We might be forgiven for forgetting that the Christmas story is about God saving the world. The nativity story is so intimate - Joseph and Mary hearing from the angel, travelling to Bethlehem. Giving birth among animals, visited by a handful of shepherds.

But we forget the Magnificat, the song Mary sings when she learns she's pregnant. It's a song about the global justice her son will bring: the hungry being fed, the powerful pulled down from their thrones. We forget about Herod, the King of Israel so threatened by the birth of this Messiah that he tried to kill him. We forget about the magi, foreign diplomats who journeyed hundreds of miles to meet this young king.

[Scripture Slide 2] And then there's what happens when Jesus is eight days old. Turn with me to Luke 2. Jesus was born to Jewish parents and so, like all Jewish parents who have a son, they had him circumcised on the eighth day. Since they were near Jerusalem, they took him to be dedicated to God at the Temple in Jerusalem.

We're about to read about two encounters the holy family has, with two very old persons who have been waiting for Jesus for a long, long time:

Then it was time for their purification offering, as required by the law of Moses after the birth of a child; so his parents took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. The law of the Lord says, "If a woman's first child is a boy, he must be dedicated to the LORD." So they offered the sacrifice required in the law of the Lord—"either a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

At that time there was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was righteous and devout and was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him and had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. That day the Spirit led him to the Temple. So when Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus to the Lord as the law required, Simeon was there. He took the child in his arms and praised God, saying,

"Sovereign Lord, now let your servant die in peace,
as you have promised.
I have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared for all people.
He is a light to reveal God to the nations,
and he is the glory of your people Israel!"

Jesus' parents were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them, and he said to Mary, the baby's mother, "This child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall, and many others to rise. He has been sent as a sign from God, but many will oppose him. As a result, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your very soul."

First, they encounter a man named Simeon. He knew that he wouldn't die until he saw the birth of God's Messiah, this person for whom his people had been waiting for hundreds of years.

And then he meets Mary and Joseph and their baby, this boy named Jesus whose name means "he saves". Can you imagine this man, Simeon, ancient and hopeful, scooping Jesus up into his arms and holding his long-awaited hope?

Simeon celebrates what Isaiah the prophet knew: Jesus is good news for the world, not just for him. Not just for the proud parents. Not even just for Israel.

But with the wisdom of old age, Simeon warns Mary: the world is not ready for this little savior. Simeon has been around. He's lived through Herod and all the chaos of his reign. He saw the assassination of Julius Caesar and the Roman Civil War. He knows that the path for this Messiah is one of pain. And so he warns Mary: what is ahead will hurt you. Be prepared.

Then, the holy family meets Anna the prophet. Anna is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Hannah. The most famous Hannah in the Bible is the mother of the prophet Samuel. Hannah was barren until she prayed and God heard her. So Hannah gave her son, Samuel, to God, to be raised in the Temple. When she dedicated Samuel, she sang a song that was the basis for Mary's Magnificat.

Mary has a strong relationship with the Hannahs of the world, so it's no surprise that when Mary meets this Hannah, something pretty amazing happens:

Anna, a prophet, was also there in the Temple. She was the daughter of Phanuel from the tribe of Asher, and she was very old. Her husband died when they had been married only seven years. Then she lived as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the Temple but stayed there day and night, worshiping God with fasting and prayer. She came along just as Simeon was talking with Mary and Joseph, and she began praising God. She talked about the child to everyone who had been waiting expectantly for God to rescue Jerusalem. -- Luke 2:22-38

Anna was "very old" - eighty-four, according to Luke. She married - probably around fourteen - and her husband died after seven years (not an uncommon occurrence in the ancient world). So she's been living as a widow for more than sixty years, spending most of her time at the Temple in prayer.

She, too, notices Jesus and begins not only worshipping God, but telling everyone she sees that the child of promise has finally come.

I am amazed by these two unsung heroes of the Christmas story because they waited *decades* for God to come. Mary and Joseph were probably relatively young (certainly compared to Simeon and Anna they were young).

Maybe it's because I'm impatient, but I can't imagine waiting six *decades* for *anything*. I can't imagine waiting 500 years for something like Israel longed for their Messiah.

And yet here are these two heroes who waited and waited. Simeon was promised he would see the Messiah after 500 years of waiting but then... waited... and waited... and waited.

How long would you wait before you began to wonder if maybe you'd misheard?

And Anna... suffice to say, her life was not Plan A. No one plans to be widowed after 7 years. And yet she too was faithful, hopeful through it all.

And God brought both of them to the Temple on the day Jesus was to be dedicated.

It was a grace, a blessing, that out of all those who were waiting, God chose these two for this moment.

Why these two? Why of all the Jewish people waiting for the Messiah were these two chosen?

Certainly, they show us the value of the Advent journey that led us to Christmas. Here are two people who waited and waited.

Simeon, who was given a promise by God but no expiration date. Simeon, who lived every day wondering if this was the day he'd finally meet the Messiah. Simeon who held the Christ child in his arms, saw him with the wisdom of age and declared, "Now I can die happily, knowing God is faithful!"

And Anna, whose life didn't go as she planned. Anna who was a walking embodiment of Plan B, who in many ways represented Israel's long, painful history. Anna who prayed and fasted, Anna who knew God so well that when she caught a glimpse of him in the flesh was overjoyed and ran to tell everyone.

Friends, some of us here are Simeon - we've been waiting a long time for God to fulfill his promises to us.

And others of us are like Anna. Our lives didn't work out like we thought. Things didn't go the way we wanted. And we're not sure what to do next.

Both of these chose to be faithful, to wait in a posture of expectation for God to come to them. And God *did* come.

This is the good news of Christmas. God came for Simeon and Anna and God came for Mary and Joseph and God came for the whole world - just like God promised long ago.

Today, on this seventh day of Christmas, we celebrate that God continues to be faithful. We celebrate that God continues to fulfill promises to us.

Today, on this seventh day of Christmas that is also New Year's Eve, we look to a new year. 2018 is pure potential right now.

What do you hope God will do in this next year? More importantly, who do you hope God will make you to be in this next year? Jesus came for you.

What do you hope God will do in your home in this next year? Who is God calling you to be in your family? Jesus came for your family.

What do you hope God will do in your vocation in this next year? What is the next right step God is calling you to vocationally? Jesus came for your vocation.

What do you hope to see at Catalyst in this next year? What is God calling you to as a part of the Catalyst family? Jesus came for Catalyst.

What do you hope to see in Rowlett in this next year? What is God calling you to as a citizen of this area? Jesus came for our neighborhoods.

What do you hope to see in the USA in this next year? What is God calling you to as an American citizen? Jesus came for America.

What do you hope God will do in the world in this next year? How is God calling you to play a part in that? Jesus came for our world.

Communion + Examen

[**Communion Slide**] The Cross points to new life. So too we look through the cross to a new year and God's call on us there.

1. **What was the most important thing God did in my life in 2017?**
2. **Where was I furthest from God in the last year?**
3. **What am I most anxious about for 2018?**
4. **How can I choose to partner with God in 2018?**

Assignment + Blessing

Celebrate!