

SERMON TITLE: "Seeing Salvation"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 2:22-38
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: December 26, 2021, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

One of the things I enjoy doing at Christmas time is watching those classic movies like *A Christmas Carol* and *It's a Wonderful Life*. It seems like no matter how many times I hear and see those stories, they still hold powerful meaning. Watching Ebenezer Scrooge change from a mean old man into a generous, cheerful soul is like witnessing a total conversion. Watching George Baily regain his purpose for living is like seeing salvation happen before our very eyes.

Seeing salvation. Sometimes we see salvation through the ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future. Sometimes we see salvation through a dumpy angel named Clarence who needs to earn his wings. But, most of all, we who are Christians see salvation through a child who was born in Bethlehem. The classic drama that never grows old is the story of angels, shepherds, and wise men who all witnessed the infancy of Jesus and knew that they were seeing the salvation of God.

Today's reading from the Gospel of Luke carries the Christmas story a little farther. Mary and Joseph take baby Jesus to Jerusalem to dedicate their firstborn child to God. There, in the temple, they encounter the 84-year-old Anna, a wise prophetess who is sure that Jesus is the answer to Israel's redemption. There they also find Simeon, a devout man, who declares that his eyes have now seen God's salvation. This morning, I invite you to consider this story with me and explore what seeing salvation can mean for us.

1—BEING AVAILABLE TO GOD

The first thing we notice about this story is that the people are available to God. Simeon was able to see God's salvation because he was there where God could show it to him. Anna and Mary and

Joseph were all there to see that salvation too. Why? Because they were open to God's call upon their lives. They were available to hear God's message. They were all acting in ways that showed they had a vital relationship with God. Mary and Joseph were carefully doing all that God's law required. Verse 37 says that Anna worshiped, prayed, and fasted night and day in the temple. Verse 25 says that Simeon was "righteous and devout," and verse 27 says he was "guided by the Spirit."

This passage of scripture tells us that people see salvation when they are tuned in to God. That isn't to say that God can't appear anywhere at any time. The shepherds heard the angels out in the fields. The wise men saw the star over their distant lands. Sometimes God even visits unsuspecting mean old men like Scrooge. But, generally speaking, the salvation of God is going to be seen by people who have some awareness of God in their lives.

A month or so ago, I started noticing a bright light in the dark southwest sky every evening as I was leaving the church. At first I thought maybe it was the light of an airplane. But when I saw it evening after evening in the same place, I figured it was probably a star. Then last week, I had a chance to talk to someone who teaches astronomy at Weber State. He told me that the bright light I'd been seeing in the SW evening sky is the planet Venus, which shows up this time of year. He also told me that by late January, Venus will be visible in the SE sky just before dawn. It will be visible to me, that is, if I get up early and make myself available to see it.

Seeing salvation is the same. Salvation came at Christmas, in the form of a tiny baby sent from God. But we are most likely to see that salvation when we worship, pray, read the Bible, and participate in fellowship with other believers. Those spiritual disciplines will sharpen our spiritual vision. We will be more likely to see salvation because we make ourselves available to God.

2—LOOKING FORWARD WITH HOPE

A second factor in seeing salvation is looking forward with hope. Verse 25 tells us that Simeon was "looking forward to the consolation of Israel." In other words, he had big expectations for the

future. *Consolation* here doesn't mean a disappointing second-place consolation prize. Simeon's hopes were high that God was going to free the Jews from oppression and restore Israel's kingdom; he was encouraged about what God was going to do.

Seeing salvation requires a positive outlook about the future. For some of us moving up in age, this becomes harder and harder. It's much more natural to find ourselves bemoaning the passing of the good ol' days. "Yeah, in the good ol' days, life was simpler. In the good ol' days, there weren't all these problems. In the good ol' days, young people knew their place. In the good ol' days, people had values."

Other times we get stuck in the past not because it was so good to us, but because something bad happened. I've seen people lose their future hope over some grievance that occurred years before. Their feelings were hurt over a misunderstanding or injustice, and they just can't seem to get over it. They harbor a grudge; they hold onto a hurt. Their future hopes are diminished by resentment from the past. If our heads are buried in the glory days gone by, or if we're blinded by former traumas, there's no way we'll be able to see salvation. The only way to see salvation is to get our heads out of the ruts and anticipate better things ahead.

That's why Simeon saw God's salvation when he looked at young Mary and Joseph with their tiny baby. Here was God's future glory. Here was the promise of Israel. Here was the hope of tomorrow. Here was the one who would make life better for all God's people. Simeon was able to see salvation in baby Jesus because the elderly man had hope that God was still active, that God was still at work, that God had greater things yet in store for the world.

What do we see when we look at young people today? Do we believe that God is using them to make the world a better place? Do we believe that God has amazing possibilities yet ahead for them? Looking forward to the future with hope is one of the keys to seeing God's salvation.

3—TRUSTING GOD

If seeing salvation comes through being available to God and through looking to the future with hope, it also comes through trusting in God. In verse 29, you will notice that Simeon attributed his sense of peace to God. After seeing Jesus, Simeon praised God for the salvation which God had prepared for all the peoples.

Trusting God for our salvation is a lot different than believing it has to come from ourselves or from some other human-made source. All the commercialization leading up to Christmas would like to make us think that our salvation comes from having the right clothes, the right toys, the right technology, or the right jewelry. But we have all seen that the kind of salvation that money can buy is fleeting. And we know that even our best efforts at earning our salvation inevitably fail. No matter how hard we try, we can't be smart enough or beautiful enough or rich enough to satisfy our longings. Nor can we ever be good enough to free ourselves of all guilt and shame. If we depend on ourselves, there's no way we'll ever see salvation. The only way to see salvation is to trust in God.

Trusting God isn't always easy. Sometimes we're like the lone hiker who fell over a cliff, just as darkness was descending on the mountain. Luckily, the hiker managed to grab hold of a small sapling, which stopped his fall. But his feet were still hanging over the gulf, and nothing but blackness was below. So he shouted, "Is anybody down there?"

"Yes," replied a great voice. I'm down here. Let yourself go. I'll catch you. You can trust me. I'm God."

There was a long silence as the hiker considered this information. Then the hiker shouted out, "Is anybody else down there?!"*

Putting our trust in what and whom we can see is often easier than trusting God whom we can't see. But when we trust God through Jesus Christ, God seen and known in human flesh, we find a peace

that gives us great comfort. Like Simeon, we find the fulfillment we have longed for. We see the salvation that overcomes even death itself, and gives us eternal life.

CONCLUSION

At a recent bell choir rehearsal, we got to talking about cataracts and how they cause problems with our vision. In the years before cataracts are bad enough to remove, that dark thickening can make it harder and harder to see well. I've always been a little creeped out about the idea of anyone messing with my eyes. But when the time comes that my vision gets bad enough, I'm sure I will clear my calendar and make myself available for cataract removal. I'll put myself through that surgery because I'll be looking forward to positive results. I'll be hoping for better vision in the future. No doubt, I'll be nervous, but I will know that my doctor has helped many people before me. I'll undergo the surgery because I'll trust my doctor's preparation and skills.

Better spiritual vision comes the same way. When we make ourselves available to God, when we look to the future with hope, and when we put our trust in God through Jesus Christ—that's when we, like Simeon and Anna, will be seeing salvation.

*Adapted from Eric W. Johnson, *A Treasury of Humor* (Ivy Books: New York, 1989), p. 124.