Book 5

Sunday December 7, 1975

"SIMEON, THE MAN WHO WAITED" Luke 2:22-40

Strange as it may sound, there are people who approach Advent and Christmas with apprehension. For some it is a sad and lonely time. For others there is too much drinking, too many parties, too little sleep, frayed nerves, over-spending and disappointment.

And there are those who don't expect much any more. They are somewhat like Zechariah, about whom I spoke last week. An angel told Zechariah that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a child. Zechariah was skeptical and said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years."

Some of us know that feeling. A kind of lethargy like the resignation of old age holds us fast. We expect nothing new to happen. Our spirits are grounded. Perhaps as children we had our dreams, but we have seen our hopes fade into illusions and our belief consumed by cynicism.

Ghosts walk at Christmas too. All the people gone from us, dead parents, lost friends, people far away from home that we would like to be with. This season can be a strange mixture of joy and sadness. Some wonder--why go through the dismal pretense and tinsel of it all?

But we forget that life itself is filled with high hopes and yet despair and the Advent and Christmas story in its totality has within it the same elements. Part of our problem is that we sometimes look at only one part of the Christmas story and thus it becomes overly sentimental and romantic. We see only the baby Jesus in a manger and forget what happened before and after.

I know someone who sent out a Christmas card with a quote from St. Augustine, a quote that found the pattern of the cross in the nailed wooden sticks of the infant's crib. Some people told him that the card was in poor taste, since it mentioned suffering during the season of joy.

But the Christmas story in its fullness has within it both suffering and joy. The gospels tell of a young couple who could find no suitable place to have their first child. And then not long after the birth the family had to become

refugees in Egypt because King Herod wanted to kill the baby and to do so had all the babies under the age of two murdered in that region.

What we forget is that the saviours of the world are often found in the underground, outlawed, conspired against and finally murdered. The good news often comes to us delivered by prophets and martyrs, and not always in the form we expect.

Simeon knew this. And though old in years, he was still young in expectation and hope. Luke tells us that Simeon was righteous and devout and was looking for the consolation of Israel. He was patiently waiting for the time when God's Messiah would appear. Unlike Zechariah who expected nothing new to happen, no surprises, Simeon though old in years had not given up hope. Before he died, he was confident he would see the Messiah.

It happened! Mary and Joseph had brought the infant Jesus to the Temple for the act of purification and dedication according to the Jewish law. Simeon was in the temple -- waiting. Taking the baby in his arms, he offered a prayer of thanksgiving--"Lord, now let thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to thy people Israel." Simeon had seen what he had so long waited for.

What can we learn from Simeon?

1. Note first that Simeon had hope, and it wasn't a trivial hope. What do we hope for? A white Christmas, a full mailbox, promotion or a raise in pay, good news of any kind, no cavities, a few moments of peace and quiet with nobody asking for anything, health for our families, a new pair of gloves, perfume and a flower or two.

Simeon had a large hope. He hoped for the consolation of Israel, his nation. He hoped and waited for God to enter the world in a new way.

We are to a large extent for we hope for. We live not by our needs alone, but by the aspirations and the hopes we have. We become what we hope for. Simeon hopes caused him to be a righteous and devout person. What are our hopes this Christmas?

2. Note secondly that Simeon was a patient man with his hopes. The story in Luke implies that when he saw the infant Jesus in the temple he was a very old man. All of his life he had been hoping that before he died there was one event he wanted to witness--God's Messiah. He didn't know how or when this might happen, but he patiently waited, all the time believing that it would happen before he died. What is the one thing you want to see before you die?

3. Note in the third place, that in addition to being patient and hopeful, Simeon was also open enough so that when the Messiah appeared, he was able to recognize him.

Most of the people in Simeon's time had fixed ideas of what the Messiah would be like when he appeared and because they had a limited view they failed to recognize Jesus for what he was. He did not fit that view.

Simeon, however was the kind of person who was open to new ideas and new ways of God acting in the world.

Yet how often it has been the tragedy of our human race that we have failed to recognize and welcome the saviours in our midst, not only in the area of religion but in the arts and sciences as well.

Thales first foretold a solar eclipse, the one in 585 B.C. and the ancient Greeks in Alexandria knew that the world was round. Why then did the facts about our solar universe have to wait long dull centuries before the truth was recognized?

The tragedy of many of us is our unwillingness to see some of the saviours among us simply because they do not fit our pre-conceived notion of what they should be like. So we often shut our eyes to new ideas. If someone sees something that the rest of us do not see, we say he or she is dreaming or crazy or out of touch with reality. We forget that our experience shapes our perception to a large degree.

From birth on we are trained to see things in a certain way; to see things in a way that matches the view of the world of those teaching us. To use an exaggerated example: a child says, "O look, mommy, a purple cow," and the mother says there is no such thing as a purple cow and so the

child stops reporting purple cows and gradually as he or she gets older the visual messages processed by the brain are modified and translated in terms of mommy's world until the person can't remember seeing a purple cow. The purple cows then walk around with impunity, unseen by anyone.

In other words, to a large extent we see what we have been taught to believe. If from little on up we have been taught to believe that one race is inferior to another, we will see that and act as if that were true. And that perception will then be difficult to change.because our minds will even falsify the evidence.

Simeon was at least open to questioning his perceptions and therefore open to seeing God's Messiah even in a baby born of common parents from the country.

Many of us have a kind of built in survival program, full of fears and we have to fight through that survival program to be able to see things new. We say to most new ideas, it won't work, or it couldn't happen that way, or it's impossible. We don't want the world the way we have been seeing it to crumble, so we do everything to keep things as they are.

Sometimes in retrospect the unreceptive inertia of our human race seems ridiculous to the point of laughter. Said a school board in an American town a hundred fifty years ago, "You are welcome to use the school house to debate all proper questions in, but such things as railroads and telegraphs are impossibilities and rank infidelity. There is nothing in the word of God about them." That is ludicrous we think.

When however one considers the situation we are in today, this shutting of the door to new ideas is no laughing matter. We are moving out into situations in economic life and international relationships so unprecedented that old formulas are as inadequate to save the day as old ox-carts are to handle modern transportation.

Sometimes it is a bit depressing when it seems that many of the leaders we hear about a lot do not seem to show much creativity or openness to new ideas, yet at the same time I know that God's saviours are among us, but usually not recognized and usually persecuted.

What we can learn from Simeon is to be open to God's workings in new ways, in ways we might not expect. No one else came to the temple to find God's Messiah in a baby. God in a baby? That would not have fit their pre-conceptions. Most of the people were too set in their regular way of seeing and doing things.

Simeon was also wise enough to see that most of the world would not recognize or accept Jesus when we was an adult. Thus he said to Mary his mother, "Behold this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against, and a sword will pierce through your soul also that the thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed."

These words strike a different note from the manger scene in Bethlehem. But we cannot separate the infant Jesus from the adult Jesus. Too many of us like to keep Jesus as a baby in the manger, for then he doesn't threaten our usual way of doing things or call our lives into question.

We like to forget that when Jesus became an adult that although some people followed him with the utmost of their devotion, others hated him and were persuaded that there was nothing which their world needed so much as to have him die.

To many in his time who were ordinarily accounted the best, to eminent citizens, to the authoritative people of church and state, the man Jesus came to seem intolerable. He offended their prejudices, challenged their conventions, and set up standards of right and wrong which blasted their respectability. He outraged them because they felt that he was always ignoring the best people and championing the common crowd.

But what about us. If there should be on this Christmas a second coming, would we like Simeon be open to Christ or would there rather be a second crucifixion. I wonder how we today would regard and treat this man. Would not the militarists among us assail him as a cowardly pacifist because he urges us love our enemies. Would not the nationalists among us attack him as a dangerous internationalist because he tells us that we are all of one flesh?

Would not the Puritans among us despise and reject him because he eats and drinks with sinners, prefering the company

of winebibbers and harlots to that of respectable church people? Would not the proud and important among us laugh at him when he instructs the 12 disciples that he who would be first should be the one to take the role of the least and serve all?

Would not each of us in his or her own way find some part of this man's saying and doing to be so threatening to our ways of life, so much at odds with our rooted beliefs, that we could not tolerate him for long?

Simeon, however calls us to accept Jesus Christ as he is, not as we might want him to be. We cannot just stop with the sentiment of Christmas and Jesus in a manger. "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many, and for a sign that is spoken against." Jesus calls us to review and reshape the values of our living.

When we have done that, then we can say with Simeon--when our life is over, "Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation." Amen.