Sunday November 28, 1976

"FINDING GOD IN STRANGE PLACES" Luke 2:25-33

We would think that most of us would be open and desirous of finding God anywhere, no matter how strange the place might be. We would also think that most people would be open to the idea that the world, creation, the universe is open-ended and that the unexpected can and does happen in the most unusual and surprising ways.

But such is not the case. A very large number of people, many of us, cannot rest until we have proved the opposite. We are paid-up, card-carrying members of the powerful trade union of "Door-Slammers." The Door-Slammer's Union is made up of people who cannot feel safe in a open-ended world. So they have to hurry around closing doors and locking windows in the human mind.

They also try to keep God in a box, and believe they have God all locked up; that God can only be found in the safe, known, traditional places; that God fits only their definition. They like to believe they have God captured, tamed and trained to their own liking.

The list of past presidents of the Door-Slammer's Union in all fields is impressive. There is, for example, the famous French chemist, Berthelot, who qualifies as an early president with his pronouncement in 1887, "From now on there is no mystery about the Universe!"

1895 was a big year for the Door-Slammers. Lord Kelvin started the year by announcing with all the authority he had, "Heavier-than-air-flying-machines are impossible!"

A little later in the same year, Professor Lippman told one of this students that "physics is a subject that is exhausted. . .and you had better turn your attention to something else." The pupil's name was Heilbronner who in spite of this door-slamming became a famous modern physicist.

The door-slammer's union is still gaining new members. It continues to be made up of persons who refuse to examine or allow room for any new idea. Not long ago a well-known physicist said, "Neither the testimony of all the fellows of the Royal Society, nor even the evidence of my own senses would lead me to believe in the transmission of

thought from one person to another independently of the recognized channels of sense." For an eminent scientist to start shouting, "I won't believe it, even if it's proved true!" is a trifle embarrassing.

Door-Slammers are found in every field, economics, science, the arts, and religion. We are all aware of the pressure that forced Galileo to recant his false and heretical opinion that the earth was not stationary and not the center of the universe. Two hundred years later the chemical manufacture of industrial diamonds was delayed for decades because a chemist of genius was forced to recant and declare in public that he had not manufactured diamonds but had made a mistake in an experiment.

In 1924, a brilliant Austrian biologist, Dr. Paul Kammerer, committed suicide, having been discredited as a scientist by what was possibly the most outrageous piece of academic skulduggery on record. The full story can be read in Koester's book, "The Case of the Midwife Toad."

Why are so many of us Door-Slammers? Both pride and prejudice are some of the hidden human factors that make us unable to see anything new. And some of us are simply afraid of anything new.

In our New Testament scripture reading for this morning--Simeon was not a Door-Slammer! Thank God for that. He was an expectant, open, hopeful person. He knew that God cannot be contained in our human boxes of rules, traditions and prejudices.

Most of the people in Simeon's time were sure they knew all about God and how God worked. They therefore had fixed ideas of what the Messiah would be like when he appeared and thus they failed to recognize or accept Jesus for what he was. God in a baby? God in a stable? Impossible!

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. Door-Slammers are everywhere! They substitute dogma for openness.

When a physician and researcher named Dr. Harvey proposed the theory of the circulation of blood throughout the body, his colleagues called him crazy. As late as forty years

after his publication on the circulation of the blood, his ideas were still not accepted in the medical world.

When Dr. Semmelweis, now considered one of the greatest benefactors of humanity, proposed that physicians should was their hands before doing surgery or delivering babies, he was almost ostracized from the medical world. He was finally driven insane. And yet physicians were continually wondering why their patients died from infections.

So it is that Advent and Christmas remind us again to look for the saviours among us and that they are often found in strange places. This season calls us to have the openness of Simeon and then we will recognize God in all sorts of places where we had not expected him.

God is even present in such simple acts of breaking bread as we gather about his table. Amen.