

*Future Tense*  
*By Jason Huff*  
*Isaiah 46:9-13, Psalm 139:1-18, Luke 2:21-39*

Our third reading this morning is from Luke 2:21-39. This is the last of Luke's passages about Jesus' family when He was an infant. Here's what Luke writes... "On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived. When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons." 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 and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too." There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth."

Did you know that the US Government's own website has a page listing the most popular New Year's resolutions? I never knew that they were important enough for our government to keep track of...but then again, making New Year's resolutions is a part of our culture. So here's what Americans want to do over the next year...lose weight, manage debt, save money, get a better job, get fit, eat right, get a better education, drink less, quit smoking, reduce stress at work, reduce stress overall, take a trip, and volunteer. Whew! Why is it that we make so many resolutions? Maybe we do it to take some control over our lives. Certainly all the things on that list are good and would be good for us...but it turns out that only about 12% of those who make New Year's resolutions keep them. Maybe we don't want all those things as badly as we think we do. Sometimes the fear of the unknown keeps us from change. After all, if things stay the same, they might be boring, even unhealthy, but it's easier than risking what a new life might look like. A new and different future might be great, but it might not be. Perhaps it's just that creating that new future might just take too much work.

We have a love/hate relationship with the future. On the one hand, we're kind of curious, even nervous somehow, about what the future holds. I've been reading that while a number of so-called "recession-proof" businesses are having problems right now, one of the few groups making a lot of money from the economic downturn are psychics and fortune tellers. Now Christians have no business consulting with one. But that said, it says a lot about us as human beings. When times are tough and we aren't sure if we're going to keep our job or our house, people want answers, and they'll turn to the strangest places to get them. Columbia Business School professor Gita Johar studied the phenomenon, and he said, "If the future is uncertain, people turn to psychics [because]...people want the illusion of control."

On the other hand, we often will go to significant lengths to avoid knowing future events. I've been known to walk out of a room when somebody's watching a movie I've always wanted to see, precisely because I don't want to know all the details. I want to enjoy it with fresh eyes and be surprised at the twists and turns. In a more serious way, many of us have made difficult life choices that have been hard in the short term but good for us in the long term. If we knew all the troubles that lay in store for us, it's likely we wouldn't have made those tough decisions that turned out to be smart in the end. Sometimes we can be glad we don't know it all!

Today's passage from Luke is easy enough for us to skip over. After the words of the angels to Mary and the shepherds, we've already established that Jesus is going to be something special, and the prophecy we hear today is, at first glance, more of the same. But if we look at it more carefully, if we look at the people involved and what is actually said, we see some things that may teach us something new for our lives today.

The passage starts with the circumcision and naming of Jesus on the eighth day of his life. This was common practice in the day, and Jesus' circumcision at that time confirmed that he was a part of the covenant community of Israel. Then the text tells us that Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the temple after their time of purification. Under Jewish law in Leviticus 12, a woman who had given birth was considered ceremonially unclean until the circumcision of her baby boy, and she could participate in that ceremony. Then she was considered ritually unclean, which meant she was unable to enter the temple, for forty days following the birth. The original Greek text talks about purification in the plural, which is really unusual in this situation. It confirms for us that Joseph himself helped with the birth and needed to be purified as well...which makes sense given the situation where Jesus was born. It's here that we unofficially learn that Mary and Joseph are poor, because the sacrifice they make at the temple is one that Leviticus 12 reserved for those who didn't have enough money to sacrifice a lamb to God at a child's birth. All of the actions that Mary and Joseph take show that they are faithful Jews who follow the law carefully. Perhaps that doesn't seem surprising, but in their day, Judaism was already starting to splinter into groups that questioned the interpretation of Jewish law. Mary and Joseph may not have cared about any of that; they simply obeyed what they saw written in God's Word.

Now in the midst of it all, in the middle of the ceremony where they are presenting Jesus to be consecrated and they are making the appropriate sacrifices, this guy named Simeon shows up. We aren't sure who he is. He's not known as a prophet; at least the text doesn't call him one. He's not a priest, as far as we know. But he is devout. He is devoted to God. And it says that he waited for the consolation of Israel. Now that phrase "the consolation of Israel" might seem a little strange, but taking a look at the Greek language helps us understand it. The Greek word that Luke uses here for "consolation" is *paraclesin*, and the word that Jesus uses for the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John is *paraclete*. Simeon is full of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the *paraclete*, and he is waiting for that same Comforter to finally comfort, *paraclesin*, all of Israel. That work of comfort will be done through Jesus the Christ.

Now this is where things get really interesting. The Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he wasn't going to die until he saw the Lord's Christ, the one that God was sending into the world to redeem us from sin and death. Then the Holy Spirit leads him at just the proper time to see the infant Jesus, and he takes him in his arms and says, "Now, God, my Master, you're letting your servant go in peace according to your promise, because I have seen your salvation." Now I have to tell you...if I were Simeon and I knew that I wasn't going to die until I saw the Christ, I don't think I'd be searching too hard! In fact, it would be easy to run the other way, to get as far away from the temple and anything that had to do with the coming Christ as possible. Can't die if you haven't seen the Christ, right? But Simeon knew better than that. Simeon knew that his future was in God's hands, and he so wanted Israel to be comforted, for all of his people to know that God loved them and was providing salvation for them. He didn't care if he died a moment after he saw Jesus...he was so happy to know that God had finally sent his long-awaited Messiah. Simeon had a glimpse of the future, but he didn't let it frighten him. He reveled in the God who had loved him enough to show him the messiah.

Now if Simeon hadn't been a prophet, he becomes one once he meets Jesus. First, he shares with Mary and Joseph a shocker: this child isn't just meant to comfort Israel and to save God's chosen nation. No, he's here to save all peoples, he's going to be a light of revelation for the Gentiles – that means you and me and everybody who's not Jewish! Now this surprises even Mary and Joseph. The angel that spoke to Mary said Jesus would be the Son of the Most High who would sit upon the throne of his forefather David, but they'd never heard anything about Jesus being God's salvation for all the peoples of the earth. How stunning would that be!

But Simeon doesn't end there. Simeon has a message to give, both wonderful and difficult. He tells Mary directly that Jesus is going to cause the falling and rising of many people in Israel and that he will be a sign that will reveal their true hearts. Now the phrase "falling and rising" sounds backwards to us...we think it should be "rising and falling," like "The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire." But there's a double meaning in the words that Simeon says that's brought out by the word order. The word "rising" here, *anastasis*, is used 40 times in the New Testament, and every other time it refers to resurrection. So in one sense, Simeon is telling us that Jesus is going to cause a total change in Israel; people will rise and fall around him just as we'd think of it. But more importantly, in a very subtle sense, Simeon is predicting what Jesus will really do...people who fall before him will be raised from the dead. Jesus will raise people in his earthly ministry, he himself will be raised from the dead, and all who trust in him will be resurrected too. Simeon's understated words tell us much about Jesus' ministry.

But it won't be without grief. Jesus will be opposed in his ministry, Simeon says, and he warns Mary directly that a "sword will pierce through your soul too." Jesus will be pierced in many ways, even to the piercing of his hands and feet. But Mary will carry a unique burden. She will carry the weight of being the mother to a son who will act in ways that nobody expects of the Messiah. She will have to trust him when others think he has gone mad with his radical words and actions on God's behalf. And then, she will see her own son die on a cross. Not all of the future is laid out before, just the hint of it. But she is told enough to learn that her road will not be easy.

And then comes Anna. She's a prophetess who's at least 84 – and by some readings of the Greek, 105 – who never leaves the temple, she's so dedicated to God. And she confirms everything that Simeon has said. Just like the shepherds last week, she tells everyone who will listen about this wonderful child who has come to redeem God's people. She is the sign that shows that Simeon's words are true. She also shows that God's gift through Jesus is for all people, not just men but women too. This was truly extraordinary in that day and age.

When we think on the words that Simeon said to Mary that were confirmed by Anna, we have to wonder how that must have haunted her. There's a popular song written several years ago now called "Mary, Did You Know?" The first verse asks, "Mary, did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water? Mary, did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters? Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new? This Child that you delivered will soon deliver you." And the truth is, Mary and Joseph didn't know. They had signs, they had clues, they had the promise of an angel's words and the prophetic words of those like Simeon and Anna, but they didn't know. They lived the same way we do, with the wonder and joy and fear of the new day, everyday. They had glimpses, but only God knew the big picture.

So the big question here is: why? Why did God use prophets like Simeon and Anna? What's the point? And why is it we so seldom get glimpses into the future now like we see in the Bible? I believe we can answer these questions in ways that can help us think about our own future now. And here's what I see we learn: first, we as Christians believe that God is a God of promises and a God of choices. Second, we as Christians know that we do not have to fear the future. And third, we as Christians know that God holds the future and has already revealed it to us.

Let's start with the first point: God is a God of promises and of choices. God made promises from the very beginning; he made promises to Adam and Eve of what would and wouldn't happen if they ate from certain trees in the garden. He made a promise to Abraham that we would make his descendents as vast as the stars in the sky. He gave the Hebrew people the "promised" land. He made a promise to David that one day, his own descendent would sit on an eternal throne. He promised the people of Israel salvation. But the thing about promises is that they are always in the future tense. Nobody can promise anything about the past; promises only work for the future. All of God's promises, then, are oriented towards the future. God looks forward. In fact, it's been said that God stands outside of time and can see all things that have happened, that are happening, and that will happen. God can tell us with perfect accuracy what will happen and what he will do.

The prophets like Simeon and Anna are God's messengers, sent with details about the future. They prove that God is living and active and keeping his promises. Even when they say things that concern us, when they tell Mary that she will suffer too because of Jesus, they say them because they are true and because they prove God's control over all things. Nothing is outside of his hands.

Now some people ask, if God has control over all things, does that make us just puppets on strings, actors on a stage performing God's play? And the answer is no. God knows all things, but God gives us the freedom to act on our own, to make our own choices. Now God plays an active role; what God wants to happen will happen, and God has free will just like you and I do. God gets involved throughout history, from large-scale history and kings and countries right down to the history between you and me. God wants us to choose wisely. His knowledge of our choices does not stop them from being our own. God often intervenes in various ways we don't even notice to help us make the best choices we can. And because God has free will, God has the right to choose how He will exercise His control over what He has created. None of that takes away from the fact that we may choose to follow God or choose not to. We can choose to accept God's promises or not. The prophecies about Jesus showed the kind of life God the Father knew He would live...and yet, Jesus too made choices. Hebrews 4:15 tells us that Jesus was tested in every way as we are, yet He was without sin. Even the prophecies didn't take away his freedom of choice. God makes promises that He will keep, but He gives us the ability to choose to be a part of those promises ourselves.

Now, second, Christians do not need to fear the future. Those of us who believe in God and follow Him faithfully know that God loves us and cares for us and has a great future in store for us. Simeon did not fear his own death. In fact, it sounds like he embraced whatever God had planned next for him. If he lived and could spread the word of Christ or if he died and could begin his eternity with God, either way, he faced the future with God.

There is so much around us that the world tells us to fear. Fear crime, fear poverty, fear death, fear sickness, fear pain, fear terrorists, fear corruption, fear our neighbors, fear everything. Fear like this is a bunch of lies. The only thing the Bible tells us to truly fear is God, because God is the one who holds life and death and eternity in His hands. And even then, God wants our love and our praise and our worship...not cowering fear like the fear of punishment, but the fear that respects Him and gives Him first place in our lives. Zecharias' prophecy that we studied a few weeks ago told us that because of God's salvation in Christ, we can serve God without fear.

It's a hard time to be fearless. When money is tight and stocks fall and we're not sure how it's all going to come together, it's easy to get nervous. It's easy to worry where the next paycheck is coming from or the next mortgage payment. And I'm not here to tell you that God is going to instantly take care of all those things. We don't believe in any get-rich-quick schemes; God's good news never states what we hear from some folks on television who preach that if you give to the church you'll get more wealth. God's people throughout history have gone through difficult times, suffering, and persecution.

But we don't need to fear because those earthly problems are temporary. God's eternity, the eternity He has planned and is bringing about even now, the eternity that we may spend with Him, *that* is the permanent solution to our temporary problems. Remember the words of Paul – “nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.” Remember the words of the angel to Mary and to the shepherds. What were their first words? “Do not fear.” We have nothing to fear, for God is near.

Finally, we as Christians know that God holds the future and has already revealed it to us. Do you want to know the future? Read the Bible. It tells us, indeed it tells all believers, what to expect. Now it's not the detailed future, it's not going to tell you what you should eat for lunch next Thursday, but it is the future we can know. I don't think it's going to spoil anything for you to know this: God wins. Even in the most difficult passages, the ones like some in the book of Revelation where we can't figure out what's literal and what's not and how we should interpret it, the message is clear: God wins. And the book reveals to us what to expect as Christians. We should expect that we will not be universally loved because we call people to account for their actions and tell them they should change their ways and turn to God. People don't like that. We're told that the early church was often impoverished and faced hardships, even though they were firm believers. But we're also told of the wonderful joy they experienced in following Christ. Their future is also our future. It isn't an easy future, but it is the best future.

When we think about God holding the future and revealing it to us, we often start talking about knowing God's will. Sometimes when we come up on something really big, like who we should marry or what job we should take or some other big decision, we want to know God's will. We often quickly find out that it's not easy. Now sometimes we'll get some sort of nudge from the Holy Spirit that makes it clear to us what we should do. But God doesn't expect us to be mindreaders. Do you want to know the will of God for your life, seriously? Read the Bible. God's will for us all is right in that book, God's will for you and for me. I think God does have an opinion, and occasionally when we pray and seek after Him, He tells us that opinion through various leadings. But the vast majority of the time, God's will is right there, right in front of us. If we do what the Bible teaches us to do, if we follow Christ faithfully and act according to the ways He taught us, we are always going to be in the center of God's will.

So what do we take home with us this week? We take home this: we need to have a broader perspective. We need to have God's perspective. You, me, all of us...we need to open our eyes to the reality that God is in control, that He keeps His promises but allows us choices, that we need not fear the future because it is in His hands, that through God's Word we already know God's will for us and know our eternal future. And if you haven't committed your life to Christ and know what it is to be His disciple, talk to me after the service and you can know your eternal future too. Because with God's promises in sight, we know that there is nothing we cannot face in the new year...or any year, for that matter...because we know that God loves us and cares for us and has provided salvation for us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Let's pray.