

"WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?"

A Sermon By

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Park Avenue United Methodist Church
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INTRODUCTION

Mike Royko, the columnist, won't let us be sentimental about Christmas. His column on Christmas day a year ago just about ruined a nice day. We had had a beautiful service here the night before, on Christmas Eve, with carols and candlelight. The choir was at its best just as it was earlier this week. It was a beautiful service, and I was still caught up in the magic of Christmas Eve when I came across his column in one of the papers.

He began by telling the story of a stranger putting \$1600 in gold coins into a Salvation Army kettle. The stranger put it in anonymously and then walked away. Now that's the kind of story the papers love to pick up and run as a bit of a feature on the spirit of Christmas...the spirit of love and generosity. He said, however, there was a follow-up story. Because of the publicity given to the \$1600 gold coins put into the Salvation Army kettle, the Salvation Army began getting phone calls from people saying that the coins belonged to them, that they had been stolen from their house. Somebody must have dropped them into kettle to get rid of them. They demanded that the coins be returned to them.

Then he told another story about a man driving home from work on Christmas Eve, who saw a boy fall through the ice in a lagoon. He stopped his car and jumped out, tore off his jacket and crawled out on the ice. The ice broke and he fell in, too, but he still reached the boy. Shivering and shaking, he crawled out of the water, put on his coat and discovered that while he was risking his life to save the boy, that one of the bystanders had lifted an envelope from his pocket containing his \$100 Christmas bonus!

Then finally the columnist told the story of a Department Store Santa Claus who stuffed merchandise inside his Santa Claus costume. On his breaks he'd go back into the stockroom, take a pillow out and put a suit in its place. They caught him and discovered that his basement was filled with stolen merchandise. He was ruining his own business out of his basement - Chicago's version of Santa's Workshop.

DEVELOPMENT

I guess I sort of resented reading all of this on Christmas Day. It bothered me. Even after all these many Christmases in this city, I still want to believe that Christmas can and really does change things, that just the spirit of Christmas is going to make a difference. I guess I heard Dicken's Christmas Carol too many times as a youngster and it did leave a strong impression on my mind. I really believed that the Scrooges of our world could be changed by the spirit of Christmas. In fact, I believed that the whole world could be changed because of Christmas.

Most of you, I'm sure, remember the story of the Christmas Eve truce in the First World War. In France, the British Army in their trenches, on the other side of No Man's Land, the Germans huddled in their trenches. The battle was fierce, but on Christmas Eve, out of reverence for the Christ Child - the Prince of Peace - there was a truce called and all was quiet on this cold, winter night with the stars set like jewels against the cosmic darkness. In some versions of the story even the Star of Bethlehem appears over France on that night. All is quiet as midnight approaches and then from the British trenches you hear the singing of "Silent Night, Holy Night". All is quiet again. Then from the German trenches you began to hear, "Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht".

I don't know if that actually happened, but I do know that I wanted to believe that it happened. I wanted to believe that the message of "Peace on earth, goodwill to all people" is more than just a dream. I wanted to believe that Christmas is so appealing, so alluring, and so irresistible that its magic can change our world and that our world will be different because of Christmas. Maybe not the Kingdom of God, but if everybody kept the Christmas spirit for one day, it would make a profound difference in our world.

As a boy growing up, I know I sure did my part. On Christmas day I made my most sincere effort of the year to get along with everyone in the family. And from my perspective as the youngest member of the family, that was an heroic effort against some great odds...believe me! I tried my best and it worked! At least for a while. And I remember saying to myself, "Who knows, if we can all get along together on this one day, we might even be decent to one another the rest of our lives". Yes, it worked. All the way through our Christmas dinner. You didn't have to ask anybody to pass you anything. My sister, who I thought didn't even know my name, spoke to me pleasantly...like an older sister ought to speak to a younger obnoxious brother. It was just like Bob Cratchit's house in London on Christmas Day. It really worked until my parents, testing the Christmas spirit would usually ask, "Now who's going to help clean things up and do the dishes?" And that was when the truce usually broke down, and no man's land was established once again and hostilities resumed.

THE STORY OF SIMEON

Now, I suppose all of us ask, "Why can't Christmas last forever?" I'd like to think it was that question that prompted Luke to conclude the story of Christmas with the Story of Simeon. Only in those days the question wasn't "Why can't Christmas last forever?". In that time the question came a bit differently...like this maybe, "If the Messiah has come, then why doesn't the world look like it?" And that's the question Simeon is there to answer.

"After the eighth day", the text begins, Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the Temple for the circumcision, as the Law required. Christmas is over now. No one is around the stable any longer...the Wise Men have come and gone home, and the Shepherds left a long time ago. After the circumcision Mary and Joseph wait another month for the Ritual of Purification, another Jewish Law to be observed; after a month the mother was to be purified.

They are there, now, for this Ritual of Purification - Mary, Joseph and the baby. They must be anxious to get back to Nazareth. They'd been there a month but now they can return home. They're all packed. In fact, I imagine that they stopped at the Temple on their way out of town. They see there an old man blocking the door, his hands outstretched. He wants to see their baby.

"Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel..." That's the way Luke introduces Simeon to us. He's been there for years, checking the babies, looking at all the children as they're brought into the Temple, to see if this One is the Messiah? Is this The One we've been waiting for? Year after year, every day, day after day, Simeon in the Temple, looking for the consolation of Israel.

Old Simeon sees Mary and Joseph with the baby and holds his arms out. What must Mary have thought? The old man's crazy. He's going to drop Him. Be careful.

Mary hands him the child anyway. Simeon pulls the corner of the blanket down so he can look into the face of the child and then sings:

"Lord, let now Thy servant depart in
peace, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation"

The Messiah has come. The Savior of the world is here. God has kept His promise. You see Simeon was an intercessor for Israel. He was there to remind God daily that He is supposed to keep His promise. Like a watchman on the wall, scanning the horizon, day after day, to see if this is the day the Messiah comes, if this is the day God keeps His promise.

And then Simeon looks again. This time he sings a different tune:

"Behold, this Child is set for the falling and the rising
of many in Israel, and a sword shall pierce through your
heart also".

TODAY'S TEXT That's the text for this Sunday after Christmas, and I wish it weren't. I wish we could go on focusing on the magic of Christmas, and the warmth and glow of Christmas eve...its enchantment. Perhaps I should have edited the text, and cut it off at the Nunc Dimittis, the famous hymn, "Lord, Let now thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation" and ended it there. That's a nice ending to the Story of Christmas, Simeon announcing the Messiah has come.

But Simeon doesn't stop there, and neither does the New Testament. He goes on to prophesy what is going to happen. "This child is set for the falling and the rising of many in Israel. A sword shall pierce through your soul also". That can mean only one thing. It means only one thing when a Prophet sets something like that in the midst of a people. It means that they're going to have to make a choice, just as in the Old Testament the prophet said,

"I set before you this day both life and
death; therefore choose life."

Jesus is being set in the midst of us for us to choose. "This Child is set for the rising and the falling of many". And it means that those who choose Him will know pain and struggle in their pilgrimage. "The sword shall pierce through your soul also."

BEST KEPT SECRET That's one of the best-kept secrets among Christians. But the fact is that if you're not struggling with what it means for you to live in this world and follow Jesus, then you're following at a safe distance. Or you are listening only to the comfortable words of Jesus. It's easy to follow Jesus if all you listen to are the comfortable words. He spoke those words to those who suffer, and if you are one of them, if you are suffering, then hear them gladly and receive the grace and the peace that only Christ can offer. But if you're strong and comfortable, then to believe that those words are for you is somewhat dishonest and unseemly. It's like overfed people stealing food that is set out for the hungry.

For the strong Jesus had different words, words that challenge us to become disciples, to become better persons, to live in such a way that the world will

know that the Kingdom has come in Christ. And if you try to follow Jesus and His hard teachings, then I tell you, you are going to struggle in your conscience, and you are going to stumble, and you are going to have to get up again and start over again, many times. That's the pattern of the Christian life.

Bishop McConnell used to tell the story about the time he presided over a Conference of preachers in West Virginia. The custom in those days in that Conference was to call the roll of the preachers and have all of them stand up and tell how many conversions they had under their ministry that year. Now preachers are notorious statisticians. You've heard of the preacher's count. That's always a generous count. As each preacher stood up the total went up higher and higher and finally the good Bishop interrupted the roll and said,

"I would estimate from hearing your reports so far that you have converted more people than there are in West Virginia...."

And one of the preachers stood up and said, "Mr. Bishop, down here you've got to convert them several times a year!"

And I suspect that's true in New York City as well. It was true in Palestine two thousand years ago, just as Simeon predicted. One of the amazing things about the New Testament is its honesty about that. All the disciples stumbled. None of the Disciples ever quite got it. And in the end all of the disciples fled and left Him. Peter - first among all the disciples - Peter, the Rock of the Church. There are at least three occasions recorded when Peter had to start all over again. And if Peter had to do it, you and I probably will, too.

INNER STRUGGLE AND FAILURE

You read the New Testament and you get the impression that inner struggle and failure, and even doubting and falling away are not the signs of those who don't have faith; they are the signs of those who choose to follow Him and finding the going difficult. They are examples that Jesus is set before us "for the rising and the fall of many". And - if you get too close, "A sword may pierce your soul also".

I've referred to Scott Peck's book, The Road Less Traveled, once or twice this past year. I recall that he stresses that growth in this life is a matter of struggle. He said if you're going to move toward the kind of life that you want to live, if you are going to move toward the kind of life that God created you to live, then it's going to involve struggle and pain and hardship on your part. In fact, I believe he defines sin as the unwillingness to choose the hard life and face the problems in your life and conquer them. To run away is what he called sin.

He observed that patients come to therapy expecting the "quick fix", some insight that is going to be revealed by the therapist that is going to enable them to be easily and quickly relieved of all their problems. And when they finally see that it's not going to be that way at all, when they finally see that it's going to be a long and difficult journey into new life, then they procrastinate and rationalize and give good reasons why they can't go on. But he said the real reason they don't go on is because they don't want to do the hard work. It is hard. It is a struggle to come to a new person. And there will be a struggle in your conscience if you try to live in this world and follow Jesus.

I know someone who did. Theodore Parker Ferris was a man whom I admired greatly. For thirty years he was Rector of Trinity Episcopal Church in the city of Boston, the Phillips Brooks' Church in Coply Square. I often had the privilege of hearing him preach when I was a student in Boston back in the early fifties. I don't know of any preacher I ever heard who could reach so intimately into the lives of other people. Theodore Parker Ferris died in 1972. From his private papers they discovered that he had gone through many private struggles himself. Faith was not easy for him. He struggled to hold on to what faith he had.

Among his possessions was a prayer, written on the back of a beverage list from an airline. It went like this:

"Lord Jesus, I would like to be able to do myself the things I help others to do. I can give them a confidence I myself do not have, and I can quiet their anxieties, but not my own. What do I lack? Or is it the way I am made? I want to be free to move from place to place without panic. You did it. And you made it possible for others to do it. You didn't count on drugs. You trusted Your Father. You didn't turn away from life, nor did you seek pain or death. You met each as it came. I would like to do the same, but by myself I can't. I like to think that You can be with me and in me, and that with Your help I can do better. Amen."

CLOSING

That's an amazing prayer, a confession, really. It surprised all those who thought they knew him. All they saw in him was courage and faith and hope and especially love, that reached out and included everyone and everybody. He was not a man to talk about himself to other people, so nobody knew about the inner struggles of his soul. But I know something now. I always wondered about this.

One of the things that Dr. Ferris was famous for was preaching the three-hour service on Good Friday. Year after year he did that. For three hours, the seven last words of Christ. It was a tour de force. And every year on Good Friday Trinity Church would be packed for those three hours, as people listed to Theodore Parker Ferris talk about the meaning of the cross for their lives.

I always wondered how he could do that - year after year - never repeating himself. Now I know. I know that he knew the cross as one who was there with his Lord. He got close enough to Jesus to know what Simeon was talking about when he said, "A sword shall pierce through your soul also."

PRAYER

As the Christmas season passes once again, O God, may the light of it linger in our lives, so that we see the whole world in a new way and from a new point of view. Give us the grace and the will to trust the best in other people and to look constantly for You, not in the sky, but in the depths of our own lives. In the name and spirit of the Child of Bethlehem we pray. Amen.