

Visions of Salvation

Isaiah 61:10—62:5 Luke 2: 22-40

The artificial divide we create from one year to the next that we'll be acknowledging this evening, and tomorrow or those who opt not to stay awake until midnight, does provide a point in time for reflection.

We can look back on the past year and consider what happened, what was memorable, what we'd rather forget, what we'd like to do-over, what opportunities we seized, and others that we let pass us by, what changed and whether it was for the better or the worse, and hopefully whether we've grown a bit wiser, more happy, more purposeful or focused, or just more of the same, or not.

We can look ahead to the coming year and ask some of the same things, perhaps in a more informed way from the perspective of years past. We always seek to form a vision for our future, and may even set some worthy goals to realize that vision. However, we've been around long enough to know that a vision alone, or goals alone, don't mean much unless there is a conviction to act, and a plan of action to which we would truly adhere. We've done wishful thinking in the past and inevitably been quite disappointed in the results. And some of those disappointments may be reflected in our less positive thoughts about the past year.

The shortcomings of past years may make us rather cynical about pledging to new endeavors at personal improvements, but the desire for change doesn't wane much. We still want that new path for ourselves or the realization of what we long to become. As always, it depends on dedicated commitment and effective planning. We can have that vision, but will it be fulfilled?

In the church, it remains the season of Christmas this Sunday before giving way to Epiphany next Sunday. The birth of Jesus has happened, noteworthy to few people besides those in the countryside around Bethlehem, a small group of Eastern magi, and the inner circle of Herod's palace and guard.

Has the promise of God been fulfilled? As yet, there has been only one real vision for what the promise of God means. We heard that in the radical declaration of Mary who envisions social transformation on the order of a revolution. It was quite powerful. Having a vision for what God is doing is definitely a spiritual gift. The prophets get included in the scriptures because it is clear that these prophets had something to say about what God is doing in the world, something that needed to be heard and re-stated and reckoned with in every age.

The passage from Isaiah continues the passage that we heard earlier in Advent, just 2 weeks ago: *The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim*

the year of the Lord's favor [- the jubilee year]. To this, God announces, *I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing*. You remember that, right?

The ending passage that week is the opening passage this week: The voice of God's people is joyfully thankful for the promise of God that's expected to be fulfilled: *I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul rejoices in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness*. The bottom line is that God's people are going to be looking good, rather than a bedraggled, forlorn, and forsaken people.

As the passage continues, the voice now shifts to God who proclaims: *I will not keep silent ... I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch*. God's elevation of Zion from its lowly state will be evident to all the nations and God promises that they will be called by a new name. The old name was not so good, as we'll hear.

You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called Hepzibah [My Delight Is in Her], and your land Beulah [Married]; for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married.

God's people have been portrayed as a barren woman, forsaken and desolate, apparently cursed by God, and therefore scorned by all for her sinfulness. Yet God would extend sacred love to the unlovely, blessing her with sacred bonds of marriage in covenant care, making the one once-scorned into the envy of all. It's Cinderella time!

This theme continues in the renaming from *Deserted* to *My Delight*, from *Desolate* to *Married*. The outcast is embraced, uplifted, and made new. The outcast is made into the bride who is united with her God as God acts as bridegroom, rejoicing in his newfound love and devotion for his beloved people.

God is bringing about a reversal and restoration. God now wants to set this covenant commitment with God's people front and center. God wants this relationship to succeed and bring forth a witness to God's blessings of peace, grace, and hope. God's people, Zion, are at the top of God's agenda, and for a reason. All nations and peoples will know this God and this people as God's people, blessed and cared for. This God acts for his people, and is devoted to their well-being.

In the naming of God's people, we hear how a different name means a new identity in the world. God wants the world to know that these are his people and they are to be a blessing for all of creation. This action comes at God's initiative, the remembrance of the ancient promise, and the pledge to steadfast love and devotion to God's people. God renders God's vision for God's people that's shared by the prophet.

In Luke, the promise of God had been fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. The main characters are no longer Mary and Joseph. They're parents toting around a baby, so no

one really cares about them any longer, as parents of babies understand. Bring a baby into our bank branch and watch people make utter fools of themselves. Grown men make these high-pitched noises, like they think they're talking in a special language that babies understand, and of course, the women virtually screech when they're not cooing. If you want to rob a bank, send a baby in first so that everyone is totally preoccupied. I'm sure the people around Mary and Joseph were just as ridiculous around babies as people are today.

The holy parents have made the journey into Jerusalem to do the right things, like the good Jews that Luke wants them to appear to be. They've come to dedicate their son to the Lord God, and to make the sacrifices expected for Mary's purification. (The offering of two turtledoves or pigeons is what the *poor* are allowed to offer; the proper offering is a year old lamb and a turtledove or pigeon. Luke is again calling attention to their poverty.) Once this is done, they drop into the background. The focus now shifts to the visions of nearby prophets who validate the blessing of this child as the sign of God's coming salvation for all people.

We first meet Simeon, a righteous and devout man who has been a "watchman," ever seeking the one promised from God. Simeon should also be acknowledged as a prophet, one who gives vision and voice to God's work in the world. The text says, *It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's [Messiah].*

Simeon does not seem to frequent the temple, but the Holy Spirit urges him to go there. He meets Mary and Joseph as they're walking in. He sweeps over and scoops up the baby Jesus, praising God for sending the Promised One, the Messiah. Although the parents will be giving their child a name, the common name Jesus or Yeshua or Joshua, meaning Savior, Simeon beholds the child as far more than simply Savior of one people, but declares the child will be *a light of revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.*

Simeon also warns, *This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel.* While Simeon is rejoicing on one hand in the fulfillment of God's promise to him and to his people, Simeon's vision admits that there will be times of tribulation as the Messiah confronts the sinfulness of the world, the injustice of the powerful, and the ugliness of threatened elites. He even asserts that Mary may experience trials due to the mission of her son, the Lord's Messiah, as she is part of God's covenant people.

Next is the prophetess Anna, an old woman who is a fixture in the temple since her husband had died decades before. Widows were often left in very harsh circumstances. For example, you'll recall the story of the widow's mite, the widow who put her last two pennies in the collection plate. Anna became dependent on the temple, being fully devoted to fasting and praying. When she sees the baby (and Mary and Joseph), she gives glory to God and identifies the child to others gathered there who were, perhaps like her, *looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.* She is moved by the Spirit to envision the fulfillment of the promise, coming through this particular baby. Like Simeon, she had sought the Lord's Messiah who would bring about the new

age with the Kingdom of God. Anna's words, added to Simeon's, name this child as the Promised One of God. In this baby and with this couple, both Simeon and Anna give recognition and witness to God's acts of salvation, fulfilling the promise for God's people. Each of them recognizes the Lord's Messiah. Each of them experiences a vision of salvation for God's faithful who have languished, suffered, and endured.

The twin testimonies of these two, an old man and an old woman, stand as the proof test that God has indeed brought the Messiah into the world. Both have dedicated their lives to the promise of God. By their devotion, they can recognize the Messiah and offer their unique testimony affirming the faithfulness of God to the covenant promise.

They also provide a witness in sacred vision. Their faithful persistence trusted in the promise of God. Their spirits never flagged that God was active in the world, even as the years added on and they may have wondered if they would be blessed in their lifetimes with a vision of the Messiah from God. They remained faithful to their God who is engaged ever faithfully for the well-being of God's people.

Like Simeon and Anna, Isaiah, too, experiences a vision of salvation for God's people. Isaiah, too, reflects on God who comes to be with his people, providing a new life promise for them amid their despair toward their future, their vision-less future that has been clouded by years of frustration, inertia, and deprivation.

As we cross the threshold into another year, let's be encouraged by these faithful witnesses. As they affirm from the ancient past, God continues to work in our lives. Do we have a vision for what God is doing in our own lives, in the lives of people everywhere? In that vision, we will find sacred purpose. In that vision, we will find salvation and redemption, the new life promise of God being fulfilled in us.