

"God Is With Us"
by Rev. Frances Savill
December 31, 2023

Luke 2:22-40
Galatians 4:4-7

Do you remember the original sin... the serpent in the garden?
His words to Adam and Eve were - you will be like God. And humanity has spent much of it's time and energy since then, trying to be God.

How ironic then, that God, in all his glory, enthroned in majesty in the heavens, chose to become a human being, to descend from his throne and take on frail flesh, to fully take on our humanity in all its simplicity.

A Jewish boy was born, they named him Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was born. His name means "God saves."
What was done in heaven, Jesus being named and dedicated to the Lord, was later enacted on earth by Mary and Joseph.

Jesus was taken to the Temple, the ceremony of dedication of the first-born male reminded the people of Egypt, how God had redeemed them from slavery. So each first born male was redeemed, dedicated to God.

So as Mary and Joseph came to the Temple remembering the story of the Passover and God's redemption and salvation of his people, suddenly Simeon appeared. Simeon was a man to whom God had promised that he would not see death until he saw God's anointed one.

Simeon and Anna were prophets of God. When he saw Jesus, Simeon was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke words of hope and recognition.

Jesus was the Lord's Messiah. He would save his people as Moses did. The plagues against the Pharaoh were said to reveal Pharaoh's heart. Jesus would reveal the hearts of many. Jesus' life calls for a response.

As we consider Jesus' life, what we see is often a very unexpected response. Simeon and Anna, the old who had dedicated their lives to worship, who were led by God's Spirit, welcomed and recognized the child and rejoiced.

The powerful rulers in Jerusalem, both the political powers and religious ones, their hearts were revealed as they recognized Jesus as a threat and tried to destroy him.

To a rich young ruler who wanted to know what he needed to do to inherit eternal life, his heart was revealed when Jesus told him to sell what he owned. That young man walked away from Jesus, sadly.

When Jesus called Simon Peter, according to Luke's gospel, He used Simon's boat as a preaching platform. When Jesus was finished preaching, he told Simon to put out his net in the deep water, the catch Simon hauled in was so great it took two boats to carry it all. When Simon Peter saw the catch of fish he fell to his knees before Jesus saying: "Go away from me Lord, I am a sinful man."

Jesus' response to him was, "Don't be afraid, from now on you will catch people." So Simon and his partners pulled their boats on shore, left everything and followed Jesus.

Peter's heart was revealed to himself and to Jesus, but Jesus offered Peter a chance for a new heart, a new life, all he had to do was follow Jesus.

Throughout Jesus' ministry many sinners' hearts were revealed, but in that seeing, many accepted Jesus' gift of forgiveness and new life.

Simeon said that Jesus would reveal hearts, but he did more than reveal the truth about our hearts. Jesus revealing the truth of my heart is not good news. But to everyone who would, there was and is an opportunity for a new heart, a cleansed heart, redemption, forgiveness, saving grace.

Simeon's final words to Mary and Joseph were:
'And a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

The shadow of the cross fell over the child.
He would be opposed, he will reveal the truth, and he will suffer.

Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness. Our world is filled with sin, with forces that oppose the truth, that cling to death, and darken the world.

At Christmas we do not forget that too many families are homeless, too many children die of starvation and treatable diseases, that war rages on.

Into this very real world of sin – God enters, takes on flesh and lives among us. He was born to poor parents, in an occupied country.

This world is the world he came to, to bring hope, and salvation- to establish His kingdom. He reveals the truth of who we are, but he offers us new life, and makes us new creations.

The child was blessed by Simeon and Anna and then he was dedicated to God and went home with his parents.

Then there was a long silence. Jesus grew up. Jesus knows what it is to go to school, learn the family business, put up with brothers and extended family. It was years of being a kid, playing games.
He blessed our work and play, our growing up.

In the incarnation, Jesus lifts our fallen humanity. He restored our brokenness. Our hearts are revealed, the whole, ugly truth, but we are adopted through Christ as God's beloved children. The Holy Spirit dwells in believers and we are made one with Christ, clothed in his righteousness.

If anyone is in Christ there is a new creation. And Jesus teaches us to think differently, to live differently- caring for the least, lifting up the fallen, sharing what we have, living in community, learning to love our neighbor, learning to love ourselves.

We are invited into abundant life in Jesus' name, and experience life in His kingdom. And so we share our building with people who are being set free from addictions and are finding new life one day at a time, in Jesus' name.

We bring food for the foodbanks so that everyone in our community might eat and enjoy something of the abundance of this life.

In Christ, again it is a good creation. It is good to live this life fully human, alive to God, being a blessed creature, a son or daughter of the divine Creator, surrounded by brothers and sisters, in a family that is diverse and very large, that stretches around the world.

And the good news of today is that God is not finished with any of us yet. Jesus continues to reveal our hearts... which are being changed, which are being made new.

We still see the broken places, the hurts, and what is hurtful, we see the fears, and the grasping, parts of bitterness and anger, selfishness and arrogance.

But Jesus is at work in us through the Holy Spirit, with us, renewing our hearts and minds as we worship, as we pray, as we are transformed by his lifegiving word. As we learn sacrifice and love from the one who continues to say "follow me". This is the adventure that is ours.

At the finish of one year, and with the new year just hours away, we see this good life that we are given, and the new life that we are invited to share.

God is with us. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray: Gracious God, in your presence, our hearts are revealed, what is beautiful and wonderful, and what is still very marred by brokenness. But in your presence are enveloped by your love, and the hand of Jesus reaches out to us, inviting us to do life with him, and follow him and his ways. Lord, you opened the eyes of the blind, who made the lame and broken leap for joy, you even brought the dead to life. Continue your good work in us, continue giving us new hearts, new minds, open hands and open hearts, and the new life that comes as we follow you. Amen.