

**Wesley United Methodist Church
December 27, 2020**

**Deck the Halls: Decorating Your Life with What Mattersⁱ
“Deck the Halls With a Promise Fulfilled”**

Scripture: Luke 2:22-40

Believe it or not, Christmas is not over. In the church year, the time up to Christmas Eve was Advent, a time of preparation. Now we are actually in the season of Christmas. It's a short season – 12 days, until Epiphany on January 6th. But outside of the church, it may seem as if Christmas is over, even though it's only two days after Dec. 25th.

This is the time when the first question most adults ask children is, “What did Santa Claus bring you?” or “Did you get what you wanted for Christmas?” Sometimes what we wanted, or thought we wanted, turns out to be different than what we expected. Sometimes we are sorry that our wish, or a promise has been fulfilled because it is so different. But sometimes the outcome is better than anything we could have anticipated.

It seems like forever, but it's been less than 9 months since we started talking about a vaccine for Covid 19. We've waited and anticipated that our scientists would figure out what Covid was enough to be able to then develop a vaccine to help protect us from this. In record time vaccines have been developed and the week before Christmas they began to be administered. Now we wait in anticipation for the day when enough of us will be able to receive the vaccine and we can begin to put Covid behind us. It is hard to wait though, isn't it?

The people of Israel had been waiting a very long time for a Messiah who they believed would come in and overthrow Rome and liberate Israel. We begin with two old people – Simeon and Anna. Both Simeon and Anna spent a lot of time in the temple in Jerusalem. Both were upright, holy people who lived a life devoted to God.

Simeon had been waiting for the Messiah, and he believed that God had told him he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. On that momentous day, Mary and Joseph came to the temple to perform the purification rituals required and expected of good Jewish families following the birth of a child.

Matthew tells us that when Simeon saw them and saw the baby, he recognized what the Spirit had promised him. He held the child and spoke words that have traveled down to us through the centuries. His words are called the Nunc Dimittis from the first two words of the Latin Translation. "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples." Simeon gives thanks to God for allowing him to live long enough to see the Messiah and now he is ready to die peacefully.

Can you imagine the joy that he must have felt when he held this baby and knew with absolute certainty that Jesus was the messiah who God had promised to send? He was filled with thankfulness and with hope anticipating the new life that would come from the fulfillment of God's ancient promise.

But promises don't always work out the way we anticipate. Most of the Jewish people were anticipating a messiah who would overthrow Rome, liberate Israel from Roman control and oppression, and restore Israel to its great glory. There are several hints in what Simeon proclaims that tell us right up front that Jesus is not the kind of Messiah that they were waiting for, that they believed God had promised them.

First of all, according to Simeon, this Messiah would not only be for the glory of Israel, but would also be a "light for revelation to the Gentiles" or as Eugene Peterson puts it in The Message "A God-revealing light to the non-Jewish nations." This is the first indication that the Messiah would be someone different than they expected. Typically, Jews did not associate with Non-Jews and yet, this messiah, will reveal God to the non-Jews.

Friends, this is one part of the promise for which we can be grateful. We are those non-Jewish nations. We are the people who are suddenly included in God's promise through this Messiah, through the one who earlier Joseph had been told would be Emmanuel – meaning God with us.

So not only has God fulfilled the promise even if it is different than the people expected, God also has a purpose for Jesus' life. Simeon recognized that his purpose was to bring salvation to God's people, and the table has just gotten a lot bigger than they expected. However, God's plan, God's purpose for Jesus would not be achieved without pain.

Mary and Joseph were speechless and were amazed at what Simeon said. Simeon went on to bless them and then said to his mother Mary, “This child marks both the failure and the recovery of many in Israel. A figure misunderstood and contradicted, the pain of a sword-thrust through you – But the rejection will force honesty, as God reveals who they really are.”ⁱⁱ

We know the rest of the story; so, we know that Jesus did, indeed, meet opposition. We know that people misunderstood what he was teaching them and some saw him as a threat. We know that this opposition would finally lead to Jesus’ painful death on a cross, charged as a seditionist trying to lead a rebellion against Rome.

Simeon reminds us that in living out our purpose and God’s call in our lives, it does not mean that our days will be easy and without pain. In fact, on the contrary, he reminds us that when we follow Jesus, we may very well expect that there will be times when we are met by opposition. We may find ourselves protesting against the status quo, challenging some government policies, using our resources in ways that may not make sense to our families, even calling the church to account when it has strayed from the purpose that God has given us.

While Mary and Joseph are trying to figure out what Simeon has just said to them, Anna enters the scene. Anna was 84 years old and had been a widow for many years. Luke describes her as a prophet. In Luke’s gospel we find more women mentioned and acting than in the other gospels. Luke wants us to know that even in a patriarchal society, God is using Anna, an old woman as a prophet.

Luke tells us that Anna never left the temple but that she worshipped there all the time, fasting and praying. When she saw Mary and Joseph and the baby, she began to praise God. But she didn’t stop there. Anna is probably the first evangelist. She talked about the child to everyone she could find who was waiting expectantly for the freeing of Jerusalem. When faced with this baby, she was not able to be silent. She wanted everyone to know about what God was doing.

Two old people in the temple who had both seen the beginning of the promise of God fulfilled. One had been waiting for this and now with that complete, he was able to die in peace. The other excited went to tell everyone she could find.

The promise had been fulfilled. The promise has been fulfilled. Both Simeon and Anna saw this child, saw Jesus as the completion of God's promise. But, in many ways it was only the beginning.

That's true of most promises. When they are fulfilled they are also the beginning of a new chapter, a time of living into the results of that promise. God had a plan for Israel. God had a plan for Jesus. God has a plan for each of us.

Now, please, don't hear this as our lives being pre-ordained or pre-destined. I believe God doesn't control what we do or how we do it. Leslie Weatherhead wrote an amazing small book called "The Will of God". I highly recommend it to everyone. It was written during the tumultuous days of World War II, when London was under almost daily attack. Weatherhead, a pastor, trying to help his people understand what was happening, described the importance of considering several things when talking about the Will of God.

First, he described God's intentional will. God's intentional will is that people would live in peace with each other, caring for each other, seeking the best for each other, living in harmony with God's desires. However, God also gave us free will, and that means that we often make decisions that seem to get in the way of God's will or initially seem to block or obstruct God's will.

When that happens, as during the War that Weatherhead and his people were struggling with, we need to consider God's circumstantial will. Given the circumstances in which we find ourselves, how do we understand God's will? What is God calling us to be and do in the conditions around us? This question was reflected in the WWJD popularity about 30 years ago. What Would Jesus Do? What does God want me to do right now?

Today in the middle of a pandemic, we find ourselves asking those same questions. There are churches and believers who insist that they do not need to wear masks or socially distance or change their lives in any way because God is in charge and God will protect them from Covid and from anything else. Sadly, some of these churches and church events have been identified as what are called super-spreaders.

There are others, myself included, who believe that as followers of Christ, God's will for us in these circumstances is to do everything we can to take care of others, to

keep others safe, to try to prevent Covid from spreading. So we wear masks; we worship remotely; we avoid being in groups of people; we collect food for those who are hungry; we do what we can to help other people. We don't believe that God caused Covid. We don't believe that God is going to insulate us from the effects. But we do believe that there are many things that are in harmony with God's will, God's desire for us during this time and we do our best to be in harmony with God's circumstantial will.

The third aspect of God's will be the piece that offers the hope and promise of Christmas. God's ultimate will is that we spend an eternity with God. Through the gift of Jesus, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, God is constantly moving us to walk in God's intentional will for us.

One of the greatest benefits of this life in Christ is that we are not alone. Jesus was, is, and always will be Emmanuel, God with us. Like Simeon, we are called to listen, to be attentive to God's will and to remind each other of God's presence with us, of the promise of God and of our eternal hope in Christ.

Listening is essential for the life of the Spirit. Simeon dedicated his life to listening to God. I read this week, that the name Simeon actually means "heard". That's a good name for him. He listened to God, and he heard. It's not only a good plan for us, but it is also an essential plan for us.

Like Anna, we are also called to share that hope, that joy, that faith with the world. We are called to help each other see that God has a purpose and a plan for each of our lives.

In a few days, we will enter a new year. As much as many of us would like to forget 2020, this is a good time for us to reflect upon this year. What have we learned about ourselves this year? How have we responded to our lives being thrown into turmoil? Have we become more self-centered or have we focused on caring for others in whatever ways we could?

Whether you like the answers to those questions or not, the next questions are even more important. As we enter a new year, what will we do differently? What will stay the same? I'm not talking about New Year's resolutions that most of us break before the first week of the year is past. I'm talking about being intentional about listening to God; about prayerfully asking how God wants us to live each day in a world

that will be forever different because of Covid, because of the recent election, because of the protests happening in our streets, because of the way we treat each other.

Let us listen like Simeon. Let us share with others like Anna. Let us rejoice that God has a plan and a purpose for our lives and never leaves us to face life alone. As we celebrate the promise of God, fulfilled in Jesus, let us hold onto God's promises for our lives too.

Let us pray:

God of love. You promised us that you would be with us whatever happens in life. We thank you for fulfilling that promise – even when we are not always able to see it. Open our hearts, minds, eyes, and ears, so that we may listen, see, understand, and know your presence with us, your promise fulfilled in our lives. Help us to be your hands and feet today, helping others to know of your promise. Help us to remind others of the hope that they and we have in you – that you have a purpose and a plan for our lives and that you promise to always be with us. Amen.

ⁱ This Series is based on a series from United Methodists of Greater New Jersey, prepared for this season during a pandemic. Some material is mine, but some ideas also come from this resource abbreviated as GNJ. Other resources influencing and quoted are Adam Hamilton's book Incarnation and General Board of Discipleship Advent Resource Year B "Company's Coming". At times it can be difficult to know exactly which source is influential.

ⁱⁱ Peterson, Eugene, The Message, Luke 2:34-35.