

Seeing What You Believe
A Homily for Sardis Baptist Church
New Year's Eve 2017
Bob Stillerman
Luke 2:22-40

On Wednesday evening, I visited with William for a few minutes – we talked about Christmas memories. He recalled a German tradition of his childhood, and even more so of his grandparents' childhood. On Christmas Eve, the whole community would gather, and share the Christ-light, similar to what we did last Sunday evening. But everyone lived nearby, and so they walked home, candles still lit, carrying Christ's love and Christ's light with them, allowing that light to illumine their own hearts and homes.

William's family carried their candles to his grandparents' house. A parlor sat in the middle of the home, surrounded by French doors with glass panes. Inside, there was a Christmas tree. And there would be cookies, and sweet treats, and Christmas decorations, and new toys, and lots of other trimmings. But here's the thing. In the days leading up to Christmas, the parlor door was locked. So all you could do was see the tree, anticipate it, dream about it. And then, on Christmas Eve, once the Christ-light was burning, the door would be unlocked, the family would be invited into the room, the tree would be lit with old-fashioned candles, and the experience of Christmas would begin. William described it as an explosion of the senses – the sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste of Christmas, all in one place, and all with the people you love.

What a beautiful memory!

Upon leaving our visit, I couldn't help but feel a little depressed – On my car ride home, the radio station had switched back to Top 40 hits; when I went into Harris Teeter to pick up groceries for dinner, the Christmas candy had already been moved into the clearance aisle to make way for the Valentine's candy; there were already empty Christmas Trees in the neighbors' lawns; and Mary Allen was back to wearing her "normal" cute onesies. It was as if Christmas vanished as quickly as it came.

I think today's passage is timely. A bit of time has passed since the birth of Jesus – at least a week, perhaps as much as a month or two. And the birth of Jesus seems a little distant now. Levitating choirs and curious shepherds are no longer tracking the family's movements, and by now, the baby has been introduced to a proper crib. And I suspect Mary and Joseph are still cautious parents, but not nearly as anxious as they were those first few restless nights. They know how to feed the baby, and soothe his crying, and respond to his needs, and they've finally given themselves permission to sleep. And perhaps, they've started to think that there's a normalcy to parenthood. And maybe, just maybe, this miracle isn't as overwhelming as they thought!!!

Enter Simeon and Anna. Here we find two faithful servants – if they worshipped in modern day Charlotte, they'd be the ones that made sure the building was warm, and the candles were lit, and the hymnals were straight in the pews, and the Spirit was equipped to fill up the people of this place. They would be there to pray diligently for others, to welcome new babies, and to bury old friends, and to sing praises to God according to the season. They were people who prioritized the rituals of faith.

And here's why that's important. When we devote ourselves to covenant, that is to the intentional practice of loving God and loving others, we are prepared and ready to recognize the presence of God,

not just in extraordinary moments, but in the ordinary ones, too. Anna and Simeon didn't need a levitating choir to understand that they stood in the presence of a special child.

And I think Mary and Joseph needed to see that, needed to experience that. They needed to be re-invited back into the wonder of this child's birth.

Now I don't claim to be the parent of Messiah, but I am a parent. And if you told me on the day my daughter was born that there could be anything that would ever again fill me with the same sense of wonder and amazement of that day, I would have doubted you. But what wonder and what amazement I experienced when my child was dedicated to God by the people of this place last spring. And what wonder and what amazement I have seen in the faces of other parents as the people of this place delighted in the dedication of another baby, and the graduation of seven high school seniors. Or to hear the people of Sardis brag about one youth climbing the Pyrenees, or another starring in *Children of Eden*, or another making a game-saving pass break-up, or another marching for peace, or still another securing an internship.

As people of faith, I believe we need to be reminded that Emanuel, the arrival of God in our lives, is not a momentary thing. It's an evolution, an ongoing, ever-growing, ever-burgeoning process that fills our lives. And so as a community, we mark special events like birth, dedication, baptism, etc., because their specialness needs to be shared and acknowledged. How do we know that God is present? Because God's people have told us it is so!!! And just as each of us need to hear that truth publicly expressed by the people of Sardis, Mary and Joseph needed to hear it from Anna and Simeon.

The birth of Jesus was not a limited transaction – it was the start of something wonderful. Anna and Simeon remind us that the wonder of such an event is not outlived by a news cycle, nor a selling season, nor even our own attention span. God's presence with us should always be celebrated.

There's a second part to the story. Simeon says that there's cause for celebration, but also for concern. The work Mary's son is called to do, and indeed that all of us are called to do, will not be easy.

As Howard Thurman tells us:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart.

In Jesus, Anna and Simeon believed they saw a child who could begin the work of Christmas. And should we choose to be faithful servants like them, we too will notice the work of Christmas that can be done

by our own children. And should we choose to be faithful servants like Anna and Simeon, perhaps we can foster the kind of love and support that will make the work of Christmas possible.

Let's imagine for a moment this meetinghouse is the parlor in William's grandparents' home. And let's imagine our goal in the year ahead is to prepare this room so that all the senses of Christmas can be shared with all the people we love.

What will you gather to help find the lost?
What will you give to help heal the broken?
What will you bake to help feed the hungry?
Who will you advocate for so that the prisoner may be freed?
How will you use your hands to help rebuild the nations?
What lengths will you take to help sow peace?
What song will you sing to make music in your heart?

Sardis Baptist Church, we've got a parlor to make ready. In the year ahead, don't forget to notice all that life offers – its joys and its sorrows – and God's presence in all of it. Acknowledge these moments, because as a community, we need to hear them. And we need to share them with all we encounter. And I've got a feeling that if we do so faithfully, just as Anna and Simeon did, we're gonna have a whole parlor full of people next Christmas Eve to help welcome Emanuel.

And if we're lucky, maybe William will make us some of that Wassel to help welcome him properly.

I sure hope so! Amen.