

"Seeing God's Salvation"
Luke 2:29-32

December 20, 2015

1st Sunday of Christmas

We are a very visual society today. Many people these days keep their faces buried in screens. It's not just when viewing movies on a theater screen or watching programs on a television screen or even looking at stuff on a computer screen. People always have their phones with them so they can see a variety of stuff on the screens of their smart phones.

While our attention to visual things may be a bit excessive these days, it's always been around, especially in the Church. The Church is a very visual place, having stained glass windows, banners, colored vestments, colored paraments, and many other things. The Church's visual nature is clearly shown especially during the Christmas season.

Have you ever wondered why we set up nativity scenes in our homes and churches? It's something more than simply being part of our holiday decorations. We have plenty of other decorations – special candles, a tree, lights, ornaments, wreaths, and so on. Why do we need one more – especially one that has so many parts to it? I think it's because we want to see Jesus. So we set up images of Jesus, Mary, Joseph, shepherds, Wise Men and assorted animals – sheep, donkeys, cattle.

Have you ever thought why we only set up visual representations of Jesus at Christmas time? After all, we don't set up scenes of Jesus feeding the 5,000 or healing the 10 lepers either in our homes or church. (Imagine how much that would cost and how many pieces would come with such a set.) I think it's because we recognize that Christmas is the start of something very special: God's actions to save us from sin, death, and hell. The One who will save us is now born. We want to see our Savior and our salvation beginning with the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem.

This also explains why we have so many representations of Jesus' cross in our church, home, around our necks, and even special ones showing Jesus' dead body on them called crucifixes. We want to see our Savior and our salvation being accomplished by the death of Jesus as the perfect and complete sacrifice for your sin, my sin, and all sin on a cross outside of Jerusalem.

Because of our desire to see Jesus and our salvation being accomplished, we may become jealous of people in the Biblical narrative who actually saw this with their own eyes and experienced it: Mary, Joseph, shepherds, and now this guy named Simeon. In our text, he boldly states, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples." We think, "Wow! I want to see what Simeon saw. I want to see Jesus."

But wait a minute. What did Simeon actually see? He didn't see anything that looked special. All He saw was a tiny Jewish baby boy who looked just dozens of other Jewish baby boys who were being brought to the temple by their parents to present them to the Lord. He didn't look special. He wasn't wearing a tshirt that said "Messiah" on it. Mary's donkey didn't have a bumpersticker on it that, instead of saying "parent of a national honor society member", said "mother of the Son of God" on it.

Rather, the identity and the mission of *this* baby boy was revealed by God, the Holy Spirit, to Simeon through His Word. By the Holy Spirit's power and promise, Simeon was able to see that this lowly baby was actually the Son of God in the flesh. According to the Lord's own word, Simeon was ready and able to depart because, with His own eyes, he had seen God's salvation beginning to take root in this tiny, non-descript baby. Whether he was departing this life or simply departing the temple, Simeon had seen the Savior and the salvation He brought and he was good to go, to live or die.

We wonder when, where, and how we will actually see Jesus. We do not see Jesus in our nativity scenes. We also do not see Jesus on our crucifixes. Both of those images are beautiful and meaningful representations of Jesus, but they are not Jesus. Both of those images draw our attention to the beginning our salvation and the accomplishment of our salvation. But setting them up in our houses or wearing them around our necks will not save us.

Are we left then to only imagine Jesus or wait until we go to heaven to see Jesus? No. We see Jesus with our own eyes today and many other days when we gather here for worship. He is on our altar. Now, you may say that, beside the book stand, the only things present on our altar are containers of communion wafers – bread – and red wine covered by a special white cloth. Where's Jesus? There's Jesus – right there with the bread and the wine.

How can this be? It's just like with Simeon. He had seen dozens and dozens of different looking baby boys in the temple that day, the day before, the week before, and the year before – however long He had been waiting. There was nothing special about any of them. All of us have seen different looking breads, different looking bottles of wine – perhaps during the Christmas holiday. There is nothing special about any of those breads and wines.

The miracle of Christmas is that the Word of God who was in the beginning, who was with God, and who was God became flesh and dwelt among us. The infinite took on the finite. God became man and took on flesh and blood. The Holy Spirit revealed this to Simeon: the tiny little baby he was holding in his arms was the Lord's Christ, the Son of God, Jesus, God in flesh and blood.

There is a similar miracle that takes place on our altar and many other churches in Christendom every Lord's Day. The Lord's Christ, the Son of God, Jesus, God in flesh and blood whom Simeon held in his arms long ago, comes to us, to our church, and to our altar. It is not by magic or by the power of the pastor that this happens, but by the power and promise of Jesus Himself – a promise the pastor proclaims to us each time it happens. On the night when He was betrayed, Jesus took ordinary bread and said, "Take, eat; this is My body, which is given for you." Taking ordinary wine, He said, "Drink of it, all of you; this cup is the new testament in My blood, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." To both of these promises, Jesus attaches the following invitation: "Do this in remembrance of Me."

After the pastor speaks the promise, the bread and wine don't look any different from other bread and wine, just like the little Baby Jesus in Simeon's arms didn't look any different from the other baby boys there. However, the Holy Spirit, working through His Word, reveals to us that this bread and wine is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit allowed Simeon to see with the eyes of faith what the eyes of his body could not see: that He was holding the Son of God in his arms. In the same way, the Holy Spirit allows us to see with the eyes of faith what the eyes of our bodies cannot see: that we are eating the body of Christ and drinking the blood of Christ with the bread and wine when we kneel at this altar.

This is more than a mystical act of God to "wow" us by showing us that He can be with us in this special way. When the Holy Spirit revealed to Simeon that the baby in his arms was the Lord's Christ, Simeon did not say, "Cool!" (or whatever the equivalent Hebrew expression was). Instead, he said, "My eyes have seen Your salvation." Trusting in the humble little baby who is the Son of God to save him from his sin, from death, and from hell, Simeon was ready to leave in peace.

In the same way, when the Holy Spirit reveals to us by His Word that the bread and wine on our altar and then in our mouths are the true body and true blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, we understand and believe that this body of Jesus which hung on the cross and the blood of Jesus which was shed on the cross was given and shed for us. Trusting in Jesus, whose body and blood are brought to us in the bread and wine, we have forgiveness, life, and salvation. We can leave this sanctuary in peace. We can even leave this earth in peace when the Lord calls us by death or in His coming on the Last Day. We are right with Him and we shall live with Him forever in a joy so great that it is beyond our imagination.

Our world may be a totally visual society. Simeon shows us that God's Church is a visual people tempered by faith. By the working of the Holy Spirit through His Word, we are able to see with our eyes beyond what our eyes can see. We see Jesus, by faith, here with us in His body and blood. We see God's salvation, by faith, for us which He has prepared in the presence of all people, a light of revelation to the Gentiles (that's us!) and for glory to His people Israel. We receive His salvation through the forgiveness of our sins. We will receive everlasting life, by faith, in the presence of Jesus. And THAT will be something to see! Amen