

"Seeing the Signs"
Luke 2:22-40
December 31, 2017
First Sunday after Christmas
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church
Dr. Catherine Taylor

Rob and I got back Friday from a quick trip
to New York City to see our daughter.
Our other goal was to go to the Metropolitan Art Museum to see
the Michelangelo exhibit.

It's an exhibit of 200 of his works on paper, done rapidly
for the most part in pencil chalk.

It was amazing to be able to get so close to each one.

Drawing after drawing is full of energy and movement.

You can see the way he experimented
with the placement of bodies and limbs
and with precise aspects of human anatomy.

Some drawings almost look like animation,
with a leg or arm shown here, then here, then here
as the master decided which position would communicate best.
Because he was primarily a sculptor the lines were incredibly strong
and sometimes cut into the paper because his hands were so strong.
On some pages a drawing by Michelangelo is right beside
a drawing by a student, who is trying to copy the master's example.
If you simply glance at them they look alike.
If you stop to see, the difference is breathtaking.

Right next to the Michelangelo exhibit was an exhibit
of bold, bright paintings by English painter,
stage designer and photographer David Hockney,
a joyful explosion of color after hours of looking
at 500-year old pencil drawings on parchment.

Hockney is also a master, one of the most influential artists
of the 20th century and still going strong.

He is a man who sees in ways that are especially
vibrant and life-giving.

In an interview he talked about taking time to see,
and about the difference that size can bring to an image.
"If the way you look is boring," says Hockney, "change it."

How fitting then to come home to a scripture text in which
two people who have lived a long time on the lookout
see what they have been looking for
and recognize what it means immediately.

Christmas pageants always end in the manger.
Some of them begin on the hillside with the shepherds,
or out on the road with the Three Wise Men,
or even in the chambers of King Herod,
who frets and paces over a possible threat to his power,
but they always end in the manger.

The cast is almost always like our cast last Sunday afternoon,
costumed children in varying degrees of excitement and discomfort
ranked around the holy family at the center,
where a doll or the congregation's newest member
plays the role of baby Jesus, as Sophie Call did last week for us.

But today the back of the manger has opened up
and the set spun 'round so that the Jerusalem Temple is in view.
If we were still in pageant mode, it would be time
for the oldest members of the congregation
to come forward from the pews
to range themselves around the holy family, on the Temple steps,
many Anna's and Simenon's rejoicing to see
the child of salvation promised by God.

That is what is happening this morning.
The young parents, Mary and Joseph,
are bringing their child, Jesus,
to the Temple to present him to the Lord.
He has already been circumcised on the eighth day.
What we are hearing about this morning
is a different ritual that took place 42 days after a birth.
During this religious ritual a lamb is usually sacrificed to God,
unless the family is too poor, as this couple certainly are.
For them two pigeons or turtle doves will do.

Luke has written this pageant scene really well.
The details are there to tell us precisely that
Mary and Joseph are a poor couple
and but they are a devout couple as well,
representing the best of Israel's religious tradition.
Everything that should be done for a first born male child
under the Law was done for Jesus.
Before it's over we even marvel at the way this child,
whose family was too poor to honor his dedication to God with a lamb,
will be the Lamb of God himself one day,
and he will give himself for the salvation of all.

Enter Simeon. Simeon is elderly.
Luke tells us he is righteous and devout, a just and good man.
Simeon is one of that small band of Jews
looking for the consolation of Israel.

He is looking for the Messiah to come and to save,
and he has been promised that he will not die
before he sees the Messiah.

I think I may have shared with you at least once before that
a several years ago *The New York Times* carried a wonderful story
about a mix up at the Brooklyn Public Library.

A teacher named David Storch borrowed a copy
of the score of Handel's Messiah.

Through a clerical error in the library the transaction was not recorded.

There were several other requests for the score,
and the Library staff, unaware that it had been checked out,
spent hours and hours searching for it in the stacks.

On the day that David Storch returned it,
placing it on the circulation desk,

he was amazed to hear the Librarian spontaneously shout with joy
"The Messiah is here! The Messiah is back!"

Every head in the Library turned toward the voice,
but, alas, as the *Times* reported,

"A few minutes later everyone went back to work."

Not so for Simeon. His work of searching for the Messiah is finally at an end.
His years of waiting have been fulfilled.

He takes the baby in his arms and says with thanksgiving
"Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word,
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples."

In this tiny impoverished child,

Simeon has seen God's anointed Messiah.

Now Anna comes into the Christmas pageant.

She too is an aging Jewish prophet.

Like Simeon she has hung on to her hope in God and
waited in the Temple for years for a sign.

She never left the Temple, Luke tells us,
but worshipped day and night.

At the very moment Simeon holds Mary's child
Anna looks at him and sees salvation.

What exactly does she see in this fragile form?

We don't know because the text does not give her
a speech as it does Simeon.

But Anna still gets equal treatment from Luke.

We are told that "she began to praise God
and to speak about the child to all who were looking
for the redemption of Jerusalem."

She is the first person to demonstrate an eternal truth about the gospel:

The good news is not a private thing or something to be possessed
or kept discretely to oneself.

The good news of Christ Jesus is to be shared!

Anna becomes one of scripture's very first Christian preachers.

Our Old Testament lesson for today from Isaiah sounds to me
like the kind of sermon that Anna might have given
based on what she saw.

Listen to it again:

"I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall exalt in my God;
for God has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
God has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations."

We don't, of course, know what Anna really said.

But we know that these two wise, elderly prophets
saw salvation in the child.

Both had longed and waited and both knew that salvation
has political as well as personal consequences.

Most importantly, they both knew immediately
that they were in the presence of a blessing.

What about us?

We know that Christmas Day 2017 has come and gone.

Have you been blessed? Has your Messiah come?

The wrappings and ribbons are in the trash cans;
the needles of the Christmas tree are on the floor
instead of on the branches.

One person described it by saying

"The house looks like some strange weather pattern has stormed through."

We are cleaning up the remains,
putting on the garments that were wrapped under the tree
finding places in our households for the gifts,
and preparing to go back to our routines after a break
or a trip for those fortunate enough to have one.

Despite the 12 days of Christmas,
life is getting back to normal. But has your savior come?

We have, as Isaiah said, "been clothed with the garments of salvation,"
but can we see them?

The word salvation, as I often repeat, means deliverance, and rescue

but also wholeness and wellbeing.
Paul Tillich, one of the last century's renowned theologians, wrote
"...Salvation cannot be seen by everybody...
There is something surprising, unexpected
about the appearance of salvation
something that contradicts pious opinions and intellectual demands.
It's nature is visible and invisible...
Only those who can see power under weakness,
the whole under the fragment, victory under defeat,
glory under suffering, innocence under guilt,
life under death can say. "Mine eyes have seen thy salvation."

If Tillich is right, if salvation is hard for some of us to see,
perhaps that is a reason why the only two people in this story
seem to know what is going on.
It is interesting to me that the only two people who can really see it
have lived a really long time.
It's safe to assume that Anna and Simeon have seen their fair share of suffering,
and know what it is to see the whole under the fragment.
Mary and Joseph, on the other hand,
don't seem to know what's happening.
I have always found that detail odd,
for haven't they just come from the first scene in the pageant?
Weren't they both there in the manger when the adoring shepherds
arrived, bearing the words of angels?
Yet Luke tells us that "the child's mother and father
were amazed at what was being said about him."

The good news for those of us who are wearing Christmas sweaters
instead of the garments of salvation
is that seeing salvation can take time.
If you haven't seen your savior this Christmas of 2017,
you have a place in the story right there with Mary and Joseph.
Yet thanks be to God for Anna's and Simeon's who *do* see clearly,
who are not blinded by visions of the strong and the powerful,
the rich or the influential,
but who can look at a poor child
and tell the rest of us what they know about the promises of God.
And thanks be to God that there really *is*
a place in the pageant for us all, young and old,
confused and crystal clear
and that there are moments in every life when salvation is visible,
even if it's not at Christmas.
May we see clearly,
--if not today then before we die—
the one whose coming meets our deepest needs. AMEN.