

The Face of God  
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Welcome to the last day of 2017. I don't know about you, but I am *feeling* that Christmas hangover. We've all spent at least the last two months purchasing, preparing and waiting for the big day. It's a non-stop season of parties, services, performances and yes, even some gorging. We move from one high to the next, and the excitement grows and intensifies as we build up to the big day. Christmas morning is a blur of wrapping paper, batteries and trash bags, and then we enter that odd post-Christmas limbo phase. And Christmas isn't quite over yet – many decorations are still up, and the stores haven't all switched their music tracks yet. Maybe you are still finding bits of tape, wrapping paper and glitter ground into the carpet. Yet on this side of Christmas, there is a different mood, because we aren't anticipating or moving toward something anymore. The gift has already arrived. We wind down and shift gears. We start contemplating when we will dismantle the decorations, we slowly trickle back to work, and the kids begrudgingly begin to do the homework they've been putting off over the break. Everything moves from the extraordinary to the ordinary once more.

Yet from the Church's perspective, the story isn't over yet. We are still celebrating Christmas, but we do so a bit wearily. I wonder if Mary and Joseph experienced this syndrome to some extent. There was a whirlwind of angelic announcements, childbirth among animals, a star in the sky and multiple strange visitors. And then reality set in. After all of that hoopla, they were left with a baby to raise. This morning's text picks up in the midst of the first post-Christmas aftermath, as Mary and Joseph begin their lives together as new parents. I will be reading from Luke 2:22-40. Listen now for the word of the Lord:

*<sup>22</sup>When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought [Jesus] up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord <sup>23</sup>(as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), <sup>24</sup>and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."*

*<sup>25</sup>Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. <sup>26</sup>It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. <sup>27</sup>Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, <sup>28</sup>Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, <sup>29</sup>"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; <sup>30</sup>for my eyes have seen your salvation, <sup>31</sup>which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, <sup>32</sup>a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." <sup>33</sup>And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. <sup>34</sup>Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed <sup>35</sup>so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too." <sup>36</sup>There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, <sup>37</sup>then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. <sup>38</sup>At that moment she*

*came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. <sup>39</sup>When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. <sup>40</sup>The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.*

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

So we have shifted scenes now from the manger to the temple. After the fireworks of giving birth to the world's hope and salvation, Mary and Joseph were back on solid ground, following through the next logical step of faithful child-rearing. They were taking him to the temple for the purification of Mary and the offering of their firstborn son to God's service, as were the customs of the day. This would have been a typical ritual for an average non-descript family of the time. Most people would not have noticed. But Simeon and Anna weren't most people.

Simeon knew from the moment he laid eyes on Jesus that he was THE ONE. He had been waiting for this day for a long, long time. The Holy Spirit revealed to him that he would encounter the Messiah before he drew his last breath, and it was the Spirit who prompted him to get out of bed that morning and head to the temple. We don't know what attendance was like at the temple that day, but we know that there was at least one other person there who had the same revelation, a prophet named Anna. She, too, had eyes that were able to behold the One who had the power to save the whole world.

So, who were these people with their X-Men mutant abilities? In the midst of the crowds, day after day, week after week, year after year, how did they know on that day and in that place that he was the One? If we are being honest, all babies look the same, particularly newborns, which is why hospitals put tags on them right after they are born. At least, the shepherds and the wise men had a little help from the angels and a star, but these two? They look and they know.

I confess that their gifts easily impress me, because I'm not the most observant person in the room. If God-forbid I ever witness a crime, let me apologize in advance to the detective assigned to the case. Waldo of Where's Waldo fame will remain safely hidden in my presence. I'm that person who misses the celebrity sightings, who can never find the animals in the zoo habitats, and whose Easter baskets were usually pretty light after the easter egg hunt. I'm probably dating myself here, but some of you may remember those optical illusion posters that were popular in the 90s. At first glance, it was just a blob of color and patterns, but supposedly, if you stared at them long enough, you could see a dinosaur or a dolphin. To this day, I have never been able to find those shapes.

So I'm a little jealous of Simeon and Anna. They had holy vision. In humanity's search for the divine, we string up twinkling lights on trees, the biblical shepherds get directions from angels, and the wise men follow the star. But Simeon and Anna didn't need special decorations or mystic signs. They could spot Jesus in the midst of an ordinary day. Just like that. We are tempted to think they had a special ability from God or maybe they had divine abilities for the day. But the text says no such thing. The only clues the scripture gives us is the Holy Spirit at work and their years upon years upon years of steadfast worship and faithfulness. They are described as righteous and devout; in fact, Anna never actually left the temple, praying and fasting day and night. These two were regulars at church.

I always find it interesting to talk to people about their God sightings. Through the years, I've asked and been asked this question in the context of Sunday School classes, retreats, seminary and at the family dinner table. Probably the most popular answers involve nature: in Montreat, on hikes, at the mountains or the beach, in the Grand Canyon or in a beautiful sunset. It is easier to see God under a star-filled sky or in places that are overwhelming, beautiful and vast.

But Simeon and Anna were in no such place. It wasn't lush or colorful. Their daily world was in a dry desert, and they lived under oppressive Roman rule. They waited their whole lives for this moment in quiet ordinary devotion. They weren't fair weather worshippers, showing up only the high holidays. They were devoted to God daily, quietly tending to and nurturing their lives of faith in anticipation of salvation.

We live in an age of the spiritual but not religious where the church is dismissed as irrelevant. And on our less faithful days, we probably deserve that designation. I've sat next to many a person on an airplane or in a waiting room who explained to me that he or she encountered God on a hike in the woods or at the beach and therefore, didn't see a need for church. I readily admit that I, too, encounter God in nature, and I often head outdoors to fill my spiritual well. I also know, however, that I need the discipline, accountability and ritual that a church community provides. And I need to participate in that church community on a regular basis.

It is interesting to note that with this story, Simeon and Anna do not encounter the face of God without the law of Moses, the Temple and a community of faith to help them develop their holy vision. Divine revelation requires people who are gathered together looking for and listening for God on a daily basis. We seem to understand that any other goal we set requires training, study, equipment and commitment. One doesn't go to the gym twice a year and expect to run a marathon. But somehow with our spiritual lives, we take for granted that our salvation was secured over 2,000 years ago and therefore there is nothing required of us beyond the acknowledgement of God's existence. Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called that "cheap grace." It is a little like fantasizing about what we would do if we won the lottery without ever buying a ticket.

Faith requires some skin in the game if we are to develop that holy vision. It was worship, prayer and ritual at the Temple that gave Simeon and Anna the lens to recognize the face of God and the courage to proclaim it for all to hear. And I believe the same is true for us. We need to gather around the Word and look and listen for God's word together. It is through daily prayer, worship, study and acts of service that we begin to sharpen our vision to detect the holy in our midst.

Most of us already know this, but if only we could find the time to squeeze it in. With all our technological gains and evolution, our world has gotten bigger and more complex. At any given moment, there is an intense competition between our institutions and entities for our attention, our participation and our investment. In short, there is so much to do, learn, experience and be entertained with. Even as I wrote this sermon, I took countless phone and internet breaks, so I wouldn't miss the latest headline, tweet, text or invitation to a gathering. While I stress and agonize about the steep decline of church participation, I can also readily relate to the difficult decisions individuals and families make about how they will spend their time in this world. And there are certainly many choices outside of church where we will encounter God, because our God is everywhere. I worry, however, that we are losing the ability to see and the courage and language to name it when we encounter our God, especially when that encounter might pierce our souls.

Even as Simeon was praising God about having this long-awaited encounter with salvation, he delivered this stunning line to Mary: *“This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”* Eugene Peterson, in his translation in *The Message*, puts it like this: “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.” The bright light of redemption can cast long, deep shadows. Swiftly on the heels of the heavenly hosts making announcements, to shepherds following a bright star in the sky came this blow about what the future really holds.

Salvation? Yes, but at great cost. My guess is that Mary and Joseph could not have imagined what would lie ahead. Could they imagine the healings, the miracles, the feeding of the 5000? Could they imagine the subsequent riots, the trial and the execution? Does any parent imagine his or her own child being nailed to a cross??? Yes, their souls will be pierced with a sword as will ours.

Simeon understood the tension of affirming and celebrating God in the flesh while also understanding that it would break our hearts and turn our world upside down. Mother Teresa captured this tension perfectly: “Seeking the face of God in everything, everyone, all the time, and his hand in every happening; This is what it means to be contemplative in the heart of the world. Seeing and adoring the presence of Jesus, especially in the lowly appearance of bread, and in the distressing disguise of the poor.”

Over the course of several years, I visited a parishioner with COPD who was in and out of the hospital. Because of his multiple hospitalizations, I got to know Bob very well, and we traded books and talked theology. He knew more about theologian Karl Barth than most pastors I know. One day, we talked about how he came to be involved with the Urban Ministry Center in Charlotte. For years, Bob had been a faithful Christian, but he struggled with mission efforts because of what he would see outside his office window. His job was next door to the soup kitchen, and his office overlooked the door where the poor would line up each day to receive a meal. He was partly curious and partly frustrated that the lines never seemed to decrease. He wondered if the ministry was doing any good.

Around the same time, Bob enrolled in a yearlong Disciple Bible study which seeks to cover the full scope of the Bible in about 34 weeks. Week after week, he read large chunks of the Bible and met with this covenantal group to wrestle with the oddities, frustrations and fascinating pieces of scripture. As they were studying Jesus’ ministry, he raised his concerns about ministry to the poor and what he was seeing outside his window. His group issued him a challenge to volunteer a few times to see what was happening inside the soup kitchen and report back to them.

What started out as a couple of volunteer hours would turn into him serving several days a week well into retirement and the progression of his illness. He told me that he encountered Jesus in that place and that his service brought the Holy Scriptures to life. He felt like he had an embodied faith. He finally had eyes to see, but it took that bible study and some courageous, heartbreaking mission work to get him there. Bob would tell you that there is no resurrection without crucifixion. The salvific revelation of God exists in the shadows, in the poverty, in the soul piercing work.

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, it is the last day of 2017. Many of us are taking stock of the past year and thinking about highlights, what we would like to change, and what goals we might set for 2018. And we have an overwhelming amount of choices and opportunities for our New year's resolutions. My challenge to you is to frame those resolutions with holy vision. Immerse yourself in the texts, in the traditions and in worship of God that you might have eyes to see, that you might have holy vision. It is only in our persistent commitment to faithfulness that we will recognize the face of God, and when we do, that we might find the courage to bear witness in bold ways. Amen.