

“What a Picture!”

Dear Friends in Christ:

I would like to share with you a defining moment in my life, captured in a picture that I have kept on my desk for the last 15 years, the kind of pride bursting photo that fill the albums of most parents and grandparents. The picture shows a proud grandpa holding his first grandchild in his arms – three generations of the Wagner boys – Jonathan Preston making his entrance into this world. I can’t tell you the joy we felt then, and still do, over the birth of that little boy, followed two years later by his sister, Megan, incredible gifts and blessings!

In so many ways this picture helped me relate in a more personal way to the picture on today’s bulletin cover, when Mary and Joseph presented their Son in the Temple to Simeon, a righteous and devout priest, who had been waiting for years for the “*consolation of Israel.*” Mary and Joseph, as faithful parents and followers of the Law of Moses, were dedicating this Child as “*holy to the Lord.*” And when Simeon took this child up in his arms, it was a life-transforming spiritual moment, his voice breaking out in song, blessing God and saying:

“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, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.” (Luke 2:29-32)

If you want to talk about “*bucket list*” moments in a person’s life, fulfillment of hopes and dreams, joy and peace flooding your soul and all is right with the world – in this moment Simeon experiences it! If the joy of a parent and grandparent holding a child in their arms is so memorable, then consider the outcome of faithful, devout people realizing that this Baby named Jesus is indeed “*the Lord’s Christ!*” (Luke 2:26) It was a moment for “*giving thanks to God,*” as Anna the prophetess did, when the “*days of all those who were waiting for redemption*” (Luke 2:38) knew that the waiting was over – for the Savior and Messiah, Jesus the Christ, God with us, Emmanuel had come!

This picture of Simeon and Anna is perhaps a better Christmas scene on this weekend after Christmas – a more preferable Nativity moment – because it’s not wrapped up in the sentiment of the season we make of Christmas. Here the scene has no angels or shepherds or cattle lowing, no Santa’s and sleds and pretty packages – just an aged priest and prophetess whose joy and peace is undeniable for they have “*seen the salvation of God!*” (Luke 2:30) Today the setting is in a “*temple*” - in a “*church*” – and we preachers like that – the people of God doing what they’re supposed to – dedicating their children as “*holy to the Lord, desiring that they grow and*

become strong, filled with wisdom, and the favor of God upon them!” (Luke 2:23, 40)

Oh, if we could but paint this picture, or snap this photograph of joy and peace in these days after Christmas, as we move into the New Year. I say this, because I fear, only days after His birth, that some of us have not yet embraced this Holy Child in the arms of faith. Some of us, I fear, only days after His birth, have not yet experienced the deep, inner personal peace and strength that comes when we trust “*the Lord’s Christ*” to be with us always. Some of us, I fear, only days after His birth, have given up longing for the everlasting hope and salvation the Savior offers, tricked by sin and Satan into thinking that the loot under the tree – the stuff we have in the here and now is what counts the most. Some of us, I fear, only days after His birth, have gone back to the routine of life, our worship and service nothing but archaic and meaningless ritual. Some of us, I fear, only days after His birth, are not living as though “*we are called by a new name,*” (Isaiah 62:3) our words and deeds no different after Christmas than they were before Christmas!

Oh, how I pray today, let’s retreat back to the manger for one more moment! Let’s go back to the temple steps, taking one more picture, each of us embracing the Christ Child through the arms of faith, proclaiming with Simeon: “*Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace...for my eyes have seen your salvation!*”

And let me tell you, my friends, we need His salvation, and we need in this New Year the peace God offers in Christ, because the reality of life in this world of sin and death sets in so quickly. Note, for example in verses 34 & 35 of the Gospel lesson, what Simeon says to Mary after blessing the holy family: *“Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also[Mary]), so that thoughts from many hearts will be revealed.”* (Luke 2:34-35)

Though Mary and Joseph did not yet fully understand, Simeon was letting them know that this *“picture perfect moment”* would not last for their Son! His life and teachings about the Kingdom of God’s grace would indeed be *“opposed.”* Jesus would be spoken against, ridiculed, questioned, betrayed, denied, condemned and crucified! He would look down from the Cross at his mother Mary, her *“soul pierced”* by grief! This Holy Child, *“so filled with wisdom and the favor of God”* would give it all up – dying on Calvary’s Cross for the sins of us all, so that we might receive this Christmas the gift of everlasting life and peace!

What a picture this is of God’s love, the manger and the cross our hope when reality sets in and sin and death yet do their thing in our lives. The Lord’s Christ is our courage and strength when the *“picture perfect moments”* are but a distant memory and we need a Savior to love us and forgive us, promising to be with us always! This Jesus, who was born, lived, died, rose and is coming

again, is our peace, who has come into this world, as Paul writes, to “*redeem us*” and “*adopt us as His children.*” (Galatians 4:5) **What a picture of God’s love!**

In closing, I would point out one more truth from the Gospel, noting again that Simeon did not want to die without knowing the Lord’s Christ. (Luke 2:26) In other words, Simeon didn’t want to “kick the bucket” before he “*held the Christ child in his arms.*” Neither do we, my friends, neither do we – graced by faith to sing at life’s end: “*Lord, now let your servant depart in peace...for my eyes have seen your salvation!*” May it happen in our hearts by faith today...TODAY!

Merry Christmas! AMEN!