

BGO Sermon for 1-1-17 – Fast Away The Old Year Passes

Those who were at Gladstone's or Oquawka's Christmas Eve service (or caught the FB Live broadcast) might remember that I shared some of the lyrics of the song "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day." There's been another Christmas-time song that has been playing in my head for a couple of weeks: "Deck the Halls".

You know how it goes, don't you?

Deck the hall with boughs of holly, fa-la-la-la-la, la-la, la-la
'Tis the season to be jolly, fa-la-la-la-la, la-la, la-la

But the part of the song that I've been thinking of the most: *Fast away the old year passes.*" I don't know about you, but fast does not begin to describe last year for me. Whirlwind is more like it! From widower to newlywed, taking two and a half households to one, selling one house, reworking another, moving downriver, traveling overseas, moving my daughter and son-in-law twice, going from two churches to three, with different traditions and calendars, new congregations, new friends and new connections, deep lows and incredible highs - all in the span of 12 short months. And through it all, there was the sense that God was in the midst of it, both the difficulties and the victories, sometimes shining light on our path, at other times working all things to the good - all in God's timing.

Many people are familiar with the words in our bulletin from King Solomon, the ones from Ecclesiastes that say "***To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven***" Less familiar is the part about God making everything beautiful in its time. But all of scripture tells us that God brings things about in the fullness of time, in God's timing. And that's no more evident than when scripture points to Jesus.

Take our New Testament passages for today. The Apostle Paul reaffirms God's timing in his letter to the Philippians: ***When the time came, [Jesus] set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human!***

It's a thought that echoes his message to the Galatians: ***when the fulfillment of the time came, God sent his Son...so he could redeem those under the Law so that we could be adopted.***

I'm not sure the Jews in the years before Jesus' birth would have bought into Solomon's words or Paul's insights. After all, it had been 4 CENTURIES since the last prophet. But they had their history to remind them of God's faithfulness...in God's time, like the stories of those who had gone into exile in Babylon who had waited 70 years for God to bring them back to Jerusalem. And they had the

promises God had given to prophets like Isaiah that Immanuel would come, promises that were faithfully fulfilled by the Baby born in Bethlehem.

Faithful might be one way to describe Simeon, the righteous and devout man from our Gospel reading. He'd been given a gift from God: the promise that before he died, he would see the long-awaited Messiah. Now the Bible doesn't tell us how old Simeon was when he got that promise, or how old he was when the Holy Family came to the temple. He could have been waiting for decades; the impression we get is of man who felt the weight of the years on his shoulders. But he had God's Spirit to not only reveal when the Messiah would come, but to also reassure and strengthen him in the wait. So his waiting was in eager anticipation, like a kid at Christmas. A fitting comparison, considering Christmas was on the way to him.

It had become a practice back then for some of the more...senior followers of Yahweh to be in the Temple, in the House of God, praying a blessing on the babies being dedicated. It's hard to imagine how many 100's of babies would be brought to the temple in a year's time; that much harder to imagine how many innocent faces Simeon had looked into, hoping to find the truly Innocent One. But the Spirit told him, "Today is the day."

Suddenly, he sees a man with two pigeons, and a woman carrying a baby boy, and the Spirit tells him, "and this is the Child." His heart racing, Simeon moves with the speed of a much younger man, taking the boy up in his arms, proclaiming, ***"Now, master, let your servant go in peace according to your word, because my eyes have seen your salvation. You prepared this salvation in the presence of all peoples. It's a light for revelation to the Gentiles and a glory for your people Israel."***

His attention then turns to the startled couple. The spirit of prophecy comes over him, and he warns Mary that her time to weep and mourn would come, because as much as Jesus would bring a time of love for some, he would reveal the hate in others.

The Bible doesn't tell us what happens next with Simeon, maybe because it doesn't have to; it already proclaimed that he would die in peace. But I think we can see in Simeon's response to God, and to the Son of God, things that we should be doing in the years ahead.

One thing is to strengthen our own devotion to God, that we might grow in righteousness. That calls for us to be faithful in practicing those spiritual disciplines: like reading, meditating and studying the scriptures; like praying; like sharing in the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion.

Another is to be in God's house as much as possible. That means being in our Worship services, to be sure, but we also need to be here other times as well, for Bible Study, for fellowship, and for service. Remember Jesus' words: ***"For where two or three are gathered in my name, I'm there with them."***

And when we come together, we need to meet in that same sense of eager anticipation that Simeon had. We already have Jesus' word that he is with us as we gather; but whether because of life's distraction or our own apathy, I'm afraid we miss Him much too often. When we hear or read scripture, when we sing God's praises, when we pray, those are times we can sense His presence.

Simeon took the Baby Jesus, praised God for Him, and prayed a blessing over him. We should do the same with our children, those in our area, in our cities and our county - praise God for them and bless them, with our words and our actions. We've talked about trying to revitalize our Sunday School programs, and a few have stepped forward; who else will answer the call, and how can we move forward to bring the kids in? We had a kid's Christmas party at Biggsville, unfortunately cancelled due to weather; could we find other special events to make connection with our young people? And let's not forget the Scout Troup at Oquawka; how can we be better involved in supporting them?

With both Simeon's praises of Jesus and his prophesy to Mary, he proclaimed God's power and glory, and God's plan of salvation. That's our call as well. We need to share with others the news about the Baby Jesus: though He had equal status with God, when the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and became human! He lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion. All that was so that we could be not just redeemed, but adopted as children of God, heirs to the eternal Kingdom of heaven.

Over and above it all, we need to follow Simeon's example and listen for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to lead us to new revelations of God in our lives, and new glimpse of God's light and glory.

We started out talking about the song “*Deck the Halls*” and the line “*Fast away the old year passes.*” Remember the next line? “*Hail the New, ye lads and lasses.*” We do have a brand new year ahead of us. And in this New Year, I’m inviting us all to follow the Spirit’s lead on a journey like the Holy Family took - a journey that will draw us more and more into God’s presence, to go deeper in our relationship with God, and to proclaim the Light and Love of Jesus to those around us. And I’m going to keep challenging us to do those things we talked about today, so we can move ourselves and our church families along in the journey. May we be the ones to reflect Christ’s light, that in God’s timing we might see God’s glory.

ECCLESIASTES 3:1-8 (NKJV)

To everything there is a season,

A time for every purpose under heaven:

² A time to be born, and a time to die;

A time to plant, and a time to pluck *what is* planted;

³ A time to kill, and a time to heal;

A time to break down, and time to build up;

⁴ A time to weep, and a time to laugh;

A time to mourn, and a time to dance;

⁵ A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones;

A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶ A time to gain, and a time to lose;

A time to keep, and a time to throw away;

⁷ A time to tear, and a time to sew;

A time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

⁸ A time to love, and a time to hate;

A time of war, and a time of peace.

⁹ What profit has the worker from that in which he labors?

¹⁰ I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied. ¹¹ He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end.

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-8 (Message)

⁵⁻⁸ Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn’t think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became *human!* Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn’t claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion.

GALATIANS 4:4-7 (CEB)

⁴ But when the fulfillment of the time came, God sent his Son, born through a woman, and born under the Law. ⁵ This was so he could redeem those under the Law so that we could be adopted. ⁶ Because you are sons and daughters, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba, Father!”

⁷ Therefore, you are no longer a slave but a son or daughter, and if you are his child, then you are also an heir through God.

LUKE 2:22-35 (CEB)

²² When the time came for their ritual cleansing, in accordance with the Law from Moses, they brought Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. (²³ It's written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male will be dedicated to the Lord.") ²⁴ They offered a sacrifice in keeping with what's stated in the Law of the Lord, A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons. ²⁵ A man named Simeon was in Jerusalem. He was righteous and devout. He eagerly anticipated the restoration of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶ The Holy Spirit revealed to him that he wouldn't die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ²⁷ Led by the Spirit, he went into the temple area. Meanwhile, Jesus' parents brought the child to the temple so that they could do what was customary under the Law. ²⁸ Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God. He said,

²⁹ *"Now, master, let your servant go in peace
according to your word,*

³⁰ *because my eyes have seen your salvation.*

³¹ *You prepared this salvation in the presence of all peoples.*

³² *It's a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and a glory for your people Israel."*

³³ His father and mother were amazed by what was said about him. ³⁴ Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother,

*"This boy is assigned to be the cause
of the falling and rising of many in Israel
and to be a sign that generates opposition*

³⁵ *so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.
And a sword will pierce your innermost being too."*

GALATIANS 4:4-7 (CEB)

⁴ But when the fulfillment of the time came, God sent his Son, born through a woman, and born under the Law. ⁵ This was so he could redeem those under the Law so that we could be adopted. ⁶ Because you are sons and daughters, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba, Father!"

⁷ Therefore, you are no longer a slave but a son or daughter, and if you are his child, then you are also an heir through God.