

Sermon – December 27, 2020
“A Light for Revelation to the Gentiles”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Luke 2:22-40

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Good morning everyone and Merry Christmas. I want to thank you for your generosity for the gift you gave to Kay and me for Christmas. We appreciate the generosity, thoughtfulness, and love that you share with us throughout the year. I hope that everyone survived the 2020 Christmas Eve rain and wind storm. We were able to have our Christmas Eve service, but it was a rainy, wet, and windy time for all who came. We give thanks to God that we were able to gather and be blessed by a time of worship as we celebrated the joy of the coming of the Christ child on Christmas Eve. I would like to celebrate the generosity of the people of this congregation and how they have enabled the church to reach out and help meet needs in our congregation and community in the past year. Let me tell you a story of something that happened this past week. On Tuesday, I went out to put up the new sign on the corner of Hacks Neck and Route 360 announcing the Christmas services. After I finished, I headed back to the office and then decided that I needed to pull up the old yard signs, including the one west of the church on Route 360. As I turned the corner on the church, there was a lady getting out of a van and coming towards me. I began wondering what she might want or need but went to meet her. She did not tell me her name, just that she and her husband were getting ready to head to Florida the next day and would like to help some families with children in the community. She then handed me two envelopes, asked me if I knew any families who might need help with Christmas, and when I told her I did, she thanked me, wished me a Merry Christmas, and drove off. When I got back to the office, I opened the envelopes and discovered they each held \$100. Now my struggle was finding two families that met her criteria that I could take these gifts to. After an evening of prayer and reflection, I did identify two families and gave them her gifts, but her action gave me extra focus this week on answering the question, “Who do I know in this community who has needs for whom such an envelope would be a blessing?” I hope that the Holy Spirit guided me well. Keep this woman’s generosity and desire in mind as we look at the scripture this morning.

This morning's scripture starts with our new family heading to Jerusalem to complete the Levitical law requirements for a newborn child. Outlined in these temple events are the completion of several requirements found in the Law. Notice that the purification rite is not just for Mary but is plural, for them. This seems to collaborate that Joseph helped in the delivery of Jesus and because of that exposure is also unclean. So, the sacrifice they offer is for both of them. The sacrifice that Mary and Joseph bring tell us they are not wealthy people, as they offer the poor person's sacrifice of two turtle doves. Yet, rich or poor, what we should notice is that the couple is working with the Law to be right before God. They are seeking to carry out the requirements of the Law in all that they do, so their son, Jesus, might be brought up in a home that honors God. I see in their actions a desire to live in a manner that what God has instructed in the Law for a family is found in their home. Even though Luke does not share with us home life details, we can expect that Jesus lived in a home that gave full attention and priority to living in a manner that honored God.

As our family goes into the temple, they are met by a man. He is not one of the priests that is assigned to the temple, but one who has been guided by the Spirit of God to knowledge that the Son of God is entering the temple for the first time. He is an old man who is "righteous and devout before God." This is Simeon, one who is looking forward to the consolation of Israel. The consolation referred to here is from Isaiah's prophecy where Isaiah tells us that God promises His personal intervention in the redemption of all people to Him. This consolation will be seen as a time of peace and the just dominion of God. That time period is the consolation of Israel, and many Israelites longed for this time to arrive, among them was Simeon. Simeon is an older man, which is a point of honor in Israel, and is a man described as one on whom the Holy Spirit rested. These descriptions point to his being filled with wisdom and words of prophecy. The witness that Simeon provides is to take Jesus into his arms and praise God for the coming of His Messiah. Notice that Simeon praises God and then prophecies about Jesus. Simeon tells us that his eyes have seen God's salvation. This is not a child who will grow into salvation or through whom salvation will someday come. This is Jesus, God's salvation. With Jesus' arrival, salvation has come to all people. Simeon also prophesies that Jesus will be a light to the Gentiles and for glory to God's people of Israel. Jesus will be a light that shines forth not only for Israel, but for the Gentiles as well. A light that draws all people to God. This is the fulfilment of a consistent theme in the Bible of God's salvation being for all of the people, all of the nations, and not limited to the people of Israel. Jesus will also be the glory for God's people, Israel. Jesus will be the blessing to all people that God has promised will come from Israel. Jesus will fulfill the role of Israel by being a royal priest who brings

blessings to all people. This will be the fulfilment of what God called Israel to do, and Jesus' actions will bring the glory to Israel that they were to have in this role. Finally, we should note that Simeon identifies that Jesus will bring division in Israel. Some will accept Jesus and others will oppose him and his mission to all people. This is a key theme in Luke's Gospel, and we see it introduced by Simeon in this moment of witness to Jesus in the temple. Also, the silence of the leadership of the temple at Jesus' arrival also speaks ominously to this theme of a coming division. Mary is told she will also be part of this prophecy and will have her own heart pierced as a result of the opposition that will grow in many in Israel.

The temple leadership is quiet in response to the coming of Jesus into the temple, but God is not done bringing forth witnesses to His son's arrival in the temple. God also sends Anna to be a witness to the coming of salvation for all people. Anna is noted as one from the tribe of Asher and of the family of Phanuel. This designation marks her as a member of a tribe of Israel and one of its citizens. Anna is a woman, a very old woman, who has been married, and then when she became a widow, is one who devoted her life to God. Her advanced age, like Simeon's, is honored by others for who she is in Israel. The fact that she is a widow of great age also speaks to her wisdom and devotion to God. She represents not only the inclusion of women in God's plan for salvation, but also the idea that those who have been widowed should seek to serve God, and here she is seen living out her service by honoring Jesus. Anna's cry is for the coming redemption of Israel. She recognizes Jesus as God's plan for bringing about that redemption.

Luke tells us that Joseph and Mary complete all of the requirements in the Law and then return to Nazareth. His message to us is that their home will be a place where Jesus will be raised by those with a focus on living in a God-honoring manner. As we encounter this idea of honoring God in our homes, I think we should ask ourselves, "What can we learn from Joseph and Mary's trip to the temple?" The first thing we might learn is that even though Jesus comes in the arms of Mary to the temple, the place where God meets with people, the place where the divine and the common mingle, the leadership of the temple does not recognize his arrival and is unaware of Jesus' presence. If Jesus had been born in the palace of Herod and had been brought to the temple, there would have been much notice of his arrival. Great celebrations would have been held, and many priests would have been present to witness his arrival. But Jesus comes with humble parents who are seeking to raise him in a manner that honors God, by keeping the law as they understand it needs to be carried out. The temple leadership accepts their sacrifice but does not recognize their presence. God provides witnesses who are sensitive to the Holy Spirit's guidance to testify to Jesus'

arrival and the coming of salvation to all people. Honor is given to Jesus through the actions of older people. This is something we should note and apply in our lives. Older adults are not done with ministry when their vocations end, when their hearing fades, when their bodies are wearing out, when their eyes do not see as well, and when their minds are not as quick as they once were. Here, at the arrival of Jesus in the temple, they are the only witnesses that testify to the arrival of God's salvation and coming redemption for all people. Those of us who are more seasoned in life should take note and realize that even in our advanced years and with our growing physical limitations, we are not done with ministry, but are to be open to the call of God on our lives. We are to do all we are capable of each day to serve God and to welcome others into the kingdom of God. Our goal in life should not be rest, but to be counted among those who finish life strong in the service of God.

Our next question should be, "What does finishing strong look like for me?" This is the time of year when our thoughts turn to the coming of a new year. In just a few days we will celebrate the arrival of 2021 and the end of 2020. Many of us will breathe a great sigh of relief for the passing of 2020 with all of its challenges and controversies. These last days of the old year are a time when we stop and reflect on our life in the passing year. We should be honest with God in our reflections about what we have done well and where we have struggled to live in a manner that honors God. Following that time of inward reflection, we should ask the Holy Spirit to lead us into new opportunities to serve God in the coming year, opportunities that can transform and mark our lives as those touched by God as we live in a manner that more completely honors the Lord. It is a time when many make resolutions in light of such life reflections. The most common types of resolutions are those focused on our health: to exercise more, eat better, lose weight, and other new starts that focus on our health. I think those are good resolutions for us to make and seek to be diligent to keep in the coming year. However, I think that we as Christians can do a much better job of self-examination and identifying resolutions for transformation in our lives as we are gifted with the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Like Simeon and Anna who were guided by the Holy Spirit to greet Jesus as he came into the temple, so we should be guided by the Holy Spirit to greet Christ living within us in the coming year and to seek to live in a manner that honors him in new and transforming ways. I would like to encourage us to take time over the next few days to focus on our spiritual health and seek to identify a few resolutions that will help us to grow spiritually and, as a result, to grow closer to Jesus in the coming year.

Let me suggest three areas where we can focus our resolutions for the coming year. The first is prayer. Pick out people in your neighborhood and commit to pray for them every day this coming year. Don't give up if you forget a day or several days. When you realize that you have stopped, just start praying again and seek to spend a year in prayer for your neighbors, those you know and those who are new. Even if you are praying for an empty house, pray that God would use you to welcome those who will come to live there into the kingdom of God.

Then, seek to add a mission or service type resolution to your list. As an example, pick out a family or an individual in your neighborhood whom you don't know and get to know them. Meet them, go and introduce yourself to them and begin to talk with them on some regular basis. Call them and check on them, reach out to them and simply seek to get to know them, build a new relationship, and seek to be a better neighbor. If you know all of your neighbors and talk with them regularly, then go to a new place and start meeting people there. Seek to find a new way this year to love your neighbors.

Next, seek to experience personal spiritual growth in the coming year. For example, read God's Word on a regular basis. Seek to be daily one who is in God's word. Consider reading through the Bible in the coming year. If that is too difficult, then pick out one of the gospels and read through it. If that is still too difficult, then commit to reading a single verse each day and see how God is speaking to you through His Word. The point is not how much you read, but that you begin to seek to grow in your commitment to encounter God through His Word. Another possibility is to commit to read a book about spiritual disciplines. Let the Holy Spirit guide you to identify one that you can begin to adopt into your life and practice it this year. Let the Holy Spirit lead you into a new spiritual discipline or a deeper expression of one you already practice. Consider meeting with a few people regularly in the coming year just to pray with and for each other. As you meet, pray for each other, reflect on your spiritual growth, and love each other. Here is a great opportunity to use John Wesley's concept of banding and to ask each other the five questions John developed to help us reflect on our spiritual life. (See below for a list of the five questions.)

Finally, consider a resolution to become a three-hour-a-week person, spending an hour in worship, an hour in study of God's Word, and an hour loving your neighbors.

As we close our time this morning, I want us to recall the opportunity I was given this past week to take envelopes of money, find families in need, families I truly knew had needs, and to give them the funds provided. Ask yourself this morning, "Who would I have taken an envelope to?" I want to challenge us as a congregation to resolve in the coming year to be a congregation who is

able to answer that question for ourselves by the end of 2021. So here is my challenge. I have placed ten envelopes on the altar with a Christmas card in each. If you are willing and are led by the Holy Spirit, then come and pick up one of the envelopes and for the next ten months do two things. On the first day of the month, put \$10, or more if you like, into the envelope. That is most likely the easy part for most of us. The second thing is to begin to develop a new relationship with a family whom you will give the envelope to next December before Christmas. That is the hard part of this challenge for most of us. How will we find a family who is in need that we can get to know well enough to confidently give them our envelope? Those who accept this challenge will need to begin by asking God to open their eyes to those He would have us develop a new relationship with in the coming year. It is a time when we will need to see those who are not like us, those who have great needs, those who are unseen, those whose homes we drive by and don't notice. I will leave the envelopes on the altar throughout January to give us time to pray and decide if we are willing to take this challenge and if you are, then come and take one of the envelopes and get started. You will have ten months to fill your envelope with funds, find your family, get to know them, and then in December to give them your envelope. In December of 2021, we will set aside a time for those who picked up an envelope to share what they have done, whom they met, and what God has done in their heart as they worked this challenge throughout the year. For those who are joining the service online, if you would like to be part of this challenge, then send us a comment, text me, call the office, or simply get a used Christmas card out of your supply, set it in a place where you will see it all year, and then begin to pray about a family with whom to build a relationship, and to fill it with the funds you will need.

Pray with me: Lord, we thank you that you provided your witnesses to the salvation that came when Jesus entered your temple. Lord, we would like to be like Simeon and Anna who finished their lives strong in your service. Lord, we are challenged to be those who are at work in your kingdom, yet our hearts yearn to be those who hear your voice. Holy Spirit, come and guide our hearts to be those whom you call to be your witnesses and lead us to develop new relationships in this coming year. Come, Holy Spirit, and speak to our hearts this day. Amen.

John Wesley's Five Questions:

1. How is it with your soul?
2. What are your struggles and successes?
3. How might the Spirit and Scriptures be speaking in your life?
4. Do you have any sin that you want to confess?
5. Are there any secrets or hidden things you would like to share?