

Fresh Starts

January 1, In the Year of Our LORD, 2006
Gates Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor
The Rev. Carol Anne Strawbridge, Associate Pastor

Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3, Galatians 4:4-7 and Luke 2:22-38

Ralph: Luke 2:22-35

Carol Anne: Luke 2:36-38

Ralph: Another incredible day in the life of this young woman, Mary! During Advent, we read of how an angel appeared to her and announced she would bear the Son of God. At Christmas, we read how shepherds arrived from the fields to worship the Messiah. Now, on the day of His circumcision, Mary, Joseph and the Baby Jesus meet two more people who have waited all their lives for that very moment.

Carol Anne: Patient people! It sounds as though Anna had been at the temple for a very long time!

Ralph: I know there are times the two of us feel as though we live here – but Simeon and Anna are pushing the limits here, aren't they? How wonderful it is to be in the midst of ten straight evenings without a meeting here at church – seven down, three to go! Then it is back to our typical hectic schedule. I know you have certain months with stretches of endless evening events, gatherings and meetings. Prior to Christmas, I was here twenty-three out of twenty-eight evenings. It sounds as though Anna was at the temple morning, noon and night, seven days a week for God knows how long!

Carol Anne: I wonder if she kept her office clean during all that time - or was it filled with empty coffee cups and piles of paper.

Ralph: And it is amazing how patient she was! Then there is the part in the passage that you read about Anna fasting and praying. *Continuous* prayer would test what little patience I have, but fasting? The scripture says fasting ... night and day. That's a bit much don't you think? I have enough trouble eating somewhat less – and yes, I have made losing weight that one of my New Year's resolutions – and yes, it is one I would like to keep! But fasting?

Carol Anne: New Year's Day is a good time for fresh starts, isn't it? It is time to look back at the past year and to then turn our attention to the future, to the year ahead..... I think I'll clean up my office this year.

Ralph: In my case, it is the credenza behind my desk – no matter how hard I try to sort the piles of paper, a gremlin comes in and messes them up every week!

Two weeks ago, when we sat down and looked at this passage from the Gospel of Luke, we wondered if the words about Simeon and Anna don't invite us to look back at the past year and then turn our attention to the future. I know that in the case of Simeon, he believed Jesus was the

fulfillment of the promises of the prophets. He quoted some of the words that we read from Isaiah this morning. Isaiah spoke about Jerusalem's salvation, but he went one step further and spoke of how everyone from all the "nations" would be witness to that revelation as well! Simeon was a Jew, but it was clear to him that this Child would be, let's see his words were:

A light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to Your people Israel.

Simeon was satisfied that the Baby Boy that Mary and Joseph brought to the temple for circumcision was the One promised for so very long. Simeon was so pleased that he said these words as though they were his last! Promised that he would see the Messiah before he died, he was ready to meet his maker. Indeed, we often read Simeon's words at the end of memorial services, for they are a wonderful summation of a long life spent in faithful anticipation of seeing God's salvation. In a few moments we are going to sing Simeon's words – the Nunc Dimittis – "I am now dismissed." There are three melodies for the Nunc Dimittis in the hymnal – and I chose what I thought was the most singable. Carol Balsley was the substitute secretary the morning I picked the melody and she said I could tell you that she concurred with my choice – and that she will share the blame is someone doesn't like the selection!

The most important point is that Simeon had waited for a long time and guided by the Spirit, he arrived on that particular day, took the baby Jesus into his arms and praised God with his now famous words.

Carol Anne: That was a long wait! Simeon wasn't the only one waiting for the Messiah. Just think what a tough time the Jews had experienced in the mean time! They were always under some other nation's dominion.

Ralph: ... from the Assyrians to the Babylonians to the Persians to the Greeks to the Ptolemies to the Seleucids to the Romans Do you know they were independent for all of 23 years from 166 to 143 BC? Judas Maccabeus had ...

Carol Anne: Actually I did know that! It really is hard to imagine that kind of oppression. I imagine that Simeon, like everyone else, had experienced enough heartache and grief. The Romans were just the last in a long line of conquerors and it was time for a fresh start – and the birth of this Christ suggested the day had come. It was like a January 1 to them, a new age, a new start, a new year, a new time when the Messiah was no longer promised but had really come! Which is what today is all about. This past year was a tough one – it will be good to look forward – to emphasize Anna's perspective. Her words were:

She came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

What Anna proclaimed in the temple was echoed by the Apostle Paul years later when he wrote the words we read this morning from his letter to the people of Galatia:

... when the fullness of time had come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. ...

Today, we again look for that redemption. We look back at a tough year and then in faith dream of what we can do in the year to come to redeem ourselves and everyone else!

Ralph: It was a tough year! But we were there as the church to rise above whatever occurred. We were there for the Kelly, Cook and Beckett families in their loss! We responded with financial support for people who suffered loss after the tsunami in Asia, the Hurricanes in Florida and the Gulf Coast, We welcomed the Frank family back from Louisiana and are grateful both of them have jobs in churches in the area and at Hochstein.

Carol Anne: And this congregation was wonderful in its prayers and support when Tom Arcara needed a new heart – and, thank God, received one!

Ralph: This congregation was at its best in those tough times, wasn't it?

Carol Anne: All of us were – and Simeon and Anna's words are timeless in that they speak about hope no matter what happens in our lives!

Ralph: Is it my imagination, or did more of us lose parents and other loved ones in the last year than usual?

Carol Anne: I think that may be true – but the year was tough for people whose jobs were lost or were in jeopardy, whose family members in the military were and are deployed to dangerous parts of the world, ... and we think of people who live in areas that are war- and strife-torn! We don't want to forget people in Iraq who must wonder every day if they will be the victims of a roadside bomb or suicide attack!

Ralph: And those who are still homeless after disasters like Katrina and now there is flooding in California!

Carol Anne: But a new year means a new opportunity to face all of that in the context of our faith just as this congregation was at its best when circumstances seemed to be at their worst, so we as a people, of these United States and as people of the world can promise to be at our very best when life is tough for others.

Ralph: Our faith suggests we be optimistic

Carol Anne: We can be peacemakers, we can feed the hungry, we can take care of difficulties that are close to home and far away. There is much we can do. Just look at how this congregation rose to the occasion to help Cameron with a lift. We promised \$8000 – and thought we might have to take monies out of the 2006 budget – but no, we met our goal – the generosity of this congregation was demonstrated once again – and that we means we know we are capable of being generous of spirit, generous in faith – and generous in sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ

Ralph: Which Simeon knew had come in this Child ...

Carol Anne: Which Anna proclaimed was our redemption.

Ralph: New Year's Day is always about fresh starts and commitments to change some of our less desirable habits.

Carol Anne: But it is much more than that! It is a day – and a time – to recommit ourselves to the ways of God, to doing Christ's work - to be filled with the Spirit so that others might be

filled as well, ...

Ralph: There is much to do.

Carol Anne: Thank God for these people with whom to do it!

Ralph and Carol Anne: Amen!