

December 30, 2012

“Witnesses to Salvation”

Luke 2:22-38

Today we hover on the edge of 2013; we look forward to something brand new even as we remember and remind ourselves of a very old story, a story offered to us by the very Maker of time itself... The story is a simple one, telling of a baby born in Bethlehem to a poor not-yet married couple who couldn't even find a hotel room, a baby born to give the world a “touch,” in human “life-language,” of the love of God, in order to “save the world from Satan’s power,” as the carol proclaims.... The lesson we heard today tells of two individuals who were near the end of their time on earth who were able to witness to the new life God was providing for us all in the baby Jesus.

Today's setting asks us to consider two things, then: Time and our use of it; and our own opportunities to witness to what God is doing in our world and in our lives today. Both of these things are easy to squander, both of these things can slip away from us without our realizing it.

Today, five days after Christmas, I wonder how we are doing in terms of our own “Life-Time,” and our own opportunities to be God’s witness?

The first Sunday after Christmas, what does Christmas mean? Perhaps you feel let down. A man told his pastor: “I can’t stand the week after Christmas. Traffic is horrible, but my heart is worse. The few hours I had with family have evaporated, and reality hits hard. It’s cold and I am lonely. I face the new year with all the old problems and habits, with the same old job bearing down on me, with the only thing new being all the extra bills coming in from the stuff I bought for Christmas. I dread this cold, hard time of year more than any other.”

We turn back to the story. Old Simeon and Anna in Luke’s Gospel had spent their lives hoping to see what they finally were able to see on the eighth day after the first Christmas. In a brand-new baby they recognized God at work in their world and in their lives. There were *two* witnesses that day, which is Biblical... Whenever there is testimony against a person in the Bible, there must be at least two witnesses; one person’s word alone is not enough in a serious case, especially in a case where the punishment might be death. In today’s lesson, TWO witnesses proclaimed the exact opposite of punishment by death: they testified to the Gift of Life, life re-understood as part of God’s active work and loving attention.

If God is actively involved in our life today, we are totally blessed, no matter what is going on in our lives, no matter how difficult our situations may be. Our hearts can know our salvation as we discover that God is with us right now. Right now, God is working to let *us* see that our Savior is right with us. Even so, we tend to find ourselves focusing more on our problems and worries than we do on Emmanuel, God-with-us.

In a sermon on New Year’s Eve several years ago, the late Peter Gomes, then preacher at Harvard Chapel, faced the New Year and the changes it might bring with the following words: “...We don’t always want it to change. Will the new year bring demands exceeding our capacity? The radical news of Christmas, and of the gospel, is for Christians that the future has

already been claimed as the place in which God lives, as the place in which God reigns, as the place over which God has control. It is hard for us to imagine this because most of us think that...God is back there, somewhere, although some may think that God is right here right now, and some may have an intimate experience of God; but the notion that God is out there before us where we have not yet been is the radical good news of the gospel that links Christmas and Easter and all of the cycle of Christian belief: God is where we have not yet been, and if that is true then we have nothing and no one to fear.

“....Christians need not dread the future, Christians need not be intimidated by the turn of the calendar or by sand dropping through the hourglass, and Christians need not be held hostage to fear about the unknown. We KNOW who holds the future. Think of the future not as some vast uncharted wasteland full of void and nothingness, or merely an extension of the past. Think of the future as the place in which new discoveries and new opportunities await, think of it as the place where God waits to be discovered by you....” (*More Sundays at Harvard*, p. 69, edited by fte)

Everything pertaining to Christmas is slashed 50 - 70 % right now in the stores and on the Internet... Before we know it the red hearts of Valentine's Day will be displayed as we move on in through our “sell-able” cycles.... But the message of Christmas must not be packed up and stored away for the next 350 or so days. The message must be held in our hearts and proclaimed by the way we live out our time. The message is Emmanuel: God is with us, God is with you. This means that the time of your life is sacred to God, that Jesus Christ came to give you salvation, and that nothing, anywhere, any time, ever, can take the love of God away from you. This means that when you're having a rough time at work or in your relationships, when you're suffering physically or emotionally, when you're wondering if there's any real purpose to your days, God is with you. God asks you to let Him redeem your time, to let His purposes speak through your life. God asks you to be His witness to others who find themselves in darkness in this challenging world.

And now, because we are in the Christmas season, I share with you one last Christmas story:

A CHRISTMAS STORY by Rian B. Anderson (emailed to me -FTE- by my father on 12/29/1999)

Pa never had much compassion for the lazy or those who squandered their means and then never had enough for the necessities. But for those who were genuinely in need, his heart was as big as all outdoors. It was from him that I learned the greatest joy in life comes from giving, not from receiving.

It was Christmas Eve 1881. I was fifteen years old and feeling like the world had caved in on me because there just hadn't been enough money to buy me the rifle that I'd wanted so bad that year for Christmas.

We did the chores early that night for some reason. I just figured Pa wanted a little extra time so we could read in the Bible. So after supper was over I took my boots off and stretched out in front of the fireplace and waited for Pa to get down the old Bible. I was still feeling sorry for

myself and, to be honest, I wasn't in much of a mood to read scriptures. But Pa didn't get the Bible, instead he bundled up and went outside. I couldn't figure it out because we had already done all the chores. I didn't worry about it long though, I was too busy wallowing in self-pity.

Soon Pa came back in. It was a cold clear night out and there was ice in his beard. "Come on, Matt," he said. "Bundle up good, it's cold out tonight." I was really upset then. Not only wasn't I getting the rifle for Christmas, now Pa was dragging me out in the cold, and for no earthly reason that I could see. We'd already done all the chores, and I couldn't think of anything else that needed doing, especially not on a night like this. But I knew Pa was not very patient at one dragging one's feet when he'd told them to do something, so I got up and put my boots back on and got my cap, coat, and mittens. Ma gave me a mysterious smile as I opened the door to leave the house. Something was up, but I didn't know what.

Outside, I became even more dismayed. There in front of the house was the work team, already hitched to the big sled. Whatever it was we were going to do wasn't going to be a short, quick, little job. I could tell. We never hitched up the big sled unless we were going to haul a big load. Pa was already up on the seat, reins in hand. I reluctantly climbed up beside him. The cold was already biting at me. I wasn't happy.

When I was on, Pa pulled the sled around the house and stopped in front of the woodshed. He got off and I followed. "I think we'll put on the high sideboards," he said. "Here, help me." The high sideboards! It had been a bigger job than I wanted to do with just the low sideboards on, but whatever it was we were going to do would be a lot bigger with the high sideboards on.

When we had exchanged the sideboards Pa went into the woodshed and came out with an armload of wood---the wood I'd spent all summer hauling down from the mountain, and then all fall sawing into blocks and splitting. What was he doing? Finally I said something. "Pa," I asked, "what are you doing?" "You been by the Widow Jensen's lately?" he asked. The Widow Jensen lived about two miles down the road. Her husband had died a year or so before and left her with three children, the oldest being eight. Sure, I'd been by, but so what? "Yeah," I said, "why?" "I rode by just today," Pa said. "Little Jakey was out digging around in the woodpile trying to find a few chips. They're out of wood, Matt." That was all he said and then he turned and went back into the woodshed for another armload of wood. I followed him.

We loaded the sled so high that I began to wonder if the horses would be able to pull it. Finally, Pa called a halt to our loading, then we went to the smoke house and Pa took down a big ham and a side of bacon. He handed them to me and told me to put them in the sled and wait. When he returned he was carrying a sack of flour over his right shoulder and a smaller sack of something in his left hand. "What's in the little sack?" I asked.

"Shoes. They're out of shoes. Little Jakey just had gunny sacks wrapped around his feet when he was out in the woodpile this morning. I got the children a little candy too. It just wouldn't be Christmas without a little candy."

We rode the two miles to Widow Jensen's pretty much in silence. I tried to think through what Pa was doing. We didn't have much by worldly standards. Of course, we did have a big woodpile, though most of what was left now was still in the form of logs that I would have to saw into blocks and split before we could use it. We also had meat and flour, so we could spare that, but I knew we didn't have any money, so why was Pa buying them shoes and candy? Really, why was he doing any of this? Widow Jensen had closer neighbors than us. It shouldn't have been our concern.

We came in from the blind side of the Jensen house and unloaded the wood as quietly as possible, then we took the meat and flour and shoes to the door. We knocked. The door opened crack and a timid voice said, "Who is it?" "Lucas Miles, Ma'am, and my son, Matt. Could we come in for a bit?" Widow Jensen opened the door and let us in. She had a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. The children were wrapped in another and were sitting in front of the fireplace by a very small fire that hardly gave off any heat at all. widow Jensen fumbled with a match and finally lit the lamp.

"We brought you a few things, Ma'am," Pa said and set down the sack of flour. I put the meat on the table. Then Pa handed her the sack that had the shoes in it. She opened it hesitantly and took the shoes out one pair at a time. There was a pair for her and one for each of the children---sturdy shoes, the best, shoes that would last. I watched her carefully. She bit her lower lip to keep it from trembling and then tears filled her eyes and started running down her cheeks. She looked up at Pa like she wanted to say something, but it wouldn't come out.

"We brought a load of wood too, Ma'am," Pa said, then he turned to me and said, "Matt, go bring enough in to last for awhile. Let's get that fire up to size and heat this place. I wasn't the same person when I went back out to bring in the wood. I had a big lump in my throat and, much as I hate to admit it, there were tears in my eyes too. In my mind I kept seeing those three kids huddled around the fireplace and their mother standing there with tears running down her cheeks and so much gratitude in her heart that she couldn't speak. My heart swelled within me and a joy filled my soul that I'd never known before. I had given at Christmas many times before, but never when it had made so much difference. I could see we were literally saving the lives of these people.

I soon had the fire blazing and everyone's spirits soared. The kids started giggling when Pa handed them each a piece of candy and Widow Jensen looked on with a smile that probably hadn't crossed her face for a long time. She finally turned to us. "God bless you," she said. "I know the Lord himself has sent you. The children and I have been praying that he would send one of his angels to spare us."

In spite of myself, the lump returned to my throat and the tears welled up in my eyes again. I'd never thought of Pa in those exact terms before, but after Widow Jensen mentioned it I could see that it was probably true. I was sure that a better man than Pa had never walked the earth. I started remembering all the times he had gone out of his way for Ma and me, and many others. The list seemed endless as I thought on it. Pa insisted that everyone try on the shoes before we

left. I was amazed when they all fit and I wondered how he had known what sizes to get. Then I guessed that if he was on an errand for the Lord that the Lord would make sure he got the right sizes.

Tears were running down Widow Jensen's face again when we stood up to leave. Pa took each of the kids in his big arms and gave them a hug. They clung to him and didn't want us to go. I could see that they missed their pa, and I was glad that I still had mine.

At the door Pa turned to Widow Jensen and said, "The Mrs. wanted me to invite you and the children over for Christmas dinner tomorrow. The turkey will be more than the three of us can eat, and a man can get cantankerous if he has to eat turkey for too many meals. We'll be by to get you about eleven. It'll be nice to have some little ones around again. Matt, here, hasn't been little for quite a spell." I was the youngest. My two older brothers and two older sisters were all married and had moved away. Widow Jensen nodded and said, "Thank you, Brother Miles. I don't have to say, "'May the Lord bless you,' I know for certain that He will."

Out on the sled I felt a warmth that came from deep within and I didn't even notice the cold. When we had gone a ways, Pa turned to me and said, "Matt, I want you to know something. Your ma and me have been tucking a little money away here and there all year so we could buy that rifle for you, but we didn't have quite enough.

Then yesterday a man who owed me a little money from years back came by to make things square. Your ma and me were real excited, thinking that now we could get you that rifle, and I started into town this morning to do just that. But on the way I saw little Jakey out scratching in the woodpile with his feet wrapped in those gunny sacks and I knew what I had to do. So, Son, I spent the money for shoes and a little candy for those children. I hope you understand." I understood, and my eyes became wet with tears again. I understood very well, and I was so glad Pa had done it. Just then the rifle seemed very low on my list of priorities. Pa had given me a lot more. He had given me the look on Widow Jensen's face and the radiant smiles of her three children. For the rest of my life, whenever I saw any of the Jensens, or split a block of wood, I remembered, and remembering brought back that same joy I felt riding home beside Pa that night. Pa had given me much more than a rifle that night, he had given me the best Christmas of my life. END OF STORY But not the end of OUR story as God works through *our* lives!! We are called to be witnesses to God working in our world in and through our lives, today.

By the grace of our God, may this be so. In the name of our Savior, Jesus, Amen.