

*Isaiah 61: 10 - 62:3*

*Luke 2: 22 - 40*

During the advent season we have spent a lot of time talking about dreams. I'm wondering what are some of the dreams you had for Christmas this year? Perhaps you dreamed of a vaccine to COVID 19. Perhaps you dreamed and longed to be with family. Perhaps you dreamed for some semblance of normalcy in a time of so much uncertainty. Perhaps you have dreamed for hope to return, or for joy to fill your heart and your home. Dreams are beautiful things. They have the power to transcend this world. Think of all the times the divine is encountered while dreaming... In scripture we have so many examples of people encountering God or God's messengers in dreams. Where have you encountered the divine this advent and Christmas season?

In our scripture today, we meet a wizened old man named Simeon. Now Simeon was devout. He had a very intimate relationship with God. But Simeon had a dream that he would see God's chosen one before he died. Imagine living your whole life waiting for that one thing. Enduring all of life's hardships, waiting and watching and hoping that one day soon the Messiah would appear. And finally, he does.

This week between Christmas and Epiphany we continue to focus on dreaming. But what's left to dream about? Christ has come. The joy, hope, love and Shalom of God has been revealed in the coming of God's son into the world. Jesus has come. We have celebrated... now what?

As Jesus is brought up to the temple to be consecrated, Simeon takes him in his arms and prophesies about all that Jesus will do, but he also prophesies about Mary and the burden she will carry as Jesus' mother. The messiah comes to all, but perhaps most importantly to the least among us; to the poor and down-trodden; to those who need to hear the hope of God.

The coming of God's Messiah into the world forever altered world history. But does it alter history still? If Christ came as a light of revelation to the gentiles and glory for Israel, then wouldn't we see the effects of the messiah here among us still? What would such effects look like?

We sing the Gloria's and halleluiahs that accompany Christmas. We sing of the joy that the earth embraces as the Lord has come. But as we move from Christmas towards epiphany and further towards the cross, I wonder what we are to do. What does it look like today for a world whose messiah has come, and yet who awaits his return?

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Perhaps it looks like the work of Christmas as Howard Thurman described:

*When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with the flocks, then the work of Christmas begins: to find the lost, to heal those broken in spirit, to feed the hungry, to release the oppressed, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among all peoples, to make a little music with the heart. And to radiate the light of Christ, every day, in every way, in all that we do and in all that we say. Then the work of Christmas begins.<sup>1</sup>*

My friends, as we celebrate the birth of our Lord, it is my hope that we would not be able to keep silent. Like Simeon and Anna, our voices should carry out into the world about the good news of God for all humanity. The work of Christmas has begun for us today. Christmas, from a distance, looks a bit like a passive event. The inbreaking of God into the world had seemingly little to do with us. In many ways it seems like it was an event that happened “over there” many years ago. And yet, as we watch the responses of people like Simeon, and Anna, and Mary, and Elisabeth and even the mute Zechariah, we begin to see that Christmas is not so passive an event after all; that Christmas, in fact, is here and now, and that the work of Christmas requires action. To believe that the Messiah has broken into this world and to believe that we encounter him still moves us towards action. It moves us to work towards the world that God has promised and intended; a world where all are welcomed and all are loved. The work of Christmas is to seek out those who are lost among us . . . to those who have lost their way, to those who do not yet know that the messiah has come, to those who are groping in the dark in search of the light and take them by the hand.

It is to heal those who are broken and in need of healing – to heal the physically sick, but also the spiritually sick; those who are broken in spirit.

The work of Christmas is to feed the hungry among us – in a world where there is so much plenty – in a world where there is enough, but only some people have enough, we are called to share of our bounty with those who have less.

Our work is to free people from the prisons of injustice that have held them captive for so long . . . prisons of racial inequity, prisons of mental illness, prisons of economic hardship and oppression, prisons of addiction . . . We are all meant to be free and enjoy the freedom that Christ offers us.

The work of Christmas is to rebuild nations torn apart, nations divided, nations in need of the healing presence of God. Our nation is one such nation, divided across so many lines that sometimes it’s hard to know how we can coexist with others. And yet our work in this Christmas season is to heal and rebuild a nation that is torn apart. It seems a tall order, but it is not so difficult if we break it down. For each of us it might look different, but I think it starts with our willingness to view those from opposing viewpoints first and foremost as God’s beloved children. Our society makes it so easy to “other-ise” people; to further the divisions between us

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<sup>1</sup>Thurman, Howard, The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations, Richmond, Indiana, Friends United Press, 1985.

which in turn further damages our nation. We can bring the healing presence of God to our nation when we bring the healing presence of God to each other.

If we dream of God's dream, the work of Christmas is to bring peace among brothers and sisters. To tear down any walls that seek to divide us; binaries in which one party must be right and another wrong, walls of political divides, walls of class and socioeconomic position; Rather we are to be at peace with one another and seek the welfare of our brethren, even and especially when we disagree. Where there is discord – and lord knows this is a time of discord – We are called to seek peace and to sow it everywhere we can.

Sam Shoemaker shows in some ways what such action might look like. Shoemaker was a rector at Calvary (Episcopal) Church in NY and ran the Calvary Church Rescue Mission – a place for the down-trodden. In this poem, he describes himself as the doorkeeper leading people to the divine presence of God.

### **I Stand at the Door**

*I stand by the door.  
I neither go too far in, nor stay too far out.  
The door is the most important door in the world -  
It is the door through which people walk when they find God.  
There is no use my going way inside and  
    staying there,  
When so many are still outside and they,  
    as much as I,  
Crave to know where the door is.  
And all that so many ever find  
Is only the wall where the door ought to be.  
They creep along the wall like blind men,  
With outstretched, groping hands,  
Feeling for a door, knowing there  
    must be a door,  
Yet they never find it.  
So I stand by the door.*

*The most tremendous thing in the world  
Is for people to find that door -  
the door to God.*

*The most important thing that anyone can do  
Is to take hold of one of those blind,  
groping hands  
And put it on the latch - the latch  
that only clicks  
And opens to the person's own touch.*

*People die outside the door, as starving  
beggars die  
On cold nights in cruel cities in the  
dead of winter.  
Die for want of what is within their grasp.  
They live on the other side of it - live because they have not found it.*

*Nothing else matters compared to helping them find it,  
And open it, and walk in, and find God.  
So I stand by the door.*

*Go in great saints; go all the way in -  
Go way down into the cavernous cellars,  
And way up into the spacious attics.  
It is a vast, roomy house, this house  
where God is.*

*Go into the deepest of hidden casements,  
Of withdrawal, of silence, of sainthood.  
Some must inhabit those inner rooms  
And know the depths and heights of God,  
And call outside to the rest of us how  
wonderful it is.  
Sometimes I take a deeper look in.  
Sometimes venture in a little farther,  
But my place seems closer to the opening.  
So I stand by the door.*

*I admire the people who go way in.  
But I wish they would not forget how it was  
Before they got in. Then they would be able to help  
The people who have not yet even  
found the door.*

*Or the people who want to run away  
again from God.  
You can go in too deeply and stay in too long  
And forget the people outside the door.  
As for me, I shall take my old accustomed place,  
Near enough to God to hear and know  
God is there,  
But not so far from the people as not to hear them,  
And remember they are there too.*

*Where? Outside the door -  
Thousands of them. Millions of them.  
But - more important for me -  
One of them, two of them, ten of them.  
Whose hands I am intended to  
put on the latch.  
So I shall stand by the door and wait  
For those who seek it.*

*I had rather be a door-keeper  
So I stand by the door.<sup>2</sup>*

As we continue dreaming this Christmas season, we carry with us the spirit of Christmas which demands that we not be silent (in word or deed), but that we declare to the world the good news that the Lord is Come, not just 2000 years ago, but today. That Christ is present every time the hungry are fed, and the lost are found. That Christ is in the midst of us when we reach out to our brothers and sisters in love. That Christ is in the midst of us when we place the hand of another upon the latch of a doorway which leads towards Christ himself. As Howard Thurman said, “do not be silent; there is no limit to the power that may be released through you.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Shoemaker, Helen, *I Stand by the Door - the Life of Sam Shoemaker*, 1st Edition, Harper & Row, 1967.

<sup>3</sup> Thurman, Howard, *Deep is the Hunger*, 1st Edition, Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1978.

2020 has been a challenging year, a difficult year, a year full of trials and pain, and division and heartache. As we look towards 2021 in the spirit of Christmas, I wonder how we might carry out the work of Christmas. I wonder what might change in us and through us. I wonder how God might reach through each and every one of you as you seek to do the work of Christ in the world. The trials are still there; the hardships are still there. We are told every day that we need more, that we are not enough unless we have “filled in the blank.” Our world tells us that we live in a world of scarcity, and yet our God tells us that we live in a world of plenty.

What if as we look towards the new year, we carry with us the joy that Christmas brings to rewrite the world’s messages of fear and scarcity. What if we actually believed that we are enough and we have enough (even if we don’t have much). What if we, like Simeon and Anna are so filled with the spirit that we cannot keep silent – that we cannot keep silent in both word and deed?

Maybe we’re not called to address all the world’s ills... in fact I guarantee that none of us is meant to do everything on a global scale. But maybe we become doorkeepers, standing and waiting to place another’s hand upon the latch so that they too might come in. Maybe we seek to do our part right where we are situated here so that the Kingdom of God may be made known to all. And maybe, just maybe, we’ll catch a glimpse of the modern-day angels and shepherds and magi, who ushered the Christ child into the world... and realize that maybe they look a lot like you and me.

May it be so, Amen.

**The Reverend Amy Ruhf, Resident Minister**