

“My Eyes Have Seen Your Salvation”

Luke 2:22-38

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In my pastoral work, it is my privilege to sit with people who are terminally ill. My work on those occasions is to listen. What I try to hear is the one thing this person is hoping to experience before he or she dies. It might be something formal such as the wedding of a child or the graduation of a grandchild. It might be something romantic like one last stroll on the beach or one last whiff of chocolate chip pancakes cooked on the griddle of a particular diner. It might be something religious like one more taste of communion bread or one last singing of a favorite hymn or once more through the 23rd Psalm. My ministry then is to see what can be done to enable this person to satisfy the longing. When that happens, I say that the person had been healed when they died.

In the text for today, we meet Simeon, a devout human being who has grown old waiting for God’s Messiah to come. He has studied the prophets and he knows Messiah is God’s promise. He has looked for signs in the heavens and in the community. His deep longing before he dies is to witness God’s promise fulfilled, to witness the very presence of God’s Messiah.

As Mary and Joseph come up to the temple to present their child for the ritual of dedication, Simeon is there to receive the child in his arms. He looks into the child’s face, into the child’s eyes, and he knows he has seen what he’s been waiting for. His life is now awesomely complete. Holding the child firmly, Simeon looks to the heavens and says to the Creator: (here I prefer the Revised Standard Version) Simeon prays:

“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation.”

This word ‘salvation’ comes from a Greek word meaning ‘to be made whole.’ For Simeon to see God’s salvation is for him to see in Christ the way to wholeness for all that is broken, for all that is wounded, for all that is disappointed, for all that is shattered. Simeon sees that the fractured places of the world can now be mended. The Great Sewing Bee can now begin. Do you know what a sewing bee is? Traditionally, it is a circle of women who have brought their various sewing projects. Some are darning socks. Some are repairing zippers. Some are replacing buttons. Some are patching tears. Some are letting out a waistline. All are wearing thimbles. All are sharing stories. All are hearing one another. There’s a mending of garments; but there is simultaneously a mending of relationships, a mending of discouragements, a mending of broken dreams.

What Simeon sees is the arrival of the Great Sewing Bee, the invitation for humanity to experience, at last, a wholeness of body, a wholeness of mind, and a wholeness of soul. It was in my Grandmother Clemmer’s home on Prospect Street in East Longmeadow, Massachusetts that I first witnessed a sewing bee. It was a little intimidating for a young boy to be in the presence of all those women. I sort of made the rounds, checking out each woman’s project, receiving a pat on the head from each one in the circle. At the time, I didn’t have a clue what was happening there, but on reflection, I see that the threaded needles and the thimble thumbs are ideal metaphors for what it means to be swept up in the circle of wholeness we all crave.

There are so many places and populations in the world today hoping for the Great Sewing Circle to descend upon them. I want to lift up three specific situations desperately awaiting wholeness.

First is the plight of American soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with post traumatic stress syndrome. Michael Hawley, a son of South Church, has returned from Iraq with a shoulder injury. But he is aware of the less obvious injuries that many of his peers suffer. So Mike has started the Veterans Art Foundation. It will be a place where returned soldiers can find healing through creative writing, poetry, painting, and sculpting. This is Mike's version of the Great Sewing Bee!

The second is the political tension in Zimbabwe. Have you been following this story?

Robert Mugabee, president for more than 30 years, was clearly defeated in the recent national election by Morgan Tsvangirai. However, Mr. Mugabee refuses to step aside, refuses to accept defeat. Diplomats from around the world have been trying to work out an arrangement they are referring to as 'power sharing.' But the aging president will have none of that. Power sharing is not acceptable to him. I raise up this desperate situation in Southern Africa because I am intrigued by the concept of power sharing as an avenue toward wholeness. I'd like to lift it up and out of the realm of politics and give it a place in theology! Salvation, the possibility of wholeness, has much to do with power sharing: with men sharing power with women; with whites sharing power with blacks; with first world nations sharing power with third world nations; with managers sharing power with employees; with senior ministers sharing power with their associates! Salvation, wholeness, has much to do with the sharing of power! Wherever power is shared and not hoarded, mending has a chance and Simeon's refrain can be sung once again.

Thirdly, I ache, personally, for the brokenness that is represented by heroin. We read about heroin in the Glastonbury Citizen. It is good that we are trying to eliminate its source. It is good that we have rehabilitation centers. It is good that we have advertising campaigns drawing attention to the dangers of heroin. What I know is that salvation has something to do with addressing the intense loneliness that makes heroin an attractive choice. Therefore, salvation has something to do with community, community that refuses to allow anyone to feel left out.

As this year comes to a close, I am so thankful for a church where nearly one hundred youth find refuge on Wednesday nights, where teenagers find esteem and self-respect, where wholeness is not just discussed, but experienced; where salvation is not just a word in the dictionary, but a joy that comes with loving and being loved, with including and being included.

I thank God for a church community where the possibility of wholeness is no mere pipe dream, where the possibility of wholeness lies in every worship hour, in every fellowship opportunity, in every study group, in every ministry, and in every mission. We have a ways to go. What Simeon saw was the arrival of the Great Sewing Bee, the beginning of the humanity's healing. What I see is so many situations where people are waiting to be invited into the circle.

This is how the text was speaking to me this week. In the greatest of hope, I say, Amen!