

Copyright December 30 & 31, 2017. All Rights Reserved. Geist Christian Church

Title: Falling and Rising Shadow and Light

Date: December 30 & 31, 2017

Preaching: Pastor Sarah Renfro, Connections Pastpr

Scripture: [Isaiah 61:10-62:3](#)

Text: [Luke 2:22-40](#)

E-mail: [Sarah Renfro](#)



“For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch.” (Isaiah 62:1)

These are the words from the prophet Isaiah. A prophet is someone who listens to God and speaks the word of

God. A prophet is a truth-teller, speaking about the present and future based on the past, not a fortune-teller predicting the future based on palm-reading or a crystal ball. A prophet is one who speaks truth in love to power, stating what will happen if things continue as status quo. Prophets oppose injustice and idolatry, risk their lives and comfort in order to confront dangerous powerful people in the hope of God’s dream and peace. Prophets shine a light on the truth. As Fred Craddock reminds us, “anyone who turns on light creates shadows. This is what is meant literally by ‘making a difference.’” Ancient prophets exposed the shadow side of the Light by speaking out in solidarity with the oppressed and against the oppressors. Prophets lived hard lives, whose words often got them killed. Isaiah was a prophet, and in today’s lesson, we meet three more prophets, Simeon, Anna, and Jesus.

²²When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), ²⁴and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. ²⁷Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the

parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, ²⁹“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” ³³And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” ³⁶There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. ³⁹When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.” (Luke 2:22-40)

Our scripture tells us that Jesus’ parents did everything “required by the law.” They were devout Jewish people. They followed the Torah. They traveled to the Temple to have Jesus circumcised. They had baby Jesus dedicated roughly around 40 days after he was born. They were poor, we know this because they offered 2 turtledoves, when it was customary to offer a lamb. And yet, even in their economic poverty, they presented something even greater: The Lamb of God, their first-born son, Jesus.

This was the One Simeon had waited his whole life for! He could die in peace, knowing that salvation, for Jews and Gentiles, all of God’s children, was at hand. Actually, in his arms, as his feeble fingers held the Christ-child. Living under the oppressive Roman regime, Simeon could celebrate that the Messiah made his appearance in the world and would upset the status quo. This One would shine a light in the darkness and reveal shadows. But salvation would not come without revelation, revealing the truth of what was, and revelation would lead to heartache. As a prophet, Simeon could see how present powers would oppose the one who came to shake things up, to speak truth to power, to even call into question the hypocrisy of religious leaders. Simeon shared the shadow side of Jesus’ ministry, calling back to the prophet Isaiah, “He will be a holy place; for both Israel and Judah he will be a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.” (Isaiah 8:14)

Jesus would speak up and shake up the status quo as an insider, a follower of the law himself with his parents. Jesus would love God so much that he would call in question leaders and laws which seemed to be the opposite of the love of God. And this would be troubling to the powers that be, of course. Jesus would be rejected and would fall for revealing the hypocrisy. This was the life of a prophet, the shadow side of creating change, making a difference.

But Simeon didn't just say falling; he also said rising. A true prophet only speaks truth in love because of the hope of rising, of light, of resurrection, of being heard and the good news of transformation, in this life! Simeon would not see, in his earthly life, the salvation of all who sought to love God, self, and neighbor, but he had the hope and peace that one day, ALL would witness the light and glory of Love incarnate.

Shadow and light. Falling and rising. That's the order of things in biblical terms. Our culture would say, "the rise and fall," but only after one has hit rock bottom, been enslaved, suffered and even died, can one rise in new life and glory.

To be honest, I struggle at Christmastime when people talk about the birth *and* death *and* resurrection of Christ. And we are still in the 12 days of Christmas until Epiphany, when the magi arrive, liturgically speaking. Can't we just focus on the baby for one moment? Isn't the infant enough of a miracle and good story to hear without going all the way to the cross? Well, yes, and...Simeon knew. He could foretell the rest of the story just by looking in the eyes of the infant. So much so, he had to share with his parents, who continued to be "amazed," or dazed and confused. I mean, they'd only been parents for maybe 41 days?! Seriously, Simeon! That's some heavy stuff. But he was too old to mess around. He had truth inside of him that had to get out. That's the life of a prophet, especially one prepared to die. Falling and rising, for redemption.

But then we meet Anna. She is the only woman in the New Testament who is identified, in writing, as a prophet. She hears Simeon's words of salvation and falling and rising, and she probably echoes his words while adding the good news of redemption. She praises God for the One who would redeem, or bring back to God, God's children. All of 'em. As a prophet, she was super tight with God, dedicating her life to the Temple after being widowed and childless. Like Hannah before her, she was prepared for a child who would serve the Lord his whole life long. And she got to meet him at his dedication.

If Jesus' dedication was anything like my child's, the mother was frazzled and both parents sleep-deprived. Anna would have been like a grandmother

or great-grandmother, there to comfort the parents while coddling the child. And so Anna did with Jesus. She saw in him what his parents had been told but couldn't fully realize, that he was to redeem the world.

Falling, Rising, Revealing, Redeeming. That's what Jesus would experience. What prophets before him tried to do, and prophets after him, embodied.

Simeon, upon meeting the Christ-child, the anointed one, the Messiah, sang a song of uncomfortable conversations. It is the job, *the vocation*, of prophets to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, to inspire uncomfortable conversations.

Reflecting on the past year, we have had uncomfortable conversations in our country. People across all spectrums have been having difficult, uncomfortable, heart-breaking conversations. Our heart aches when we know people are still being treated differently because of their genders and their races. Our heart aches when people are unable to live the lives God has created them for. This year, racism and sexism have been in the forefront of our media and our consciousness. Silence-breakers were named Time Person of the Year.¹

Many of those in the public sphere have experienced the rise and fall of fame, prestige, and power because it has been revealed that they have been accused of sexual harassment, misconduct, assault. Those who have spoken up, shaken up the status quo of Hollywood, newsrooms, statehouses, have experienced the falling, the rising, *and the redemption* that comes from revealing the truth. Those in power don't want to hear it, shame the silence-breakers, re-victimize those who dare to share their stories. And yet, they rise.

#Metoo showed up on Twitter and Facebook and Instagram for stories of women (mostly) who had been sexually assaulted. I shared, as well. Few women are immune from the sexism disease and dis-ease. Uncomfortable conversations are being had with people in power because the status quo is no longer acceptable. Change must come, but it isn't easy. The prophets, or spokeswomen, who speak on behalf of God who created male *and* female in God's own image, suffer at the hands of naysayers, deniers, what-was-she-wearing-ers. Revealing one's experiences exposes the shadow side of speaking out, speaking truth to power. And yet, she rises and is redeemed when others join her voice (like the millions who already have). She rises when the perpetrators of sexual violence stumble and fall out of power. When other men become allies and advocates, asking tough questions of the culture, that, too, is redemption.

Television host and silence-breaker Megyn Kelly said, "At least we've started asking the right questions. Ones that seem alarmingly basic in hindsight: 'What if we did complain?' 'What if we didn't whine, but we spoke our truth in our strongest voices and insisted that those around us did better? What if that worked to change reality right now?' Kelly acknowledges that this still feels more like a promise than a certainty. But for the moment, the world is listening."

We are still in the midst of the story. The promise of salvation is already and not yet. He is born, and the Kin-dom is near, but we still have work to do. Silence to break. A difference to make.

Falling, Rising, Revealing, Redeeming.

It is New Year's Eve, and on this weekend 155 years ago, slaves gathered to worship on Watch Night.

On New Year's Day, 1853, slaves would be freed.² "This meant that on New Year's Eve, 1862...slaves gathered all over in churches, homes, and wherever they could meet, to celebrate and wait together for the moment that the Emancipation Proclamation would become law. The faithful offered prayers of thanksgiving and praise to God that first Watch Night for finally reaching "The Promised Land" of freedom.

Those who had known what it is to fall on their knees, not just in prayer, but subject to their owners, would know what it would be like to rise as free people. But the unknown of their rising would bring anxiety, among the freed slaves and those who believed it was right for one man to own another because of their skin color. New Year's Day revealed who was free and who was slave to racism. The inner thoughts of many were revealed to be dangerous, as lynching and Jim Crow laws became the norm in the South. Prophets who rose up to be spokespeople for God, the One who calls ALL God's children, regardless of race or background, were sought for slaughter. The prophet, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who grew up in the church, was a pastor, devoutly religiously like Jesus' before him, dared to call out his white brothers and sisters, especially the pastors who preached *against* Civil Rights, and you know what happened. Revealing, falling, rising...redemption?

The conversation has continued, and yes, we have come far, but to salvation? God is here, yet salvation is yet to come to all. On this night, African-American congregations, like Amazing Grace which meets at our Mud Creek Campus, will gather to remember what was, what is, and what it is possible in God's dream for all of us. The fall of slavery, the rise of the free,

the revealing of inner thoughts of racist views, and redemption that is and is to be.

This is the story that Simeon knew. That God was in the fall and rise of humanity, revealing the truth, and setting people free. God had kept God's promise in the Exodus, a promise which African-American slaves held (hold) onto. God spoke to the ancient prophets and they told their truth to the ones in power. And then God loved humanity so much that Jesus embodied the Divine and spoke the word of God, preached a good and hard word, challenged the status quo, opposed injustice, and broke long-held but largely discriminatory norms. And it got him in trouble. Those he caused to stumble out of power were threatened by Jesus' insight and actions. And they had him killed. Simeon knew. And after the fall comes the rising. In the Risen Lord, humanity, Jews and Gentiles and all of God's children could, can, know redemption. Anna knew that too.

Sticks and stone will break my bones, but words will never hurt me. Oh, please. Words can hurt. And sometimes the words we need to speak are the ones that hurt the most. And yet words of solidarity can heal and redeem. In 2018, may we resolve to have the courage to dare to listen to God, speak the word of God, share the truth in love, like the prophets before us and those with us now. No one said this faith thing is easy. Making a difference, speaking up and out, casts long shadows. But the Light shines brighter.

Falling, Rising, Revealing, Redeeming.

On this New Year's Eve, as one year falls away and another rises, I will close with Maya Angelou's words:³

"You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may tread me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops.
Weakened by my soulful cries.

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own back yard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise."

¹ <http://time.com/time-person-of-the-year-2017-silence-breakers/>

² <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/ecopreacher/2017/12/watch-night-simeon-anna-racial-justice/>

³ <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/still-i-rise>