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**Title:** Seeing the Light

**Date:** December 29 & 30, 2018

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**Scripture:** Isaiah 42:1-6

**Text:** Luke 2:21-40

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Merry Christmas. Are you still saying that? I hope so because Christmas is just getting started. I know you think it is about time to pack everything away but today is just the sixth day of Christmas. You should be coming into this place singing, "Six Geese a Laying." I thought about having geese here as a prop but they were

expensive. The internet price was \$1,600, up 10% since last year. That's not worth it. Plus, given the problem that we have with geese in the parking lot, we'd have to get the carpets cleaned afterward so it'd be even more expensive. <sup>1</sup>

Despite the way we do Christmas, the season is just 12 days long. We have a week to go and then, the kings arrive. Epiphany begins every year on January 6 which is perfect for this year's calendar. It falls nice and neatly on Sunday. Expect to sing "We Three Kings."

Today though is the sixth day of Christmas and connects with our theme of Christmas Light. You might not know this but some suggest there are hidden meanings behind the 12 days of Christmas. Whether true or not, the symbolism gets us started. "Six Geese a Laying" represents the six days of creation. What did God say on each day of creation, "Let there be" and on the first day, God said, "Let there be light." (Genesis 1:3) God's first breath of words brought actual, physical, life-stimulating light. It divided the void into darkness and light, the very thing that Jesus was sent to do, to shatter darkness. God was the first to see the light but since then, to "see the light" has been an ever-changing metaphor.

Skip ahead a few thousand years. Now the symbol of "light" is not the sun, but the invention of the Thomas Edison Research Laboratories, the light bulb. In 1879 the research team that Thomas Edison oversaw created a filament that could burn an "electric arc" for forty hours without burning out.

By 1882 the tungsten-based version of this filament made long-life light bulbs a reality. "Let there be light" was converted by the lowly light bulb from a sacred mantra to a hardware-store purchase. And as anyone who has ever watched a cartoon knows, a big, bright, new idea or insight is demonstrated by a "light bulb" going off over someone's head. It is a symbolic of "seeing the light."<sup>2</sup>

Hold on to that because even though the light bulb takes nearly two thousand years to be discovered, it is about to happen in the first century. It happens when Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the temple, not on the sixth day of Christmas but on the 40<sup>th</sup> day of Jesus' life. I know, I know, we are getting ahead of the story. I told you the kings arrive next week on the 12<sup>th</sup> day. Now we are talking about the 40<sup>th</sup> day. It happens, one of the challenges of scripture. It is impossible to coordinate the calendars of Matthew and Luke. According to Matthew, the Holy family isn't anywhere near Jerusalem six weeks into Jesus life. They are soaking up the sun on an Egyptian escape, both literally and figuratively.

But not Luke. Luke presents Mary and Joseph as a good faithful Jewish family. It's important to his storytelling about the life of Jesus. In fact, four different times in this story, Luke tells us that they did everything required under the Law. Later in his ministry, Jesus will be criticized for trying to abolish the Law, something, of course, Jesus denies. So from the outset, Luke wants us to know that he or in this case his parents, did everything he was supposed to do. This means that Mary returns to the Temple, to be "purified according to the law of Moses and presented to the Lord." (Luke 2:22) The Law of Moses prescribed an offering of a lamb and a pigeon. But there was provision for those who would find such a gift was a hardship. They could instead offer 2 turtle doves. Sound familiar? On the second day of Christmas, my true love gave to me? "Two turtle doves..." Yes, it is where it comes from, a provision for making less of an offering than what is prescribed in the Law of Moses, a purification offering at 40 days.<sup>3</sup>

An amazing thing happens when Mary and Joseph show up. There is a guy who lives in Jerusalem. We don't know a lot about him other than his name is Simeon, but what we do know is impressive. Luke gives him incredible credentials. He is "...righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him." (Luke 2:25) It wasn't just that the Holy Spirit was on him. The Holy Spirit talked to him. We've been known to put people away for hearing voices but not then, at least not Simeon. The Holy Spirit promised that he would not die until he saw the Lord's Messiah. That's what the "consolation of Israel" is: a phrase used by Isaiah about the Messiah. When we talked about Mary receiving the light, we acknowledged that the first century was a time of great messianic

expectation. You heard the phrase, "when the Messiah comes..." a lot. Simeon probably used that language because he was a "Messiah-watcher." It is his one and only purpose in life. His first thought upon rising and his last thought upon lying down was, when will I see the Messiah? He expects him to show up at the temple, something promised by the prophet Malachi.<sup>4</sup>

On the 40<sup>th</sup> day of Jesus' life, when Mary and Joseph are headed to the Temple for the purification ritual, the Holy Spirit talks to Simeon. Luke doesn't tell us how. We don't know if it was in a dream like Joseph or if he heard a voice. We simply know that he is so. "Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required..." (Luke 2:27)

Simeon sees baby Jesus, just one of the hundreds of ordinary babies awaiting presentation, and a "light bulb" goes off. Simeon's been looking for a handsome warrior like David, riding in on a horse, a Messianic King. Strangely, he is drawn to this baby as if seeing a light shining in the darkness. I've always found this a fascinating part of the story. Let's face it, most 6 week old babies look the same. I know, I know your six weeks old was precious but he or she was precious because he or she was your child. Most six weeks olds look pretty much the same. They are starting to smile, grunting and googling, focusing better. What did Simeon see that made baby Jesus stand out?

Whatever he saw, Simeon goes over to Mary and says, "Let me have your baby." Mothers, can you imagine the anxiety Mary experienced? Young mothers never, ever like strangers, particularly old strangers who can barely hold themselves up asking to hold their babies. It is an unrecorded miracle that she gave Jesus to him. But she does. Simeon holds the baby, looks into his face, and smiles and Simeon, the expert witness, said "This is the one we have been waiting for. He is here. I have seen the light." "For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel." (Luke 2:22-23)

Luke says that Joseph and Mary were amazed about what Simeon said. You might think this amazing too. After all, they've had visits from angels who revealed this truth. Shepherds and kings told them about Jesus. Why are they amazed when an old man said what they had already been told? Why else than Jesus will be is simply amazing, no matter when or what they hear. Over and over again, year after year, I'm sure they were amazed.

Simeon himself was amazed. The Messiah he was waiting for was very different than the one who he held in his arms. He knew it and immediately

saw all the implications. He didn't just see the light of Jesus. He says the darkness that will surround him and even try to defeat him. He sees it and says it. This Messiah, this Savior, Jesus, would be controversial, "...a child destined for the falling and rising of many." He saw with clarity what was ahead for Mary. Simeon turns to Mary and says, "What happens to him is going to break your heart. It will pierce you like a sword in your soul."

Luke doesn't tell us how Jesus is given back. But I think I know. I think Mary grabbed him immediately out of Simeon's arms, the very second he delivered that awful news. Mary may have understood exactly what Simeon was saying. Certainly, her own magnificent song suggests that she understand that Jesus life isn't going to be easy. But no parent wants to hear that kind of stuff about their kid. I think Mary grabbed her Jesus back and Simeon walks off the stage saying, "Got to go. I'm good now. Seeing the light, I can now depart in peace."

No sooner does Simeon walk away then another beautiful character in this story arrives. It's a woman named Anna. If Simeon was old, Anna was older. Anna had been married for seven years. Her husband died. The best reading of Luke's text is she lived another 84 years as a widow which would put her very close if not over the century mark.

You'd think it'd be easy for her to be hopeless or bitter about having such a difficult life since losing her husband, but we're told, "She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying." (Luke 2:37b) She was a Messiah-watcher too and she saw what happened with Simeon and Jesus, maybe even heard his announcement that in Jesus, he sees the light. So, Anna makes her way over and she too sees the light "...she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem." (Luke 2:38) Jesus isn't just the consolation of Israel, he is also the redemption of Jerusalem. Jerusalem and with it, the temple represented the whole of Israel's hope before God. God is leading Israel to the Messiah as promised by Isaiah. He is a light to the nations, a "child given, a son born for us." Anna knows that Simeon is singing from Isaiah songbook and quoting Isaiah 42." Anna joins him. She glorifies and praises God for who Jesus is, God's chosen, the consolation of Israel and the redemption of Jerusalem.

It is a beautiful picture. One which, I'm sure, had there been cameras, would have been recorded and it would have been stunning when developed. Or for that matter, if the scene unfolded today, the two Messiah-watchers would have captured the moment by taking a selfie. It would be the ultimate "selfie" wouldn't it? There is a reason. The lighting was just right, perfect.

Great photographers know that a great photo has nothing to do with the beauty of the subject. Everything—and a photographer will tell you that means EVERYTHING—is about lighting. It is not skill, or timing, or beauty that makes a great photo. It is all about the light. The right light is every photographer’s “secret weapon.” If you want to be beautiful, you don't need plastic surgery. You don't need a make-up artist. You don't need the best clothes. You just need the right light. Everyone is beautiful if the lighting is right and Jesus is the right light.

Simeon and Anna upon seeing the light, respond because they had to get into that picture. Scripture paints the scene as beautiful photography, like an ultimate selfie. In doing so, it invites you to do the same, to put yourself in the picture where you can see the perfect light and have the opportunity take the ultimate selfie, to picture yourself with the Light of the World. That’s what Christmas is about, a good challenge on this 6th day of Christmas. But it is an even better one for the New Year. How will you end 2018 and begin the New Year in 2019?

Think about it. New Year’s celebrations begin with an extravagant show of lights. Fireworks and festivities around glowing balls are showcased in the most famous New Year’s parties. But it’s not the perfect lighting for selfies. They seldom come out just right.

You don’t need that. You just need to be a Messiah-watcher and like Anna and Simeon to see the light. He comes as a small, fragile package to hold. Wrap your arms around him, proclaim him as a light of salvation then snap a selfie. See yourself pictured with Jesus. You’ll be surprised at how good you look because this Light brings out all of your best qualities.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://pnc.mediaroom.com/2017-11-15-Holiday-Cheer-12-Days-of-Christmas-Gifts-Rise-Just-0-6-Percent-In-Price-According-To-PNC>

<sup>2</sup> Sweet, Leonard. Light and Life and All he Brings. retrieved by subscription at Sermons.com

<sup>3</sup> Luke, Fred Craddock. Interpretation. p. 38.

<sup>4</sup> Trotter, Mark. Simeon’s Song. Retrieved by subscription at Sermons.com.