

# *The Sunnybrook Pulpit*

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December 31, 2017 – New Year's Eve

## **A Life Worth Living**

Then 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 <sup>35</sup>so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.' – *Luke 2:21-40*

When I was much younger, I spent several months wandering around South America. I spent New Year's Eve and New Years Day in a beautiful little city in Columbia called Popayan. The custom in Columbia is that each family creates an "old man." They stuff old clothes and add symbols of things they want to forget or let go of. And then, at midnight, the old man, is burned. The Old Man is the old year, and all the sins and struggles of the old year are burned along with him. The New Year is a time of forgiveness and healing and letting go of all that is not worthy of holding on to. In some communities, after the old man is burned, a baby or doll is brought forth, symbolizing the New Year and all the possibility that comes with the new. And the New Year is therefore a time not just for letting go, but also a time for commitments, for resolutions to make of this New Year something better than the old one.

Babies symbolize something new and holy. It is that sense of holiness that leads families in our tradition to present their children for baptism or blessing. It is that sense of holiness that led Mary and Joseph to take Jesus to the temple to present him with the customary sacrifice of a pair of pigeons.

But when Jesus is presented at the temple, according to custom, something happens that was not at all customary: two elderly people, Simeon and Anna, notice him and call attention to him as the one who would reveal God's love to the Gentiles (non-Jews) and bring glory to the people Israel. Simeon adds some ominous words of coming conflict: "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed, revealing the inner thoughts of many – and a sword will pierce your own soul also." It is a premonition that the passion for justice that was to burn in Mary's child would lead

him into conflict with those who benefited from injustice, and that that conflict between justice and injustice would lead the life that began in a stable to end on a cross. In that very conflict however, Simeon foresees that the opposition of the powerful would not defeat Jesus, but only reveal the corruption of their own souls.

Jesus' life will not be an easy life, Simeon says, but it will be a life worth living. And those who follow Jesus will often find that their lives will not be easy, but they will be worth living. The Way of Jesus is not an easy one, because we are called to live in the world, but not be of the world. We are called in baptism to dance to the beat of a different drummer, to walk the road less travelled, to reject the narrow materialistic values of a world that has often lost its way. We are not called to withdraw from the world, but to be a light in the midst of the world's darkness. It is not easy to stand out, to be different, to be such a witness, but it is to people such as these that the future belongs. That is why the Way of Jesus is not an easy one.

But the Way of Jesus is a path worth walking because in allying ourselves with a God who loves the world passionately, we participate in God's plan to resist evil, to bring God's kingdom into being. That is why J.R.R. Tolkien portrays the Way of Jesus through stories of Hobbits who get caught up in an ancient quest to rid the world of evil, and J.K. Rowling portrays the Christian life through stories of Harry Potter and other novice sorcerers who, despite their youth and immaturity, have crucial roles to play in vanquishing the powers of darkness. The Way of Jesus is not an easy one, but it is a way worth walking because in it we participate in the quest to establish God's kingdom of love on earth as in heaven.

In the Methodist tradition, one of those which joined to make up the United Church of Canada, it was customary to mark the New Year by recommitting ourselves to this quest. A Wesley Covenanting service provides the opportunity to renew our commitment to the Way of Jesus with God through confession, forgiveness and renewal. We let go of that of which we are not proud and commit ourselves anew to our faith, our church and the God who is behind it all.

The New Year seems an obvious opportunity to celebrate the generous covenant which God has made with us, and to recommit ourselves to that covenant

as the sure foundation for a New Year. To commit ourselves to God is more than just committing ourselves to the church or even to a set of beliefs. God is greater than either the church or what we believe. In committing ourselves to God, we commit ourselves to Truth, not a narrow and shallow truth, but Truth which is broader and deeper than any truth we individually can grasp, We commit ourselves the highest and best in life, and we need to continually strive to expand our understanding of what is highest and best. So committing ourselves to God is to commit ourselves to an ongoing process of growth – spiritual, intellectual, emotional – a spiritual quest in which we are always stretching beyond what we are now.

During the early years of the Second World War, the people of England lived with not only the constant air raids, but the dark cloud of a potential invasion and conquest. There were many dark days when it looked very bleak indeed. During a New Year's radio broadcast, King George VI quoted the following lines from a poem by Louise Haskins, called, the Gate of the Year:

And I said to the man who stood at the gate to the year:

"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."

And he replied:

"Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God.

That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."

So today, I invite you to put your hand into the Hand of God in an intentional and active way. Later on in this service, I will be inviting you to recommit yourselves to our covenant with God. I will invite you to do that in a very specific and detailed way by writing your New Year's resolutions on a piece of paper and making it a part of the offering this morning, and then I will invite you in a general and a corporate way to stand and to renew your commitment to the God who makes covenant with us. I hope you will take advantage of this opportunity to place your hand in the Hand of God. For that shall indeed be to you better than light and safer than a known way. AMEN.

