

Isaiah 49:1-7

Luke 2:21-40

January 3, 2016

The Ordination and Installation of Elders

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

LOOKING FORWARD

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

As early as 600 B.C., the ancient Greeks used a baby as a symbol of the new year. They celebrated the birth of their god of Wine on New Year's. His name was Dionysus. In their New Year celebrations, the Greeks would parade around with a baby in a basket. The baby represented the rebirth of Dionysus.

A baby as a symbol of New Year's might sound familiar. When the clock strikes midnight at New Year's, you might very well see a picture of old Father Time, stooped over, sporting a long beard, and wearing a sash with the number of the previous year. Sometimes he carries an hourglass, in which the sand has run out, and a scythe. You also see Baby New Year, usually dressed in nothing more than a diaper and top hat and wearing a sash with the number of the new year. "In with the new, out with the old" is the message of the aged Father Time and the young Baby New Year.

Old Simeon and Baby Jesus present a similar picture in the temple. On the one hand we have old man Simeon, who is described as "righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel." On the other hand, we have eight-day-old baby Jesus, named by the angel Gabriel because he will save his people from their sins. "In with the new, out with the old" — an old, faithful man ready to die holding a baby who fulfills the long-awaited promise of salvation.

This story in the temple is full of "looking forward" —

Mary and Joseph, like any other parents, must have been thinking about what lay ahead for them and their child. It was time to circumcise him. It was time to name him. It was time to present and dedicate him to the Lord.

Simeon, like many other faithful people of God of his day, was looking forward to the consolation of Israel. He had waited all of his life to see the Messiah. He recognized the baby in his arms for what he was and what he would be — "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel; destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel; destined to be a sign that will be opposed."

Eighty-four year-old Anna, pious and faithful in her own right, spoke for and to "all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem."

Did you know the month of January gets its name from the Roman god of beginnings and transitions, whose name is taken from the Latin word for door? Janus was often pictured as having two faces — one looked to the future, one looked to the past.

Yes, there's a lot of "looking forward" in this story about the baby Jesus in the temple. But the "looking forward" is rooted in the past. Simeon and Anna tell us that — they are steeped in the age-old covenant promises of God. In the baby Jesus, Simeon and Anna recognize the new thing God is doing but, as someone has written, "God is doing something new, but it is not really new, because hope is always joined to memory. The new is God's keeping an old promise."¹

On this first Sunday of 2016, we are "looking forward" to the new year and we are marking beginnings and transitions. Today we thank Susie, John, Curt, and Bill for their three years of faithful service as members of the session's Class of 2015. At the same time, we ordain and install Nick, Ann, Nell, Joe, and Susan as members of the session's Class of 2018. The work of the new session will build on the foundations which these faithful elders have laid. More than that, the work of the new session will rest on the memory of what God has done in the past. Our hope and prayer is that we will recognize that the new things God is leading us to do rest on an old promise.

On this first Sunday of the new quarter, we also come to the Lord's table, which is certainly a place where we look to the past and to the future. We say, "Great is the mystery of the faith: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again" — past, present, and future. But, the Lord's supper is no mere memorial meal by which we simply remember a good man who once lived and died, long ago. When we gather at the Lord's table, we are in communion, not only with one another, but with the risen, living Lord, who commissions us to look forward into God's future and who promises, "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20)

Righteous and devout Simeon is a model for each of us and our church for this new year. How long had he waited to see the Messiah? We're not told an exact amount of time, but it must have been a while. Simeon had prayed for and been looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and you can almost hear the relief and gratitude when he holds the baby in his arms and praises God, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples." (Luke 2:28-31)

A couple of Sundays ago, David Sanderson shared Simeon's thoughts in the choir's Christmas cantata, *A Noel Celebration*. David/Simeon said, "I have believed the promise. I have called out to Him, every day, for as long as I can remember, to save us; to send a Savior. I believed the promise. Everything in me knew it the moment I saw Him. This small baby was not what I had expected. He was greater than I had expected. How like our God to bring salvation in such a way! In Him, a light greater than all the darkness. In Him, a promise greater than all the lies. In Him, redemption bigger than all of our shame and pain and sorrow. Sovereign Lord, it is as You have promised."²

"Sovereign Lord, it is as You have promised." That is what we have to "look forward" to in this new year. We are called to believe the promise, to live and act accordingly, and to trust in the new things God is doing among us, the new things that are actually God keeping an old promise.

As we look ahead to what God is calling us to do and expecting from us as his people in this new year, hear these words of a writing by Father Pierre Teilhard de Chardin called “The Slow Work of God.”

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
We are, quite naturally,
impatient in everything to reach the end without delay.
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown,
something new.
And yet it is the law of all progress that it is made
by passing through some stages of instability —
And that it may take a very long time.
And so I think it is with you.
Your ideas mature gradually —
let them grow.
Let them shape themselves,
without undue haste.
Don't try to force them on,
as though you could be today
what time (that is to say, grace and circumstances
acting on your own good will)
will make you tomorrow.
Only God could say what this new spirit
gradually forming within you will be.
Give our Lord the benefit of believing
that his hand is leading you,
and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense
and incomplete.

Let us pray: Lord God, you have called us to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹Fred B. Craddock, *Luke* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), pp. 39-40.

²Lloyd Larson, *A Noel Celebration* (2015 Lorenz Publishing Company, a division of the Lorenz Corporation), p. 56.