

Sermon for December 31, 2006 – Praising God!

Jeremiah 33: 14-16

Luke 2: 21-38

Col 3: 12-17

We are called on to praise God, in all times and in all places. Sometimes that can seem to get us into trouble, but in the end, praising God – saying, “Thank You, God – this is good!” always works out. Back in the 19th century, **there was a king in Africa who had a close friend that he grew up with.** The friend had a habit of looking at every situation that ever occurred in his life and remarking, "This is good!"

One day the king and his friend were out on a hunting expedition. The friend would load and prepare the guns for the king. The friend had apparently done something wrong in preparing one of the guns, for after taking the gun from his friend, the king fired it and his thumb was blown off. Examining the situation the friend remarked as usual, "This is good!" To which the king replied, "No, this is NOT good!" and proceeded to send his friend to jail.

About a year later, the king was hunting in an area that he should have known to stay clear of. Cannibals captured him and took him to their village. They tied him to a stake surrounded by wood. As they came near to set fire to the wood, they noticed that the king had but one thumb. Being superstitious, they never ate anyone that was less than whole. They untied the king and sent him away.

As he returned home, he was reminded of the event that had taken his thumb and felt badly about his treatment of his friend. He went immediately to the jail to free him. "You were right" he said, "It was good that my thumb was blown off." And he proceeded to tell the friend all that had just happened. "And so I am very sorry for sending you to jail for so long. It was bad for me to do this."

"No," his friend replied, "this is good!"

"What do you mean, 'this is good!' How could it be good that I sent you, my good friend, to jail for all this time?"

"If I had not been in jail, I would have been with you--and eaten!"

We ARE supposed to praise God, in the big things and in the little things. Luke has been showing us people praising God all throughout this nativity story. Today, we encounter Simeon and Anna, who praise God for God's mighty actions in the world, and for sending the Messiah at last. Mary and Joseph are going about their business, the righteous business of having their son welcomed into the covenant of the Chosen People. We learn that Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day, a righteous action done according to the law, as a sign of his inclusion into the covenant established by God between Himself and Abraham and his descendants. Then the time came for Mary and Jesus to be ritually purified, again, according to the law. Leviticus 12 describes how women and babies are to be made ritually clean after childbirth. The law called for a lamb to be offered as a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove to be offered as a sin offering; but if the family was poor, then two birds could be offered instead, one as a burnt offering, to atone for any of the sins the adult may have committed, knowingly or unknowingly, and one for the sin of being ritually unclean. So the young family went to Jerusalem, to observe the law of Moses with righteousness, and to participate in the holy rituals, when Simeon approached them.

Simeon was a righteous man who had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would see the messiah before he died. The Holy Spirit guided him into the temple that day, and when he saw Jesus, he offered the song of praise many of us know by its Latin name, *Nunc Dimittis*, thanking God for keeping His promise to him, by allowing him, Simeon, to see the glory of God's salvation. Another person came along, Anna, who was a prophet. She also began to praise God, proclaiming the redemption of Jerusalem, offered to all by this Child.

Both Simeon and Anna were able to praise God for God's faithfulness, because they kept themselves focused on God and God's glory. They focused on the fulfillment of God's promises, to them and to the Chosen People as a whole. They praised God for God's mysterious ways – not all Jews would have believed that it would even be possible for someone to serve as a light for revelation to the Gentiles AND for glory to God's people Israel – many Jews, in their desire to fulfill the law of Moses in a righteous way, would have thought that it would be impossible for someone to serve as a light for revelation to the Gentiles while at the same time bringing glory to God's people Israel. Simeon and Anna both knew that the ways of God are not the ways of the world, and that even the ways of those who are honestly trying to be righteous may not be following God's way.

Simeon's song, especially, stands our expectations of praising God on its head, because just as Zechariah and Elizabeth and Mary and Joseph had all come to understand that the working out of God's will wasn't going to make everyone on earth happy, especially those who were in established places of power, so too will the fulfillment of the promise of the Messiah mean that things will be changing. *"This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel – and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed."* But until the final establishment of God's presence, visibly, on earth, there will be conflict between the will of humans who seek power and control over others, and those who seek to do the will of God.

How do we know when we are part of that group whose inner thoughts, when revealed, will be acceptable to God? Colossians 3 lays it out: we are to live righteous lives, lives of compassion, lives filled with kindness. We are called to be humble, meek and patient – all righteous ways to behave, and all difficult to do. We have to be willing to lay aside our own striving for power and control and control our impulses toward self-righteousness, as we try to follow the way that Jesus calls us into.

The amazing thing about this is that we can do it at all – and we can not because we are so good, but because God is so good. God can take us and turn us into people who really can thank God and find good in the middle of anything, not because we are delusional, but because in the middle of life, with its great and energetic and wild twists and turns, God is present. We can do these things because we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us, to paraphrase Phil. 4:13. So let's keep singing our praises of God, in good times and in bad times, because we are not alone; God will never leave us or forsake us. After all, as Jesus said to His followers, in John 14:27, ***"Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."*** So let us continue to praise God, from Whom all blessings flow, until His Son returns to us in glory. And even so, come soon, Lord Jesus. Amen.