
CHRISTMAS COURAGE

How many of you still hear Christmas music on the radio?

- Has anybody started taking Christmas decorations down?

It's amazing how quickly Christmas passes, isn't it?

- After all the preparations—both in church and at home—after four weeks of Advent, after carols and special projects, special music, and Christmas Eve worship,
 - after all this, it's suddenly done.
- The presents are opened, the wrapping paper is put in the recycling bin, needles are falling from the tree, and it's 358 more days until next year's celebration.

Of course, Christmas isn't done.

- The church knew that there was no way you could truly celebrate it, let alone comprehend the incarnation of GOD in just one day, so it recognized twelve days of Christmas.
- The larger culture has forgotten.
 - Even the Christian radio stations and many of the non-liturgical Christian traditions have already moved on from Christmas now.
 - For many of them, the twelve days of Christmas began on December 13 and ended on Christmas Day,
 - rather than beginning on Christmas Day and ending on January 5, the day before Epiphany, the day the church celebrates the arrival of the wise men.
- It seems like the day after Christmas is only connected to Christmas in that it's the day to exchange your unwanted Christmas gifts for something more desirable.
 - Otherwise, it's on to planning for New Year's celebrations, making resolutions, looking ahead to the playoffs and bowl games, and all the other things with which we fill our winter.

Now I'm not raising this clash between the church's sense of Christmas-time and the culture's, to scold that we must keep Christmas for twelve days.

- Rather, I want to suggest that most of us *need* to keep Christmas a little longer to face all that the New Year will bring.
 - And keeping Christmas beyond the 25th, let alone into the New Year is no easy task.
 - Toward that end, this Sunday's story of Simeon and Anna might just be the passage we need.

Mary and Joseph are at the temple in Jerusalem for the purification rites that would cleanse Mary after childbirth, when these two older people meet them.

- Simeon speaks a prophecy to them about their CHILD.

Notice, first, what an odd song Simeon sings to the new parents, Mary and Joseph.

- These words are part of the Morning Prayer service in our hymnal:
*YOU, my CHILD, shall be called the prophet of the MOST HIGH,
for YOU shall go before the LORD to prepare HIS way,
to give HIS people knowledge of salvation
by the forgiveness of their sins.*

- But Simeon prefaces this song with words about his own death:
 - *LORD, now YOU may let YOUR servant go as YOU have promised.*
- Simeon had been waiting to see the sign of GOD's redemption, and having beheld GOD's commitment to Israel and the world made manifest in this CHILD, he now asks to depart—that is to die.
 - Beautiful, but a tad disturbing, I imagine, to these young parents.
 - And the peculiarity of Simeon's song doesn't end there.
- After praising GOD for the light JESUS will shine on the nations, Simeon blesses Mary and Joseph,
 - but also tells them that their SON will bring about the rise and fall of many,
 - and will be a sign that will be opposed.
- And if that's not enough, Simeon concludes by telling Mary that a sword will also pierce her heart.

Glory and anguish, beauty and sorrow, gladness and opposition.

- All these and more will embrace this CHILD...and indeed, each of our own lives, as well.
 - And that's just why we need Christmas to last longer than just 24 or 48 hours,
 - why we need it not simply to persist into the new year, but to keep us strong throughout the year.

Because the reality is that this life is wonderful...and difficult.

- And GOD came in JESUS to be with us and for us through *all* of it:
 - the ups and downs, the hopes and fears, the successes and disappointments, the accomplishments we will savor, and the mistakes we will regret.
 - All of it.
 - GOD is with us and for us...not just some of the time, but all of the time,
 - even when we don't act as we want, don't live into the identity GOD has given us, or make it to church on a regular basis.

Which brings me back to Simeon's plea: *"LORD, now let YOUR servant depart in peace."*

- Yes, Simeon is talking about dying, but it is *dying in peace*.
 - That is, with the confidence that GOD *is* with him, that GOD *is* keeping GOD's promises, that GOD will love and care for this world,
 - that whatever he may see, or feel, or experience, yes, even the end of the world will be shaped by GOD's "yes" that stands in contrast and opposition to all the various and assorted voices shouting "no" across the land.
- Simeon can depart in peace.
 - Which aptly names my deep prayer for myself, my family and community, for you and your family, for our nation and our world:
 - that we can enter into the new year with a measure of courage that comes from the confidence that GOD continues to keep GOD's promises, that GOD is indeed walking with us, that GOD will, in time, bring all things—including the work we do and the love we offer—to a good end, therefore allow us to experience peace.

I call this “Christmas courage” because it is rooted in the promise that in JESUS, GOD becomes one of us and so is, indeed, EMMANUEL—“GOD with us.”

- It is the courage that allows us to anticipate opposition without fear or, perhaps worse, animosity toward those who oppose us.
- It is the courage that allows us to acknowledge when our hearts are pierced, and then not allow our hearts to be hardened, but instead allows them to be open to others whose hearts have also been pierced.
- It is a courage that grants the peace of which Simeon sings and leads us to the thanksgiving that his temple companion Anna offers.
- It is the courage that allows us to continue to love and sacrifice and dare because it believes that no gifts given in love are ever lost or without meaning.

Christmas courage is that with which we are invited to live:

- courage that comes from knowing GOD is with us—every single day of our lives;
- courage that grants us peace and confidence to face this new year, and leads us to thanksgiving for all GOD has done...and is still doing...to us, with us, and through us.
- Christmas courage allows us to be in the moment—the precious present—and to relish those moments with praise and thanksgiving.

The best Christmas present is CHRIST’s presence in our lives.

- That presence is part of every moment of our present.
 - That makes our present a precious present.
 - That makes every moment a time to praise GOD.
 - When all is said and done every day there *is* more to be done.

Celebrating Christmas into the new year means living like Simeon and Anna—singing and praising.

- Do so with no motive, no agenda, no plan.
- Do it simply because of the gift of GOD with us.
 - Praise GOD for the moment that GOD showed up in our world.
 - Praise GOD who is indeed present and powerful in our world that often seems to suggest otherwise.
 - Praise GOD for the peace that comes from knowing GOD keeps GOD’s promises.
 - Let that peace carry you through the new year.
 - Let that peace allow you to live every day with Christmas courage.
 - Let that peace reshape the way you approach this celebration of GOD,
 - with us now and every day forward.