

A Sermon for DaySpring
By Brett Gibson
Seeing
Luke 2:22-40, Galatians 4:4-7
December 31, 2023
First Sunday of Christmastide

Apparently, about 25% of children were like me, had a similar experience to me--just 25% of you. But upwards of 92% of you will join the rest of us by the end of your life...so just because you didn't experience it in your childhood doesn't mean you won't experience it at some point--that sensation I experienced for the first time as an 11 year old.

I had 11 years of life under my belt...eleven years of going to school, riding my bike, watching movies, playing baseball, going on vacations, learning the piano, going to church...just being a kid: life was bliss. I knew nothing, everything was good. As far as I knew, all was right with the world. And then...when I was 11, the doctor suggested I should probably get my vision checked. I got my vision checked and though it wasn't terrible, the optometrist said, yeah, he can definitely use some correction. So...I joined a quarter of my peers and got my first pair of glasses. In the optometrist's office, there's all kinds of lenses you're looking through, so I didn't notice right away. It was on the ride home---I'll never forget the trees.

West Texas where my home of Snyder is located is prairie land with nothing much native there besides the bluestems and wheatgrasses. The only ubiquitous native trees are those ugly little mesquite trees, but obviously, our small town had planted plenty of trees over the 100 or so years of its inhabitation. We were good Texans, so our yard sported two big pecan trees that produced fairly abundantly in their seasons: picking up pecans was not my favorite household chore, I can tell you. But that day, when I got home, I saw for the first time the detail of the leaves of those beautiful deciduous trees. I could see the green husks of the pecans up high. I had no idea how clear things actually were. When you put on your first set of glasses and are invited to see the world in a new way, when your vision is tightened up, it can be revolutionary.

The season of Advent from which we've just emerged is about looking, about vision. The protagonists of Luke's story this morning—Simeon and Anna--embody that liturgical move from Advent to Christmas as profoundly as anywhere else in scripture. Simeon and Anna are, as one commentator puts it, "Israel in miniature, and Israel at its best: devout, obedient, constant in prayer, led by the Holy Spirit, at home in the temple, longing and hoping for the fulfillment of God's promises" (Craddock, 40).

The language of vision is all over this passage. As we are introduced to Simeon, we are told he is “*looking* for the consolation of Israel.” He will not *see* death until he has *seen* the Lord’s Messiah. Old Simeon is looking, waiting. The Holy Spirit guides Simeon into the Temple at the moment Mary and Joseph have brought their firstborn to present him before God. There are really two things happening here that Luke highlights: the presentation of the firstborn and the purification of Mary, which happens 40 days after a birth of a son. The purification rite calls for a lamb and a pigeon to be sacrificed. Lev 12:8 makes a concession though: “If she cannot afford a sheep, she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons...”

Luke shows us a poor, faithful Jewish couple, observing the law, devout in their faith. It’s notable that this isn’t a mass recognition and celebration, this is not a sort of proto-triumphal entry with crowds receiving this baby, crying Hosanna. The Temple was always busy, filled with people, and this was a time of great messianic expectation. In fact, at the very end of the passage, Anna is proclaiming this for all of those who are looking for the redemption of Israel. Others are there, others are waiting, others are looking for the consolation of Israel.

But though Israel is waiting for its consolation, no one recognizes who has just come into the temple for the first time. No one, that is, except one old man and one old woman. It’s a tender scene, isn’t it? Old Simeon takes the baby Jesus into his arms and praises God saying, “Lord, now dismiss 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, *a light for revelation* to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” Anna’s is an echo of Simeon’s: she sees the child, praises God, and speaks about the child to everyone looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

How do they know? This is not what was expected. What was expected was a warrior, a new king. All the cries for the Son of David, the root of Jesse...these are political cries, looking for a military leader who would come in and lead the people of Israel, redeem them from occupation, and establish the Kingdom of God. This is not what was expected...a baby—not only a baby but the child of two poor otherwise anonymous Jews.

What a gift God has given to these two...to be able to see, to be able to see rightly. But it’s not all light and Christmas music. Simeon knows that with light comes shadow. He takes the mantle of a prophet and tells Mary that the child is destined for the falling and rising of many...and that a sword will pierce her soul.

Simeon and Anna see, their vision is clear; they see what no other worshiper that day can see. They know that the coming of God into the world will involve redemption, yes; consolation, yes; it will also involve suffering. For there is no light without shadow, there is no joy without pain, there is no rising without falling, there is no resurrection without crucifixion. And in a moment, these two prophets of Israel see it and are given vision.

If you know me, you know I love musical theatre. Where it all started for me was with the hit 80s musical *Les Misérables*. In a spiritual sense, the hardscrabble land of West Texas where I grew up was about as far from the lights of Broadway as one can imagine. So when my mom took us to New York when I was 15, and we went to see this show that was recommended to us, my brain split open a little. I really was not ready for what I saw: the lights and costumes, the revolving stage, the sweeping orchestra, the magnificent voices, all in service of an epic story of redemption: it just all converted me for life. Maybe you've read the novel, or maybe you've seen another adaptation of it.

It tells the story of Jean Valjean, who is at the beginning of the story finishing a 19-year prison sentence for stealing a loaf of bread to keep his sister's children from starving to death. The world of Jean Valjean is a cruel world, a punitive world, a world in which there is no mercy; there is no love; there is no hope. Upon his release from this long captivity, he is given a yellow passport, which identifies him as a former convict, which he must carry everywhere he goes, presenting it to potential employers. It is a cruel world.

Thus ostracized from society, he finds himself in the village of Digne, where the kindly bishop invites him to stay with him. Bishop Myriel feeds him and cleans him and gives him a warm night. In the night, Valjean steals the bishop's costly silverware and flees. The authorities catch him and bring him back to the bishop, telling him that Valjean has reported that the bishop gave the silverware to him as a gift. They know this is a lie, so they confronted the bishop with this question. The bishop says, "That's right. Not only that, but you forgot the candlesticks I had given you as well."

But remember this my brother
see in this some higher plan:
you must use this precious silver
to become an honest man.
By the witness of the martyrs
by the Passion and the Blood
God has raised you out of darkness,
I have bought your soul for God.

This is the way the story began; this launches Valjean into the rest of his life. Bishop Myriel is putting new glasses on Valjean. He's saying your view of the world is all wrong; it's not just a cruel world...because God is here; Christ has come. Mercy trumps law and punishment.

This really is the beginning of the story; the rest of the story is Valjean's attempts to live into this new identity, to see in some sense the world of the bishop realized, the world of mercy and forgiveness. And several other times through the story, his vision must be corrected, again and again, misses the mark. He ignores the injustice done to one of his workers who ends up dying, but when confronted, he takes her suffering daughter into his care. His vision is tightened up. He then tries to shelter his new daughter from the world, but when confronted, he opens his home to her new beloved and his vision is tightened up. It really is in caring for his daughter and her new husband—in extravagant and self-sacrificial ways—that his vision is clear. That vision was set in motion by the bishop. By the end, Valjean himself is a Simeon, an Anna: an old man who sees mercy and kindness where everyone else can see only selfishness and vengeance. As he dies in the show, he hands his daughter some paper and says:

On this page I write my last confession.

Read it well when I, at last, am sleeping.

It's the story of one who turned from hating.

A man who only learned to love when you were in his keeping.

And of course, his famous last line to all of us hearing his story:

And remember the truth that once was spoken:

to love another person is to see the face of God.

I think the conversion of Valjean in that story reflects the journey Paul depicts in the little passage in Galatians we heard earlier.

God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir through God.

The opening choruses in the show "Look down, look down, you'll always be a slave." This is the world that he is emerging from. But that vision in which we are slaves is the dominant narrative wasn't just the case in Victor Hugo's time. It is just as much a dominant narrative in our own culture. It may not be seen as a miserable servitude, but it's a servitude, nonetheless. We are slaves to our desires, slaves to the economy, slaves to the politicians in power, slaves to the media, slaves to our jobs. Whatever we find

ourselves feeling as if we are at the mercy of others and other powers. But no, Paul says...no, we are not slaves. We are beloved children of God ; our vision needs correction.

St. Gregory the Great insisted that the mission of the church was the mission of John the Baptist: to point out the presence of Christ in the world. I read Thomas Merton some this Advent, and he wrote some, building on St. Gregory the Great, saying, “our task is to seek and find Christ in our world as it is, and not as it *might be*. The fact that the world is other than it might be does not alter the truth that Christ is present in it and that his plan has been neither frustrated nor changed: indeed, all will be done according to his will. Our Advent is the celebration of this hope. What is uncertain is not the ‘coming’ of Christ, but our own reception of him, our own response to him, our own readiness and capacity to ‘go forth and meet him.’ We must be willing to see him...”

We’re given no other details about Simeon and Anna. We don’t have the benefit of a backstory, of what their waiting looked like. But I have to imagine that the gift of this vision of Jesus, of finding the Messiah in this unexpected person came as it did at the end of a long life of having their vision tightened. They were ready and able to recognize God in the unexpected.

May we have our vision to see Christ in the unexpected places. May we have the eyes of Valjean, to see the mercy of God at play in our world. May we have the eyes of Paul who saw so clearly the move in status from slave to beloved child. May we have the eyes of Simeon and Anna, to see the suffering savior and receive him, remembering that what is uncertain is not the coming of Christ but our own reception of him.

Copyright by Brett Gibson, 2023