

12.31.23 – Christmastide 1

“Destined Redeemer”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Psalm 148 (NIV)

¹ Praise the Lord.
Praise the Lord from the heavens;
 praise him in the heights above.
² Praise him, all his angels;
 praise him, all his heavenly hosts.
³ Praise him, sun and moon;
 praise him, all you shining stars.
⁴ Praise him, you highest heavens
 and you waters above the skies.
⁵ Let them praise the name of the Lord,
 for at his command they were created,
⁶ and he established them for ever and ever—
 he issued a decree that will never pass away.
⁷ Praise the Lord from the earth,
 you great sea creatures and all ocean depths,
⁸ lightning and hail, snow and clouds,
 stormy winds that do his bidding,
⁹ you mountains and all hills,
 fruit trees and all cedars,
¹⁰ wild animals and all cattle,
 small creatures and flying birds,
¹¹ kings of the earth and all nations,
 you princes and all rulers on earth,
¹² young men and women,
 old men and children.
¹³ Let them praise the name of the Lord,
 for his name alone is exalted;
 his splendor is above the earth and the heavens.
¹⁴ And he has raised up for his people a horn,
 the praise of all his faithful servants,
 of Israel, the people close to his heart.
Praise the Lord.

Leader: These Are Grateful Words of Praise from God!

All: Thanks be to God!

Luke 2:25-40 (NLT)

The Prophecy of Simeon

²⁵ At that time there was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was righteous and devout and was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him ²⁶ and had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. ²⁷ That day the Spirit led him to the Temple. So when

Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus to the Lord as the law required, ²⁸ Simeon was there. He took the child in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹ “Sovereign Lord, now let your servant die in peace,
as you have promised.

³⁰ I have seen your salvation,

³¹ which you have prepared for all people.

³² He is a light to reveal God to the nations,
and he is the glory of your people Israel!”

³³ Jesus’ parents were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them, and he said to Mary, the baby’s mother, “This child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall, and many others to rise. He has been sent as a sign from God, but many will oppose him.” ³⁵ As a result, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your very soul.”

The Prophecy of Anna

³⁶ Anna, a prophet, was also there in the Temple. She was the daughter of Phanuel from the tribe of Asher, and she was very old. Her husband died when they had been married only seven years. ³⁷ Then she lived as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the Temple but stayed there day and night, worshiping God with fasting and prayer. ³⁸ She came along just as Simeon was talking with Mary and Joseph, and she began praising God. She talked about the child to everyone who had been waiting expectantly for God to rescue Jerusalem.

³⁹ When Jesus’ parents had fulfilled all the requirements of the law of the Lord, they returned home to Nazareth in Galilee. ⁴⁰ There the child grew up healthy and strong. He was filled with wisdom, and God’s favor was on him.

Leader: These Words of Exaltation Are of God. All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Creator God, who sent his own Son to be our Savior, peacebuilder, promise of hope, unexpected joy of deliverance, and the unconditional sacrifice of divine love, we worship you today with Scripture, prayer, music, and candles. May we enter this Christmastide season and the new year in reflection and wonder. Let us recognize the new baby Jesus as Simeon and Anna did for who he is in all his power to save and for what he will become. Speak to us this morning in your Words and your voice through this servant messenger. Amen.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year, almost! Thank you again to our Worship Team, Woodwind Quintet, and the Choral and Instrumental Ensembles with guest musicians for last Sunday’s beautiful music. It was lovely to have you with us for Christmas Eve Day. And yesterday, we had nine of us at Anthony’s for our monthly friends and family breakfast, as if

we hadn't eaten enough during Christmas week! We gather monthly for fellowship at local restaurants on the 4th Saturday—you are invited. While we were together yesterday, I asked the group, and I ask you now, to do a bit of reflection. What highs and lows did you experience in 2023? What goals, resolutions, or a special inspiring word have you chosen for 2024? This is an annual introspection exercise I learned in my first church staff position, and I do myself each year. For me, the lowest point was an unexpected heart surgery in May; and yet the highest point was all the good that came from it—how you all supported me personally and stepped up to lead the church through it; and how healing and new fitness levels are improving my ability to carry out our mission together. That brings me to the word I never shared with you in 2023; it was “courageous”! Isn't that interesting? I hadn't looked at it since my trip to Israel, but it was definitely God-inspired. What might be your word for 2024? I will share mine for this year because I hope it will influence United Baptist as well: “**vitality.**” The Latin “vitae” means to live or living, and the English noun vitality means energy and life; isn't that a great goal as we invite more families and build relevant opportunities to intergenerationally serve our community?

The links to our Scriptures are about life and spiritual vitality, too! We begin our study with a Psalm praising the creation and creator God, also fitting for next year's theme of “Finding Beauty.” Praising God is very appropriate after Christmas and the arrival of baby Jesus! All of creation is called to praise him. All the heavenly hosts, the sun, moon, sky, oceans, mountains, trees, beasts, snow, fire, kings, young and old have come to praise him. His own created order praises his workmanship

in this psalm! And don't we love the sunrise/sunset photos or vacation pics of natural wonders that are posted on Facebook or that we show each other on our smartphones? The psalmist recognizes the "horn raised up" for the people of Israel, and in his day, it was David, as ruler, a symbol of strength and royalty, even though he was a meek and mild shepherd. We cannot help but compare that "horn raised up" with New Testament hindsight, as Jesus of Nazareth, born in the city of David, from the ancestry of David, was humbly born in the stable, placed in a rough-hewn animal trough with straw and unclean surroundings, yet became the mighty Savior of the world!

The Gospel writer, Luke, was careful with details and narrated them with great accuracy, especially how the baby Jesus was born, circumcised, and dedicated according to Jewish law. Even though Mary and Joseph were poor by our standards, they went to the temple as was required after birth for Mary to receive purification. Most would have brought a lamb for the sacrifice, but they had no land on which to raise such animals, so they brought the smallest yet largest offering they could. Their two doves as a sacrifice would be sufficient according to the law. Working with the traditions of their belief affirmed, through his parents at least, that Jesus' role would be that of Messiah. Remember, the angel Gabriel visited both Mary and Joseph to deliver that news.

For some believers then and for us today, another proof of Jesus' divine nature is from the testimonies of two respected, pious Jews, Simeon and Anna, who separately declared his transcendent role as redeemer and Savior. Simeon was not only a righteous man but had been waiting for the consolation of Israel for many years (which means

anticipating the arrival of the Messiah). We do not know how old he was, but the words “elderly” or “aged” in Biblical times means after age 60! Some scholars believe he was in his nineties, but the evidence is not clear. When Simeon picked up the baby Jesus (while Mary and Joseph were at the temple for the dedication), the power of the Holy Spirit illuminated Simeon’s mind and heart to see what he had been waiting for—the Messiah. The news was so powerful and fulfilling that he was now ready to die and meet God face to face, after having met his son!

Although this news probably broke all their hearts, Simeon had to prepare Mary and Joseph for what was to come and did so by quoting Isaiah prophecy; Jesus had come to save the entire world, both Jew and Gentile! As Luke states in verses 34-35, in order to save this world, he reveals that: “This child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall, and many others to rise. He has been sent as a sign from God, but many will oppose him.”³⁵ As a result, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your very soul.” His parents were “amazed” the more contemporary translations state; amazed means surprised, stunned, etc. But the more traditional translations, including the Greek, θαυμάζοντες (*thaumazontes*) translate the word as “marveled,” which means wondered, or stood in awe to ponder. Each has a slightly different meaning you can think about.

Anna’s prophecy, also at the Temple, came from her prayer and fasting spiritual disciplines. She was a widow, only married seven years, and after her husband’s death, she dedicated herself to prayer at the temple with a group of elder women who prayed night and day. She was 84 years old and also a pious Jewess; many would listen to her and believe her testimony that this child they had been waiting for had come to save

Israel and the world. He was here at last! Not much else is known about her, but we appreciate and recognize Luke's usage of both male and female messengers throughout his Gospel.

Jesus' role as Savior and Redeemer was destined before his incarnation, before he was born a human boy:

⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another (1 John 4:9-10 ^{NIV}).

How then do we approach this new year? One way is to remember Simeon's understanding and declaration to the young parents. Another is to live out the writer's warning in 1 John 4 I just read. Loving each other in times of strife and violence is messy as is praising God's creation and finding beauty in times like these; and yet, that is exactly what we are called and empowered to do at any age! But how? You have the answers within you: by the vitality and strength of the triune God who sent his son and the Holy Spirit to save, comfort, and collaborate with us in service. That's how we live with vitality and beauty; that's how we love the unlovable. Not by our strength, but by his. Amen? Amen! ||

Please pray with me. All knowing and loving God, we praise you and thank you for all we experience from your generous Holy Spirit. We ask now for more clarity in our own lives so that we may share our faith and your inspiring words with others. Help us reach out to share your loving and restorative grace that comes from salvation through Christ. May we also reflect his light for others to see. It is in your Son, Jesus' name we pray, **Amen.**