

BOLD PREDICTIONS

Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3 Luke 2: 22-40

We gather on a very unique day. Yes, the celebration of Christmas continues, even as many people have already put their Christmas Trees out to the curbside. But it is also the last day of 2023. Tomorrow is the first day of a New Year. As such, this is a day when many people will make resolutions for the year ahead. And, like every prior year, those resolutions will soon be forgotten, or broken, within a few weeks. Still, we make the resolutions nevertheless. But it is also the time for predictions. 2024 is a Presidential election year. It appears we will have 2 candidates that nobody really wants, but nobody else seems to have the clout to do anything about it. Still, polls and political scientists are already making forecasts about expected actions of the American populous in red, blue, and swing states like Wisconsin. Economists and stock market analysts are telling us what to expect about interest rates and inflation in the year ahead. And then there are the people who get into Horoscopes. I know I am dating myself, but I can remember when I was young seeing in the supermarket tabloids, like the National Enquirer, during this last week of the year the incredible predictions that came from psychic Jeannie Dixon.

Dixon, who was born in Medford, WI, became famous for an article published in Parade Magazine in May of 1956. In that article, she predicted that the Democratic candidate for the Presidency would win in 1960, 4 years in the future, and would then also be assassinated. Of course, in John F. Kennedy her predictions came true. Most all of her other psychic predictions in the coming decades would be totally off the mark. Still,

every year, because of her JFK prediction, the tabloids would publish her pronouncements and predictions for the year ahead. And, she continued to have public influence; she met regularly with President Richard Nixon, as well as Nancy Reagan.

St Luke's Gospel begins with bold predictions, too. But unlike those of Jeannie Dixon, these predictions would become reality. In the first chapter we hear Mary's Magnificat, where she sings and proclaims the God who will bring down the powerful from their thrones and lift up the lowly, who will fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty, while scattering the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. Also, in the opening chapter of Luke's gospel we find the prophecy of Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, who declared that John would go forth to prepare the way of the Lord, to announce salvation and the forgiveness of sin, and to give light to those who walked in darkness and to guide the feet of God's people into the way of peace. And now, in chapter 2, we hear unexpected yet profound words of prophecy from Simeon and Anna, words which ultimately will be found true as well.

Today we find Joseph and Mary and the baby Jesus in the Temple. Joseph and Mary are very devout in their religious practice. Right before today's lesson we read that, on the 8th day, they had had Jesus circumcised as the law of Moses required. Now, 33 days after his birth, as required in Leviticus chapter 12, Joseph and Mary arrive at the Temple to go through the required ritual purification after childbirth. Yes, we have gone from Angels

proclaiming incredible messages and Mary singing the Magnificat, to crass details such as circumcision and childbirth purification rituals. The law proscribed that parents were to bring a lamb and a pigeon for this purification offering. But the fact was, Mary and Joseph were welfare parents. They didn't have the wealth or means to provide a lamb. So, using an out-clause in the law for those who were poor, we are told they instead brought a pair of turtledoves. Mary and Joseph are just another raggedy, working-class couple, seeking to do the right thing for their baby according to the Law of Moses. If these two parents harbor any delusions of grandeur from the messages of angels or the witness of shepherds, they don't seem to show it here. Still, they end up in the center of a little Temple brouhaha nevertheless. Two elderly worshipers, regulars at the Temple, have some bold predictions to make. One of these two pious elders is named Simeon. The other is a widow by the name of Anna. And on this day they predict and pronounce the future of this baby boy born in Bethlehem.

First to speak is Simeon. He declares that *"my eyes have seen your salvation."* Now, Israel had had many noteworthy religious figures – prophets, priests, and kings. But this child would be different. This child would be all three! And he will not only lead the people TO salvation; this child, says Simeon, IS their salvation. And Simeon then says that God has prepared this salvation *"in the presence of ALL people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."* Of course, the prophet Isaiah had predicted this years before. But Simeon is more blunt. This helpless child held in his

mother's arms is going to change the world. This isn't just the Savior for Israel, the chosen people. No, he is the salvation of ALL peoples, all nations, Jew and Gentile alike.

But Simeon's message then grows dark. *"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."* The baby Jesus will not be all sweetness and love. This baby will bring salvation to earth, yes; but he'll also bring about division between people. Just as Mary sang in her Magnificat about the mighty being cast down from their thrones and the lowly exalted, so Simeon declares that this child is going to upset the applecart. His greatness will make a lot of powerful people very fearful and very angry. Those in positions of power will not like him. And they will oppose him. And, ultimately, they will kill him, because his message is a threat to them. And then, finally, Simeon gets up close and personal. He speaks directly to Mary, perhaps in a whisper, or maybe out loud for all to hear – we don't know. *"And a sword will pierce your heart, too."* Did he really know what was to come? Like Jeannie Dixon, could he predict the scene some 30 years later, when Jesus would hang bleeding on a cross and would say to his mother, *"Woman, here is your son"*? (John 19:26) Simeon somehow knows Mary's life as a mother will be one of indescribable joy and also gut-wrenching pain. Simeon's words are not exactly the sort of thing you'd write inside a new-baby congratulations card. But Simeon doesn't pull any punches. He tells it like it is. He makes bold predictions, which will all come to pass.

And then there is Anna. We know very little about Anna. All St Luke tells us is that she was a widow, well into her 80s. She comes to the Temple each and every day to pray, and often stays well into the night. I've always kind of envisioned her as like a Catholic nun, who arrives early every morning for the daily Mass. She would be there in the outer court of the Temple, where the women were allowed to be, with eyes closed and lips pursed, intoning over and over again the words of the Psalms. She is probably a very familiar sight to those who pass by her each day. But on this day Anna, a contemplative woman of few words, becomes unusually verbal. She gets up and scurries from person to person, leaning on her walking stick, urging them not to miss seeing this very special child. 'He is the One,' she announces, with breathless excitement. She boldly predicts that he is the One who will redeem Jerusalem.

Why did Luke share these stories? No other gospel writer did. And wasn't the declaration of the angels and shepherds sufficient to make the announcement about who this baby was? Certainly, their testimony was much more impressive. While total speculation on my part, I think we are told of this account of Simeon and Anna because St Luke wanted to share with us a real message of hope. Can you imagine how the biblical story would be different had Simeon and Anna focused on the bad things going on around them rather than the coming good? Nobody could have disputed it. They lived in a time filled with disease, famine, banditry and slavery. Life expectancy was

short. Their Roman overlords were stepping up their oppression of the Jewish people. There was no shortage of bad things to commiserate about. Yet, when these two wise elders of Israel catch a glimpse of the baby Jesus in his mother's arms, they both intuitively zero in on the tremendous good that this child will bring; this one who is the Son of God. The very Son of God – born in their midst? Who could have imagined that? And who could imagine what that would now mean for everyone? And what about our days and our time? As a New Year begins, yes, we face the dismal prospect of another election cycle with sub-par candidates. We have wars continuing to wage in Ukraine and Palestine, with people dying, children orphaned, yet much of the world seemingly more fixated on what this all means for the price of oil and our stock portfolios, and whether shipping delays in the Red Sea might delay the fulfillment of our Amazon orders. We face increasing evidence of climate change and therefore increased destruction due to weather while many still think the best solution is to keep their heads buried in the sand. The migration of refugees around the globe is increasing due to governmental corruption, changing climate, and families who just want a better life. We, like Simeon and Anna, could just focus on the bad of the present day. Or, like Simeon and Anna, we could claim the bold prediction of the Gospel, and begin to live our lives in the New Year ahead based upon the promise of the Good News, truly believing that in Jesus Christ we have received the Salvation of all creation, Jews and Gentile alike.

United States Youth Poet Laureate, Amanda Gorman, who many remember from when she spoke at the Presidential inauguration of 2021, penned these words for New Year's Eve 2021. I think they speak to us these two years later as well. I think they capture the hope of the bold predictions that Simeon and Anna sought to convey. May we hear these words anew:

So let us not return to what was normal, but reach toward what is next.

What was cursed, we will cure.

What was plagued, we will prove pure.

Where we tend to argue, we will try to agree.

Those fortunes we forswore, now the future we foresee.

Where we weren't aware, we are now awake;

Those moments we missed are now these moments we make, the moments we meet,

And our hearts, once all together beaten, now all together beat.

Come, look up with kindness yet, for even solace can be sourced from sorrow.

We remember, not just for the sake of yesterday, but to take on tomorrow.

We heed this old spirit, in a new day's lyric.

In our hearts, we hear it:

For auld lang syne, my dear, for auld lang syne.

Be bold, sang Time this year.

Be bold, sang Time.

For when you honor yesterday, tomorrow ye will find.

Know what we've fought need not be forgot nor for none.

It defines us; binds us as one.

Come over, join this day just begun,

For wherever we come together, we will forever overcome.¹

Jeannie Dixon was really a very poor psychic. And most of our New Year's Resolutions will be forgotten within weeks. So, I would encourage you to consider another perspective this day. It is common when we conclude a Service of Witness to the Resurrection and commend to God those who have died, to share the Song of Simeon. As 2023 ends, and a new day and a New Year await us tomorrow, may we claim his words of promise and hope not just for the dearly departed, but for this very world and our very lives. He made a bold prediction, and in Christ it has come to be. May we make it real in our lives this day:

Lord, 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 people,

A light for revelation to the Gentiles and for the glory to your people Israel.

Happy New Year everyone. Christ, the Savior, is born. Amen.

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¹ From "A New Day's Lyric" Newsweek.com – December 30, 2021.