

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

The Rev. Dr. Scott Couper

Sunday, December 27, 2020

Luke 2:22-40

“Long-Awaited Gift”



By her choice of music for this week, Mary Milkey-May begs the question: ‘What is it that we are going to ‘tell on the mountain?’. Musically speaking, she has made this question the beginning and end of the service. So, Mary, I hear you loud and clear! You want me to answer the question, ‘what is to be told on the mountain?’

Of course, our knee-jerk response is understandably, ‘that Jesus Christ is born’. But that *alone* would make for a lame sermon. What needs to be told on the mountain is the *ministry* and *mission* of Jesus the Christ that is of utmost substance and therefore importance and not so much *only* that he was born.



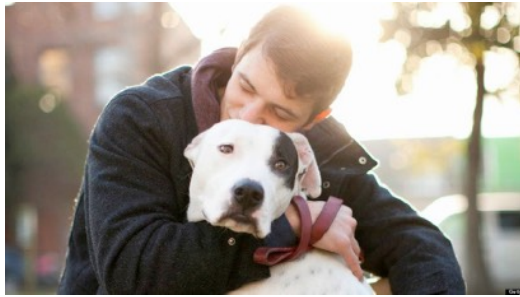
This morning, I now invite anyone and everyone to hike with me this afternoon up Mount Wantasticutt, to summit, and to ‘tell it on the mountain’ that Jesus the Christ, the long-awaited gift, includes *all people and all things* in God’s salvific plan.



So, at the summit of Mount Wantasticutt, I am going to ‘tell it on the mountain’ that I am included. Here’s my card. Here is another card that I am going hand-out to one of you who will ‘tell it on the mountain’ that you are included. This card will be given to someone who will ‘tell it on the mountain’ that the poor are included. If you come with me, perhaps you will have this card and you will ‘tell it on the mountain’ that the LGBTIQ+ community is included. This card instructs us to ‘tell it on the mountain’ that the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) community is included. That we as sinners are included. That the sick are included. That the imprisoned are included. We are going to go so

far as to say that 'those who don't know they are included' are in fact included.

We are going to go even further.



We are going to 'tell it on the mountain' that your dog is included in God's salvific plan (and everyone knows that is stretch for me!).



We are going to 'go tell it on the mountain' that the birds, trees, the rocks, and the water descending down the mountain are all included in God's salvific plan. Indeed, I pray you will join me in declaring that the atmosphere, the sky, and indeed the very cosmos are all included in God's salvation. Indeed, we have many cards and there will be lots of tellin' on the mountain today!

Our scripture reading this morning tells the story of Simeon, a devout man at the Temple who, while Jesus was being dedicated, declares him to be the promised Messiah, the 'Chosen One'.

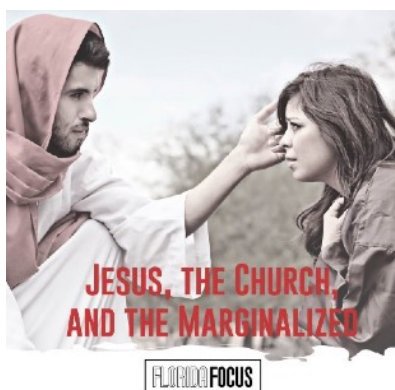


Like Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), Simeon's disclosure is somewhat disturbing because he communicated that Jesus' ministry would bring division! Mary sang, "He has scattered those who are proud [...] He has brought down rulers from their thrones [...] he has sent the rich away empty [...]. That doesn't sound like inclusion, does it? After Mary and Joseph dedicated Jesus at the temple, Simeon confided to Mary that Jesus was "destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel" (Luke 2:34).

By this point, if you are hearing me, you might sense that I am contradicting myself. On one hand, I am preaching that we are to 'go tell it on the mountain' that Jesus' ministry is one of inclusion. Yet our scripture today, and many others that follow in gospels, declare that Jesus' ministry brings division.



Allow me resolve the apparent contradiction in our minds so that we can declare boldly on our mountain top that *all people and all of Creation* is included in God's salvific plan. The explanation for the apparent contradiction is that many in this world do not like God's radical inclusivity. They just don't like it. These are the rulers and the rich of whom Mary spoke. These are the ones who Simeon declared will fall. Simeon predicts that many will speak against Jesus. In fact, after Jesus' very first sermon, when he included the poor, the imprisoned, the blind, and the oppressed – all who the society declared to NOT be in God's favour - he was almost executed. We see the dynamic soon after Jesus was born with King Herod. Interests were threatened. We see it with the rich young prince who went away sullen and disappointed. We see it with the Sadducees and the Pharisees. Over and over and over again, those with privilege and those in power do not agree with - and in fact actively oppose - Jesus despite the fact that they often claim they are people of faith.



Jesus included. He included the Syrophonecian woman. He included the Roman centurion. He included Jewish tax collectors who collaborated with the

occupying empire. He included terrorists, AKA, 'zealots'. Eunuchs, pagan astrologers, adulterers, women, lepers, children, you name them. Anyone who was excluded was included – if they desired to be. As the Franciscan mystic Richard Rohr so brilliantly states, “the only thing Jesus excluded was exclusion itself”.<sup>1</sup> And when Jesus included the excluded, that pissed people off. And this is from where the division comes.

Though Jesus was the long-awaited gift to Mary and Simeon, they both announced that Jesus’ coming will divide people.



The entire emphasis of Luke-Acts is that those who encounter Jesus are divided: “some receive him, and some reject him”.<sup>2</sup> Simeon’s song is precisely about Jesus’ radical inclusion and the division that is created by those who are opposed to that inclusion. Those with power and privilege often reject, oppose, and ultimately kill Jesus’ message.

Today, our time is no different than Jesus’ time. Today there are those who do not wish to include People of Color; there are those who don’t think

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe*, (New York: Convergent, 2019), 34.

<sup>2</sup> Ruthanna Hooke, in *Preaching Transforming Justice: A Lectionary Commentary, Year B*, eds., Ronald Allen, Dale Andrews, and Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 40.

the poor matter; there are those are against the inclusion of the queer and transgender communities;



there are those who support the increased and unprecedented rate of prisoners' executions under federal law; there are those who are against the inclusion of animals, plants, and the natural habitat.



Even today, the construction of a ridiculous wall on our southern border is causing great environment damage

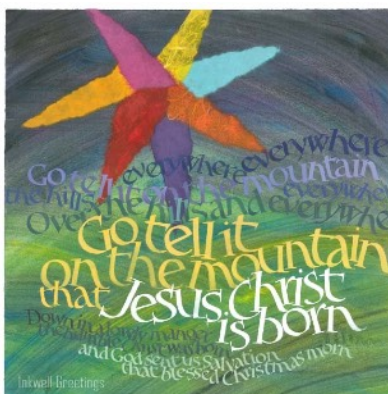


and fossil fuel mining is being threatened in the protected artic. And the story is the same today as it was then, the rich and the powerful deny the fundamental tenants of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and instead support their antitheses.

The Song of Simeon is the thesis of Luke-Acts: that Jesus is radically inclusive.



Simeon prayed, “For my eyes have seen the salvation, which you have prepared for *all people*, a light for revelation to *the Gentiles*”. For a righteous man at the Temple to proclaim that God would reveal himself to the Gentiles, those who would be killed if they even entered the Temple, was crazy radical for the time and place.





So, friends in Christ, let us be crazy radical Jesus Gospel people and let us go to the top of Mount Wantasticutt. At the trailhead, take a card, and when you summit, on top of that rock, and in the spirit of our African-American spiritual, let us “go tell it on the mountain” that a long-awaited gift, a radically inclusive Jesus, is born!

This is the word of God, and it was delivered to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.