

Straight from the "Hart"

Worship Service from December 27, 2020



Opening Prayer Let's pray. Our heavenly Father, you have come to claim us as your own, and as the year turns, we take time to remember the covenant you have established with us, and the new covenant you confirmed with us through Jesus. Impress your truth upon us and receive us again in mercy as we sing our praises to you. Amen.

Call to Worship

Gives thanks to the LORD! Call on his name! Tell everyone you meet what he has done. Sing praises to him.

We will talk about all his wonders and honor his holy name.

Let those seeking the Lord have joyful hearts. Keep your eyes open for God. Watch for his works.

We will seek his face always.

Be alert for signs of his presence. Remember the wonders he has done.

We will remember his miraculous signs and the verdicts he has rendered.

You are his servants, his chosen ones, He is the LORD our God! His rulings are relevant everywhere on earth.

He remembers his covenant forever, the promise he made to a thousand generations.

He brought out his people with rejoicing.

He led out his chosen ones with singing and shouts of joy.

Then he gave them the lands of the nations. They inherited what others had toiled to produce.

So that they could do everything God told them—to observe his laws and follow his teachings.

(Inspired by Psalm 105:1-8, 43-45 NIV, MSG, CJB)

Music Intro

As the deliverance from Egypt through Moses is rejoiced over and reported in Psalm 105, the deliverance from sin through Jesus in Bethlehem is rejoiced over and reported in the following song...

Music vv 1,2 *Good Christian Friends, Rejoice*

Theme So the great news is spread -- and yet -- the world doesn't seem as delivered and transformed as we hoped, especially this year with covid. And never

mind the world, sometimes we can't even figure ourselves out. Paul said it once, I do not understand what I do. The good I want to do, I don't. And the bad I don't want to do, I do. I decide one way, but then act another. I can't be trusted to figure out what is best for myself and do that -- then I need something more...(Romans 7:15 ff) A shortened version of an old Jewish folktale reminds us that when we look at our world and life, the bigger and longer term picture is often beyond our ability to understand.

Two young brothers spent all their lives in the city. They had never even seen a field or pasture. One day, they decided to take a trip into the countryside. As they walked along, they spied a farmer plowing and were puzzled about what he was doing. They asked themselves, "What kind of behavior is this? This fellow marches back and forth all day, scarring the earth with long ditches. Why should anyone destroy such a pretty meadow like that?"

Late in the afternoon they passed the same place again. They saw the farmer sowing grains of wheat in the furrows. They asked themselves, "Now what's he doing? He must be a madman. He's taking perfectly good wheat and tossing it into the ditches!"

One of the brothers said, "The country is no place for me. The people here don't make any sense. I'm going home." He headed back to the city.

But the second brother stayed in the country. A few weeks later saw a wonderful change. Fresh green shoots began to cover the field with a lushness he had never imagined. He wrote to his brother and told him to hurry back to see the miraculous growth. He was also amazed at the change. As the days passed, they saw the green earth turn into a golden field of tall ripe wheat. Now they thought they understood. But then the farmer came with his scythe and cut it down. The brother who had returned couldn't believe it. "What is this imbecile doing now? He works all summer long to grow this wheat and now he is destroying it! He is crazy after all. I'm going back to the city."

The first brother had more patience. He stayed and watched while the farmer collected the wheat and took it to his granary where he cleverly he separated out the chaff and stored the rest. He was filled with awe when he realized that by sowing a bag of seed, the farmer had harvested a whole field of grain. Only then did he truly understand that the farmer had a reason for everything he did.

"And this is how it is with God's works, too," he said. "We mortals see only the beginnings of His plan. We cannot understand the full purpose and end of His creation. So we must have faith in His wisdom."

Above story adapted from: Edited with Commentary by William J Bennet, *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993, pp 774-775.

We can't always see the work God is doing in the world and even in us -- and if we do see his work, we may not understand it -- (and worse, we despise what we do not understand -- did you notice the name calling in the story?) But God grasps such a bigger picture than we can possibly see. That is when we have to fill in the gaps of our understanding with a trust that he loves us and knows us, and our world, and he knows what he is doing better than we do. And we must have faith that he has the power to carry his good plans to fruition. It is because of that trust and faith in him that we can open our hearts to and worship him for the future he envisions for us and our world. Plans that began in the baby Jesus so long ago.

Music Intro Donna and Kathy are going to play an Italian piece called Gesù Bambino. (Jesus Child). The melody and chorus were derived from Adeste Fideles, (ah-des-tay fi-day-lis), O Come All Ye Faithful. Its tune was also used in an English carol, "When Blossoms Flowered mid the Snows", but some of the original Italian lyrics are literally translated as:

Special Instrumental Music: Gesù Bambino (Jesus Child)

<p>In the humble hut, In cold and poverty The Holy infant is born, Who the world will adore.</p>	<p>Chorus Hosanna, hosanna, sing With a joyous heart, Your shepherds and angels, O King of light and love. Come let us adore, Come let us adore, Come let us adore The Lord.</p>	<p>O beautiful boy do not cry Do not cry, Redeemer! Your mother cradles you, Kisses you, O Savior. Chorus</p>
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Music Intro

And one way adore him is by honoring, glorifying the name of Jesus -- the King of kings and the sacrificial lamb who died and lived again, making him the Lord of life who came to save us from the curse of sin and death.

Music vv 1,3 We Will Glorify

Pastor's Prayer O God, king of the world and ruler of our hearts; you are our Covenant Friend. You have been gracious to us through all the years of our lives. We thank you for your loving care which has brought us to this time and place. You have comforted us with family and friends, you have satisfied our hungry hearts and given us your peace. You have been our light in darkness and a rock of strength in adversity and temptation. This week we lift up all dealing with covid in one form or another -- be it illness, caring for those who are ill, facing financial challenges, or the challenges of isolation and the loss of normal patterns of living.

We give thanks for the coming vaccines and we pray that they will be effective; and for persistent diligence in safe practices, and that we can find good spirits in this season despite the pandemic. For Jan Martin's son Brian and wife in TN, as he feels ill. For Ione Bennett who received some bruises due to a recent fall, as well others that you lay on our heart in this moment of silence. **SILENCE** Lord, Christmas reminds us that you remember us even when we forget you. You patiently stay with us when we flee from you. When we come to our senses and return to you, you meet us with overflowing grace and forgiveness. You redeem us from sin and give us a high calling in Jesus, and then enable us to fulfill that call by the gift of your Spirit and the fellowship of your people in your church, whom you have taught to pray. **Lord's Prayer**

Music Intro

In anticipation of the next series and the wise men arriving to see and glorify Jesus, we too, long to see him, recognize him for who he is as Lord, gift ourselves to him by setting aside meaner (lesser) priorities and rising up to follow him.

Music vv 1,2,5 *We Would See Jesus*

Bible Reading From 1 Chronicles 16:8-15a

The Ark of the Covenant was a gold covered chest designed primarily to carry the two stone tablets of the Law. It signified God's presence with his people. They would go before it to seek God's direction. They carried it with them into battle. On one occasion, the Philistines captured the ark and the Israelites mourned that God had deserted them. Wherever the Philistines placed it in their land, that area experienced misfortune. To remove the curse, they returned it to the Israelites. David arranged for a great celebration as they processed the ark back home, and he composed a Psalm of thanks for the occasion. In it, he recalls God's deliverance of his people from Egyptian slavery, reminding the people to praise God because he doesn't change, He never deserts his people and always remembers his promises. A few of David's lyrics:

Give praise to the Lord. Proclaim his name. Make known among the nations what he has done. Sing praise to him. Tell of all his wonderful works. Glory in his holy name. Let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice. Look to the Lord and his strength. Seek his face always. You, his servants, his chosen ones: Remember the wonders he has done, his miracles, and the justice he pronounced. He is the Lord our God; his authority is seen throughout the earth. He remembers his covenant promise forever.

Message***Let Christ Create His Home*****Luke 2:22-40**

One church began a weekly Bible Study called SHiFA, an acronym built around Psalm 105 which is a near verbatim quote of the Psalm recorded in 1 Chronicles 16. Specifically, the verse that exhorts us to “Seek His Face Always”. By calling it “SHiFA”, we constantly reminded ourselves that our group’s purpose was to seek God – to learn about him, to draw closer to him, to take action for him - to be and do better at keeping our side of the covenant promises with our Lord.

This is what was in the hearts of the people in our text in Luke 2:22-40. They were waiting to see God’s salvation. Anna was a senior widow who lived in worship at the temple. Simeon was promised by God that he would see the long-awaited Messiah before he died.

The Spirit moved Simeon to walk the Temple courts on the same day Joseph and Mary brought 8-day old Jesus to the Temple. They had come to follow the traditional Jewish laws of purification rites and presenting Jesus to the Lord. Simeon saw them coming, took Jesus into his arms and he blessed them with these words: “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.” (Luke 2:29-32 (NIV)) Then he said to Mary: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” (Luke 2:34-35 (NIV))

As Simeon finished, Anna walked up and she “gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.” (Luke 2:38 (NIV))

The holy family proceeded into the Temple to fulfill their religious requirements and they returned home to Nazareth, and Jesus grew and become strong and wise, and God’s grace was on him, (See Luke 2:39-40 (NIV)) our text concludes. These last verses were summarizing phrases about all those years we know so little about. There is only one other story about Jesus until we read about him as an adult beginning his ministry.

This is the culmination of what started at the beginning of this series, when people lost track of what is important because life is too busy and too diverting. They suffer the consequences of being off of God’s rails (like a train is off a track). These consequences drive them to hope that God would rip open the heavens, come

down, and make his home with his people again. When people re-commit to God's spiritual track, they discover that God is more than willing to forgive and restore; and fill with joy, even though circumstances may remain challenging. They opened their lives and hearts to him. Joseph and Mary opened their lives to receive the Messiah, the one born to them. and he still enters hearts willing to become his home today.

When we see the One who delivers us, as Anna did, as Simeon did, as others did; when we see him, how do we react to what we see? Our two prophets, Simeon and Anna, may help us in how we should respond. We can only guess at what stirred within them when they saw Jesus. It had to be more than the sight of a baby -- they would have repeatedly seen parents bringing their newborns to the Temple. They would have shared the joy with parents at the sight of any newborn -- just as we do when we see newborns. But they sensed something more in this baby Jesus that was life-changing for them -- and they knew it would be life-changing for the world as well. They saw in Jesus a destiny of hope -- not only for Israel, but for the salvation of *all* people. Do we see Christ as the Savior of the world? Or perhaps the more important question is, when we see other people, do we see them as potential recipients of this salvation?

Simeon also saw that people would be polarized about the truth of who Jesus was and what he was offering -- forcing people to make a choice and to reveal their hearts. Would they choose God's way or not? Not all hearts are going to get on track with God's plan of salvation. It was the negative side of this polarization that put Christ on the cross, and pierced Mary's heart with grief. It is a choice that still needs to be made by each one of us today. What is our reaction to Christ's presence among us? What does it feel like, how is he changing our lives, On which side of the pole will we take our stand?

Will we, as Paul described his pre-conversion experience of Christ -- when he opposed Jesus -- as deeply struggling to kick against the goads? (See Acts 26:14) That phrase conjures up the image of yoked oxen pulling the plow. When an ox tried to resist his calling to plow as he should and veered out of the furrow -- when got off track -- the farmer took a goad, a long slender stick of wood or iron with a point on the end; and used it to *encourage* the wayward ox back in line. (That's a nice way of putting it). Stubborn oxen would sometimes kick against this goad rather than obey its proddings -- but in the long run, they found it was in their own best interest to obey the master (the farmer). So, one reaction, one side of the "goad pole" (so to speak) is to keep kicking -- to continue resisting what God is

calling us to be and do in some task, some ministry, or some attitude or habit or other area of life.

The other option is to follow Christ's example that was at the end of this text. We can move into the new year with a renewed determination to grow in godly wisdom and strength. And we can follow Anna's example who shared the news of Christ whenever she crossed paths with someone who was seeking redemption in their life.

Put like that, the answer is a no brainer. But applying the answer to our practice of life isn't as easy. Before this week ends, we will be entering into a new year. Some of us will make resolutions. It is easy to say we want to grow in godly wisdom and strength – but how do we plan to go about it? What would it look like in my life were to be more pleasing to God in 2021? What old practices may I need to put away? What new practices may I need to incorporate? What kind of results may I want to discover in my life when I prepare to enter 2022? In other words, look 12 months ahead to the end of 2021 and imagine (realistically), what I want my life to look like then. And what do I need to begin doing now to make that happen?

As a starting point, Taylor Burton-Edwards suggests we focus on 3 words found in our two prophets. He calls them the “impact crater” of Jesus' coming to us. All three words -- *redemption*, *falling*, and *rising* -- are in a grammatical form that indicates that it is something that has begun (in Christ's arrival) but it is still an ongoing process. God's process of unfolding his rule in the hearts of humanity continues and continues and continues right up to this day in our hearts.

Redemption means something is bought (or bought back). A simple example -- I need some quick cash, and so I go to a pawn shop and sell them my watch. Later, I return and buy the watch back. I have redeemed it (I bought it back) from the pawn broker. Another example is if someone is kidnapped or taken prisoner of war and a ransom is paid to get them back -- the person is redeemed, rescued, freed. And the one who pays the price to make it happen is the deliverer, the redeemer.

In spiritual terms, every time God's people got off track or were taken captive -- by Egyptians, by Babylonians, by Romans (to name just a few), but ultimately, taken captive by sin, God did something or sent someone to pay the price to set his people free from whoever or whatever enslaved them. He redeemed them, bought them back as his people. Ultimately, he sent Jesus, first to the manger, then to the cross, and he is still bringing his deliverance to all who are held captive by sin and death, by fear, by disease, or by all forms of evil, injustice, and oppression.

His redemption begins within each of our own hearts with faithful justice and loving grace, and it involves *falling*. (Literally, it means a downward displacement in rank, or in power, or in status). It involves letting go, giving up those actions and attitudes in our life where we are unfaithful, unjust, unloving, and withholding grace. When I mention these negative traits, does some group, person, or situation flash through you mind? (Pause) These traits are often easily justified and disguise themselves as honorable. Yet they hold us hostage. When Christ comes to liberate, those in charge have to let go of their charge. If sin and evil rules, then sin and evil must lose its power, just like Pharaoh had to release his power over the Hebrew slaves, kings had to release their hold over exiles, and we – we must surrender control of our life. If Christ rules, *everything* else must fall underneath that rule. The question is – will the falling be forced upon us like those Old Testament rulers, or will we cooperate with it and let it work for us?

As God enlightens us, receive his forgiveness and acceptance, allow God's compassionate love and justice dictate our attitudes and our decisions and the direction of our lives, and become an advocate for justice and compassion for others.

Bernard Clairvaux suggests we have the option of two spiritual paths. One is the path of ascent – it is a path where we attempt to work our way up to God. As we move along the path, it may look and feel like progress and elevation. But in truth, self-made salvation is the surest path to destruction. The other path he calls abnegation, which moves in the opposite direction. Rather than trying to save ourselves, it seeks surrender and release to God at every point -- allowing *him* to save *us*. It may look and feel like a continuous falling, but it is the means by which God lifts us, purifies us, and most fully sets us apart as his.

Yes, it is humbling. It was humbling for the slaves of Egypt to realize they could not save themselves, but needed to trust and obey God's direction, especially through a shepherd Moses whom they had already rejected years earlier.

It was humbling for the exiles to realize they needed to turn back to God and allow him to lead them through people like Nehemiah and Ezra, who led them out of exile to rebuild the homeland. And it was humbling to listen to the prophets to help them rebuild their spiritual lives. And it is humbling for us to recognize that we cannot conquer the sin in us, much less the sin in anyone else, without submitting our fallen natures, our lives, to Jesus Christ and the Spirit of God.

It is in the humbling, the falling, the surrendering of ourselves -- that we allow the process of *rising* (literally resurrecting, or uprising) to begin. We move from an old,

dark, deathly, no-life to a new, enlightened, vibrant, and powered life because we have been redeemed -- and whatever power(s) that had been suppressing life has been thrown off by Christ. That is why Jesus' self-described mission was to announce "this rising" (of himself) – which was good news to the poor, freedom for prisoners, sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free, and proclaim the year of God's bountiful pleasure with his people (Luke 4:17-21); and in the sermon on the mount, he announced God's blessing and coming happiness to all those who didn't currently experience it, but would trust him and recognize their need for him. (Matthew 5:3ff)

Something has to fall so that something new can come. That is why Peter encourages us to humble ourselves under God's mighty hand (fall to him), that *he* may then lift us up. (1 Peter 5:6). This is how we can rise and can encourage others to rise to new heights that are beyond what we can even imagine. Whenever we take obedient action to overcome what is defeating us; whenever we take action to improve the quality of life for another, we are cooperating with and participating in Christ's rising among us.

Redemption, Falling, Rising -- let's make it practical. Many of us, especially as a new year starts; may want to set our sights on doing something different or doing more of something good (rising). But those goals are often hindered and frustrated by the fact that we are a people of habitual routines that fill all of our time. We cannot reach for the good. We cannot rise without falling, without sacrificing something we are currently doing -- because we all always have exactly 86,400 seconds in a day; and if we want to add something into those seconds, what is currently in those seconds has to be displaced; because -- outside of one Old Testament Joshua story -- it as Jesus said, that even by worrying, we cannot add one hour to our life (Matthew 6:27).

The inherent problem with rising (instilling) a new practice in life is often not so much the challenge of the new practice itself as it is the falling away (the eliminating) from our life something that will free up the time and space to establish that new practice. By the way, the opposite is also true – if we are trying to end something in our life, we must then fill that vacuum with something else or the old practice will come back at us stronger than ever. (See Matthew 12:43-45)

Simple illustration: Let's say as I enter 2021, I want to improve my exercise life or increase my prayer life. Let's imagine I choose to wake up an hour earlier in the day to do that. The challenge probably isn't going to be exercising, I know how to do that; or praying, I know how to do that. The problem is going to be in denying

myself that morning sleep that I feel I need, and/or denying myself the normal morning routine, for I am habitual. When I get up, I do this and this and this and then go to work. So, even if I manage to overcome the craving to sleep and get up an hour earlier, I will still be tempted to do my normal morning routine steps of this and this and this and instead of getting the new thing into my life, I will simply end up at work an hour earlier - because I am habitual. The real challenge will be changing the old habitual activity to include the more or new and different practice into the habitual routine.

I suspect it is the goal of most of us to allow Christ to create his home in our lives -- and for him to keep on remodeling and restoring our hearts so that we are more and more comfortable with him and he with us. Just like we continue to rebuild, maintain, our homes to make them better for ourselves and for others.

Like the brothers observing the farmer, we may not always understand what God is wanting to sow into our world or even into our own lives, but we can trust that he knows what he is doing, and each of us needs to ask God's guidance in what needs to rise and what needs to fall in our lives to further along his redeeming work in us and in his world as we resolve our way into the next year of 2021.

What must fall away so that Christ may raise something better within me so that I may better live out God's redemption in my life?

Closing Prayer Let's pray. As we resolve to get started in a new year, Lord, help us to consider the right questions: Do we see you? How are we responding to that sight? Are we listening to what you are asking of us -- to let this fall away and that to rise in our life? Show us what needs to be mercilessly uprooted from our life. Sow what you want to plant and raise in us so that we can even more effectively carry on your redeeming work in us and for others 2021 and beyond.

Empower us to know and live according to your instructions -- to let things fall away in order to raise up your kingdom. Show us how to envision you as Simeon and Anna did in their life changing moments -- that we may recognize you as ruler of all and you become our highest priority -- harvesting a crop of good character no matter what befalls us, no matter what circumstances we may face. It is in Jesus' name that we pray. Amen.

Closing Music # 451 *Be Thou My Vision*

Closing Blessing Know without a doubt that the great mystery of our faith is confirmed by the Spirit, seen by angels, and announced to the nations, believed in throughout the world: that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who makes his home around - with - and in -- all who will welcome him. Amen.