

December 31, 2017
First Sunday After Christmas
Luke 2:22-40

RISING AND FALLING

So, here we are on the last day of 2017. Another year ends, a new one about to begin. Doesn't it seem like 2017 flew by? Actually once you're over 30 it happens every year, but you never get used to it. Around about the end of March, Sally and I will be saying to each other how can it be almost April? It was just New Year's Eve.

I read a fictionalized book about Lewis and Clark once a long time ago. Those guys and about 35 men with them spent 2 ½ years in the wilderness trying to find a water passage from St. Louis, Missouri to the Pacific ocean starting in 1804. It was a grueling, arduous trip through lands that no person of European descent had ever stepped foot in. Some of their encounters with Native Americans were violent, but mostly they were not. I remember one part of the book explaining that the white men figured out how to distill some grain or fruit or something and on Christmas day they had a huge celebration and all the white men got drunk. The Native Americans who were with them had never been exposed to alcohol and they just watched the whole affair mystified. But they were even more perplexed when one week later, the white guys did the whole thing over again. And then that was it. No more partying.

If you think about it, it's kind of odd that New Year's Eve is such a big holiday. It's not like there's anything earthshattering about it. An old year passes and a new year arrives. It could be any random day on the calendar. That it is exactly one week after Christians celebrate the birth of Christ is pretty much coincidence.

Many religions in the world promote this circular view of time. Time keeps going in an unending circle. Past, present, and future; past, present, and future. The

goal of many of these religions is to rescue ourselves from this unending cycle. We are to transcend it somehow. The idea is we can make ourselves into transcendent beings independently if we just meditate enough and focus on our inner selves, shutg ourselves off from all human pleasures and distractions.

But that is not the Jewish and Christian faiths. We understand that as humans, with all our human limitations, we cannot really change the course of time, nor can we make some big contribution that adds something truly new to the world. We can't do it. Still, Christians join Jews in believing that although God is eternal and therefore not bound by time, God doesn't simply withdraw from our time. As one contemporary theologian put it, the eternal God stands with one foot in time.

Although sometimes we look around and wonder where God is in all this mess we call the real world, we understand that God entered our time in the form of a baby about 2,000 years ago. That is the great affirmation of Christmas. God did not leave us to our own time, an endless cycle of just one thing after another. God entered our time. God stands with us, one foot in our world.

And that affirmation is what makes New Year's a joyous rather than a mundane time. As you go through this New Year you will undoubtedly be doing many things that you did in the Old Year. You will follow pretty much the same schedule in the coming year that you followed in the past year. And yet, by the grace of God, there may be true newness. I believe that God not only loves us, but there are certain gracious moments when God intervenes for us. God steps into our time, and that divine stepping is sometimes disruptive and sometimes reassuring and wonderful. God really grants something new.

You know this. There are times in your life when you have stood before a closed door, a dead end, and then to your surprise, God entered. God knocked on the door (or knocked down the door) and you had a future offered you that you could not have created on your own.

And in a particular time, a particular baby came to particular parents. The angels appeared announced his coming, gave him his name and attended his birth. But Mary and Joseph follow the law of Moses and take him to the temple for redemption, to mark him according to the Jewish customs. They do the ordinary things that are appropriate for their faith tradition.

And an ancient elder of the church, one who has seen countless young families come and go, notices this particular child. The elder adds one more level of affirmation that this child brings something new into the world. He says: “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many.”

Notice the order of Simeon’s prophecy. We are used to talking about the rise and fall of the Roman Empire. The rise and fall of a Hollywood movie star. The rise and fall of a politician (how many have we seen in the last 12 months?) But Simeon talks about the falling and rising.

This child provokes a decision. For Simeon, for Anna, for all people of every generation. How we respond to this one person decides everything. And the stakes are not trivial. It is not that if we go with Jesus our problems are solved. It is not even that our lives are 22% better, or our marriage is 16% healthier. It is not measurable. It is not quantifiable. It is not predictable. It is not the same old same old. If we choose to go with him, and it is entirely our choice, we suffer and die with him. From that lowest point, we rise. We fall and we rise, we fall and we rise. A life that otherwise might seem mundane and circular has meaning and purpose and hope. All we have to do is choose to make it a life in Jesus Christ.