

# The Park Road Pulpit

*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*

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***Whadjuget?***

***“Learnin’ Us” How to Live***

*Isaiah 52.7-10; Luke 2.25-40*

Russ Dean, December 30, 2007



You’ve probably asked it a dozen times or more since last Tuesday’s dawn broke over bright-eyed children everywhere. It’s the only question that seems to matter on a Christmas morning. All the long waiting has come to an end. The surprises are no more. The gifts are unwrapped and all those well-kept secrets have been spilled – epiphanies of shredded paper and discarded bows. Going from house to house, from Christmas breakfast to Christmas lunch to Christmas dinner, and back again, we greet and celebrate together, but first we just have to ask children of all ages ...

Whadjuget!?

It’s a great word, isn’t it!? And appropriate, I think, that we would contract an entire sentence into three syllables, for the one word just says it all: whadjuget!? I’d like to suggest to you today that it says it all not just concerning our commercialized Christmas, but that there is theological insight in this word and in the Song of Simeon which sings of the revealing of the salvation of God to all flesh. I hope we can unwrap it together in the next few minutes. Maybe as we do so, old Simeon can “learn us” something about living, in the process.

The song of Simeon, known from its Latin translation as the *Nunc Dimitis*, (“now dismiss”) is the fourth canticle in a quartet of songs of praise recorded in the first two chapters of Luke’s gospel. These songs come from Zechariah, the father of John the

Baptist, Mary, the mother of Jesus, the angels who announce the Christmas birth to shepherds on a hillside, and now, to Simeon. Four quite different characters in the drama of divine salvation: an aging new father of one who would prepare us for the coming of the divine, a young mother, who would surprise earth and heaven with her submission and obedience to the divine, a heavenly host who would dramatically announce the divine, and, today, an old prophet who could boldly say, “I have seen the divine, in the flesh.” These are four quite different characters, but in one way or another, the scripture makes clear they are part of the divine purpose because of their openness to the movement of God around them. They were “filled with the spirit.” They were open to the unexpected. They said, “yes.”

Simeon’s pronouncement is a fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah, some 800 years prior, that *the ends of the earth (all flesh, KJV), shall see the salvation of our God...* The truth of incarnation, God’s coming among us in human form, provides a double entendre I had not seen before studying old Simeon: The boy-child, Jesus, presented by his parents at the temple, represented for Simeon the presence of God in the flesh. But, perhaps equally important, if overlooked, is that Simeon’s flesh counts, too! Incarnation means not just that God comes in the flesh, but that we, in our flesh, *shall see it together!*

Have you? In the flesh... seen the divine? Have you? In your living... experienced the salvation of God? The promise of divine salvation is offered here (in this text) to a congregation, not just to an individual. We shall see, know, realize the Kingdom “*on earth as it is in heaven*”(Matthew 6.10), not alone, but in the company of “all the

saints.”<sup>1</sup> Together we will know God’s salvation. Biblical salvation always implies this corporate dimension and a this-worldly perspective, as the Psalmist promises, *we shall see the goodness of God in the land of the living* (Psalm 27). People of God...

Whadjuget?<sup>2</sup>

But that corporate truth also requires individual affirmation. When you “come to die,” as Thoreau put it so succinctly, life itself asks us the only question that matters.<sup>3</sup> When we “come to die,” that is, not just when we are at death’s door, but when we reflect on the life we have lived, or haven’t, all of our years get compacted, contracted, into one three-syllable question: John, Mary, Bob, Sara, Melanie, Buck... Whadjuget?<sup>4</sup>

It is a great tragedy that Christian faith, as it is too often communicated, gets boiled down to the wrong, final question. Not “what did you get,” but “what will you get?” All of Jesus’ imperatives for living life to the full: loving God – by loving self and neighbor, forgiving and forgiving and forgiving, denying self and serving one another,

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<sup>1</sup> I had in mind here the great hymn, “For All the Saints,” which probably owes, in some measure, to the *great cloud of witnesses* of Hebrews 12.1.

<sup>2</sup> Someone recently introduced me to a collection of poems by Edgar Lee Masters, *Spoon River Anthology*, in which he sets to verse the epitaphs of all the citizens of one, hypothetical, town. The following poem, “The Village Atheist,” spoke to me of this sermon, and was printed in the bulletin: “Ye young debaters over the doctrine / Of the soul’s immortality, / I who lie here was the village atheist, / Talkative, contentious, versed in the arguments / Of the infidels. / But through a long sickness / Coughing myself to death / I read the *Upanishads* and the poetry of Jesus. / And they lighted a torch of hope and intuition / And desire which the Shadow, / Leading me swiftly through the caverns of darkness, / Could not extinguish. / Listen to me, ye who live in the senses / And think through the senses only: / Immortality is not a gift, / Immortality is an achievement; / And only those who strive mightily / Shall possess it.”

<sup>3</sup> Henry David Thoreau, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”

<sup>4</sup> I used the last line if this poem (which I have italicized here) in our bulletin. “Who made the world? / Who made the swan, and the black bear? / Who made the grasshopper? / This grasshopper, I mean-- / the one who has flung herself out of the grass, / the one who is eating sugar out of my hand, / who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-- / who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes. / Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away. / I don’t know exactly what a prayer is. / I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down / into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass, / how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields, / which is what I have been doing all day. / Tell me, what else should I have done? / Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon? / *Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?*” Mary Oliver, “Tell Me...”

loving our enemies and caring for the outcast, putting off the worries of tomorrow and seeking God's kingdom right here and right now, praying by living, living by praying that heaven would come, on earth... all Jesus' imperatives for living are lost... if faith is just about what we're going to get when we die.

John Lennon once said, in a non-Christian jest that was filled with deep Christian truth, "Life is what happens, when you're making other plans." Christian faith isn't just about making other plans (other-worldly plans). It's about what happens. Forrest Gump reminded us poignantly that "stuff happens," and it seems to me that scripture devotes its entire energy to the prospect of cracking open our hide-bound consciences, that we might get a glimpse of the most extraordinary truth there can be, namely, that in the midst of all we're doing, all the plans we're making for some future that may (or may never) come, while all the stuff is happening... God is with us!

And Old Simeon saw it. Thanks be to God, he saw it! *Now dismiss your servant in peace... for my eyes have seen your salvation...*

But why did he not see it until he had, literally, "come to die?" I claim as my own the Christian affirmation that in Jesus of Nazareth, an ordinary child born to ordinary parents in a backwater town in a first-century culture, *the fullness of God was pleased to dwell* (Colossians 1.19). Yes, in Jesus, the *fullness of God* lived richly, fully, and Simeon saw this by some divine revelation. But, folks... it wasn't as if God had been absent all the while, only to come on the scene in Jesus. His presence was so filled with the likeness of God, his living so full of the loving of God that we make the audacious claim that Jesus' one life was a unique moment in our human history, in God's "salvation history."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Salvation history is a phrase that scholars use to speak of the activity of the world – as it relates to the work of God in that world. Biblical history is not "history," strictly speaking, but it is undoubtedly

But “God with us” is the very nature of God, not just the nature of Jesus.<sup>6</sup>

My grandmother, with her eight years of formal education, taught me so much in the few years we had together. She was a formative figure for all of her children and grandchildren, for not only was she a large woman, she had a giant persona that occupied center stage for the Phillips family for many years. One of the greatest truths she taught me was an unintended lesson I learned by observing her large living and comparing it to her sometimes grammatically poor, but always interesting, southern speech.

“Russ,” she’d say, “Come over here and let me ‘learn you’ how to do this.” I don’t know why her incorrectly placed verb stayed with me all these years, but it seems oddly appropriate. You see, someone else can present right facts or demonstrate right methods, and in so doing, “teach” the skills of life. But only when I have appropriated them for myself, can I really learn anything. So, my grandmother taught her brood not by giving lessons in the abstract, “watch this;” “listen to this.” She “learned us” by inviting and encouraging us to live it for ourselves. “You want to know how you cut the head off a chicken to make a chicken stew? – Here’s the knife... You want to know how to crochet an afghan? – Here are the needles... You want to know how to suck every ounce out of life, to live long and prosper, even though you were born poor and underprivileged

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salvation history. (i.e., The writers of scriptural “histories” were much less concerned with the facts of chronology and geography, as archeological evidence largely attests, than they were concerned to make a point about what God was doing in such and such a moment.)

<sup>6</sup> “God with us” is a very wooden translation of the Hebrew name, Immanuel (Im-manu-el = with-us-God), which is the name Christians came to associate with Jesus, in whom they saw God. This point is one of my ongoing sermons – that God has always worked (as God still works) among us. There come seminal moments in history, however, when time and place and person(s) coalesce, the “stars line up right,” or, in the words of Paul in Galatians 4, there is a “*fullness of time*” – and in these “kairos” moments (the Greek word for “fullness of time”), the presence and work of God are seen more fully. For Christians, Jesus is the seminal moment – but he is so because it is the (eternal) nature of God to “come among us” (John 1.14).

– Here’s the way I did it,” her life told us. And by trying to follow her example, she “learned us” all how to get it for ourselves.

Christian faith is not based on a rule, a set of rules, a code of conduct, a manual of discipline, a philosophy, or an all-encompassing doctrine of divine absolutes. Christian faith is faith centered on a person. A person, by whose living, we can see the salvation of God in the flesh. In his flesh. In our flesh. It’s the only way God could ever really “learn us” to live.

Who would have thought that all we need to transform the earth is not a carefully detailed plan or a powerful army? Who would have thought that despite his being rejected by all known authorities, a little child could lead our way. It is God’s surprising story among us. Coming from heaven to earth, as it were, Christmas Day will never find us wanting.<sup>7</sup>

So... don’t wait until you come to die to ask, “Whadjuget?”

And if you don’t like what you’ve gotten, Jesus can “learn you” a better way.

May it be so!

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<sup>7</sup> This is a paraphrase of a relatively new Christmas hymn, “Who Would Think That What Was Needed.”