

Destiny's Child

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Luke 2:22-40

Only a member as hip and savvy as Geoff Barnes would have caught the cultural reference in today's sermon title. "Destiny's Child" is a hip-hop musical group, very hot right now. And only a fine legal mind like Geoff's would anticipate potential lawsuits from visitors who would be expecting something different today than a sermon. They might be expecting a "babe" of another variety than the Babe of Bethlehem.

One thing Christianity can never be accused of is modesty. Its claims are sweeping and universal. Eternal salvation. Endless peace. For God so loved *the world*. "Light and life to all he brings" we sang boldly on Christmas Eve. The baby born in Bethlehem is in a transcendent sense "destiny's child"—in whom these claims will come to fruition. And yet there is plenty of evidence to suggest these promises are exaggerated. Where is life amid so many scenes of death and despair? Where is the light in our own hearts clouded with confusion, stress, sorrow?

The pronouncements made at Jesus' birth: peace on earth, goodwill among its people, somehow seem to have gotten lost in the violence and brokenness of the world, the communities, the homes, and souls we inhabit...

...which is why our gospel text this morning is so provocative and inviting. Two people are present at a completely routine event...and discern something that changes everything. No angels herald it; no bright star guides them. Yet Simeon and Anna have a good look at a Hebrew baby and see the child of destiny, who will somehow figure in God's plan to save the people. What in the world did they see? And could it possibly signal hope for us, so many centuries later? Listen for God's word in the reading from Luke, in the second chapter at the 22nd verse [Luke 2:22-40].

It's the day of Jesus' presentation in the temple. This was a religious ceremony to which observant Jews submitted their firstborn son—an offering back to God of the gift God had given them. It was officiated at by the high priest with all the mystery of ordained office and all the legitimacy of the Book of Order, but that's not what made this event remarkable.

The religious leaders don't seem the slightest bit aware of either the identity or destiny of the little boy before them. But two others do.

One of them is Simeon. Luke gives us a little window into his life—letting us know that this was a devout man who had been promised that he would not die before seeing the redemption of Israel. Just as Jesus' parents enter the temple, this old man comes straight in and takes Jesus out of their arms. Nobody "official" who cradles the baby in his old arms and declares that now he can die happy because he has seen in this little child, the salvation of the whole world.

Then, to make sure we "get it," Luke introduces another person whose vision about this child is clearer than most. Anna, a widow 84 years old, not only recognizes the divine essence and mission of this baby, she starts telling everyone about him. Long before John the Baptist makes the scene, this elderly widow lady becomes an evangelist for Jesus Christ! While it's true that salvation comes from God—completely apart from human invention or intervention--it surely does help to have others point out that which we're ignorant of, or what we might overlook. It's true there are many roads that will take us to the Rapid station, but we need a map or a friend to tell us one way that will get us there!

It's only a day after Christmas and we have our doubts. The gospel writer wrote about these encounters retrospectively—that is, after Jesus' life had unfolded completely into his adult ministry and his death and resurrection. So even though they are triumphant in outlook, they also honestly acknowledge the complex and unreceptive world in which God work's out God's purposes. "This child," Simeon prophesies, "is destined for the falling and the rising of many...and to be a sign that will be opposed..." Already Luke is explicitly stating what indeed came to pass: Jesus will challenge reality so deeply that he will be strongly resisted, and rejected by many. It's as if the gospel writer wanted to encourage the believers not to abandon hope when the promises were delayed in being fulfilled. This is about God's timing, not ours. About God's plan, not ours. And curiously, it's not always the popular, crowd-pleasing, cheerful, easy stuff that brings it about. The early church understood that all too well, as they endured persecution and even martyrdom.

In North America, the church is not so much persecuted as it is ignored, pushed to the very edges of social and cultural life. It's easy to look around at our lives and wonder where God is in all of this. Light??? Salvation? Show me!

Well maybe you are, right now. The first public witness to Jesus as the bearer of God's salvation to all people came when God's people were

gathered to worship, to enact centuries-old rituals that proclaim God's presence and God's action throughout history. Anna and Simeon were led by the Holy Spirit to see what the "professionals" had missed. Here we are gathered again for worship at the start of a week that will lead us into a new, unknown year. What's ahead?

Maybe what we need to take us confidently into it is not so much a new year's resolution, as a revelation—a sign that God is with us and working for the salvation of all people. I want to suggest that the context for that revelation is right here, among God's people. People whose lives are not perfect, but who sense that what they're looking for may be found in the place where God's word is proclaimed and God's people are fired up with the light that can illumine every night. People who believe their destiny lies with this child born so long ago.

Simeon's longed-for dream was fulfilled as he held the baby Jesus in his old, tired arms. He could die peacefully because he had seen this child's destiny. Though Simeon couldn't have understood fully how this little baby would save the world, he had seen enough...enough to smile a future's face.

What about you and me? Have we seen enough? Enough to have our flame of faith rekindled? Enough to meet the new year with courage and hope? Enough to see that we don't have to do this all alone, but with companions, both human and divine? Enough to go and share with others that God is still working to fulfill divine promises of life and light, peace on earth, good will to all. No? Well, will you try the approach of the minister author Annie Dillard writes about: "This man knows God. Once, in the middle of a long pastoral prayer of intercession for the whole world—for the gift of wisdom to its leaders, for hope and mercy to the grieving, freedom to the captive and God's grace to all—in the middle of this he stopped and burst out, 'Lord, we bring you these same petitions every week.' Then after a shocked pause, he continued with the prayer." [from "Teaching a Stone to Talk," p. 112] Keep on. Keep on looking; keep on watching; keep on worshipping with God's people. Our hope lies with Destiny's Child, who is faithful to the end. As an anonymous person of faith expressed it:

*When we walk to the edge of the light we have,
take that step into the darkness of the unknown.
Believe that one of two things will happen: there
will be something solid for us to stand on;
or, we will be taught how to fly.*

**NOW TO THE RULER OF ALL WORLDS, UNDYING, INVISIBLE, THE ONLY GOD,
BE HONOR AND GLORY FOREVER AND EVER! AMEN.**

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