

Where is God in 2012?

Introduction:

The New Year is always an exciting time. It is so full of possibilities; In many respects, we are given a clean slate, to do something different this time around. For many of us, this is an exciting idea. We get do-over's on all of the things we regretted about last year. And for some of us, this is a welcome relief from last year.

Think back about 2011. What was it like for you? Did you experience milestones, such as weddings, children, grandchildren, great trips, job promotions, etc. Did you experience tragedies? job loss, personal sickness or sickness in the family, divorce, death in the family. Most of us probably experienced a little bit of both. Thinking on these things, I wonder what this year has in store.

One New Year's tradition that many of us participate in every year is the "New Year's Resolution." It's a perfect time to make one; there is natural break in time and an obvious starting point for us if there is some change we would like to make or some goal we would like to accomplish. In setting a "New Year's Resolution," we often have certain timetables set in our minds; we would like to lose weight in "x" number of months, we would like to read "x" number of books this year or watch "x" hours less of tv per week. Maybe we have a milestone we would like to accomplish by "x" day or "month." This is a very human way of thinking; we create timelines based on our own capabilities. I have to wonder, where do we see God in all of this? Where did we see God in our lives last year?

So many of our New Year's resolutions center how WE are going to change our lives. This year, let's not ask what we are going to change; instead, let's ask, how is GOD changing our lives?

Transition: This morning, we're going to explore what a life changed by God looks like by checking out two New Testament figures that devoted themselves completely to God.

Biblical:

Our passage in Luke today continues on from where we left off last week in the nativity story. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus, after being visited by the shepherds and magi, and taking some well needed rest, are on their way to the temple. They have a twofold purpose in going there. First, it was time for them to take part in the purification ritual. According to Old Testament law in Leviticus 12, a woman was considered ceremonially "unclean" for forty days after she has given birth. This didn't mean that she didn't wash up for forty days, it just meant that she couldn't worship in the temple for that amount of time. After the forty days, she would have to offer the proper sacrifice to be considered clean; in this case, it would be a pure, firstborn lamb. What's interesting, and I would even say important, is that in Luke, the author specifically notes that Mary and Joseph give two doves for the sacrifice, which was a substitute that the poor were allowed to offer up if they could not afford the traditional sacrifice. Again, this says something about the character of God, that He chose to reveal Himself to and dwell among those considered least in society.

Secondly, Mary and Joseph were taking Jesus to the temple to be consecrated to God. This consecration rite of the firstborn son was established during the time of Moses in Exodus 13:1-2:

“The LORD said to Moses, “Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether human or animal.”

God commanded the Jewish people to do this as a tribute to all of the ways that He blessed them in bringing them out of Egypt, and so devout Jewish people continued this practice as a way of honoring and remembering God.

It was here, at the temple, that Joseph and Mary met the protagonists of this story: Simeon and Anna.

1) Simeon:

Simeon was the first to approach the couple and Jesus. He was an older man, devout in the Jewish faith. God had revealed to him through the Spirit that because of his righteousness, he would see the Messiah before He died. And so, compelled by the Spirit, Simeon took Jesus into his arms and says these words in verses 29-32.

“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.”

God had seen something special in Simeon, so much so that Simeon would hold Jesus and prophesy about Him. Before the ministry of Jesus even began, before Paul and Peter argued about it when establishing the church in Acts, Simeon knew that the Messiah would come and bring the Good News of God not just to the Jews but to the Gentiles as well. This is a message that was highly contested all throughout the New Testament, but a message that is central to the work and character of God: His grace is available for all men who would confess Him as King and Lord.

Now, there is one phrase that Simeon said in here that I want you to keep in mind: “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised.” Lock that into your brain, we’ll come back to it.

2) Anna:

While in the temple, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus also encountered a prophetess, Anna. According to her short biography that Luke gave, Anna had lived a fairly difficult life. Her husband had died after only seven years of marriage. She never remarried and was now 84 years old. Assuming, like Mary, she was around 16 when she married, and her husband died when she was only 23, Anna would have lived for 61 years as a widow at that point. Like Simeon, Anna too was devout, constantly worshiping, praying, and fasting in the temple. It was these acts of devotion that set her apart from those around her. And so she too was given the privilege of seeing Jesus before she died.

Anna’s story speaks to us about Christian faith in the face of heartbreak. Author William Barclay, in talking about Anna, writes that “She had known sorrow and she had not grown bitter.” Like any one of

us, she had a choice on how to live after her husband died; she could've blamed God, or she could have faith that as her Father, He would never do anything to cause her harm. Barclay quotes a verse from the hymn "Our Times Are in Thy Hands," which offer comfort, especially in light of the difficulties we have faced last year in will face in the year to come, that God truly does love and care for His children.

Our times are in Thy hand;
Why should we doubt or fear?
A Father's hand will never cause
His child a needless tear.

Anna had the faith of a life given over to God, even in the face of a situation that would break many of us. How is it that she had this faith? Was she just stronger or holier than the rest of us? No. Anna cultivated this faith through her worship, prayer and fasting. She was willing to put her faith and time into becoming a disciple of God, giving control of her situation over to Him.

Biblical Conclusion:

And so here we have the earthly parents of the Son of God bringing Jesus to the temple to be dedicated back to God, which seems a little unnecessary to me, since as I said earlier, He is the Son of God. And as the three of them arrive at the temple, they are approached by two very committed believers who had been looking forward to seeing Jesus. This was the climax of their lives, lives that were not filled with worldly accomplishments and milestones but were aligned with God.

Now, recall the phrase that Simeon said when he met Jesus: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised."

It's just six short words, but so packed with meaning. First, there is the phrase "Sovereign Lord." Simply said, God is in control. Both Simeon and Anna knew this. Both were obedient to His will for their lives, that they would worship and follow Him. Even in spite of tragedy that Anna faced at the loss of her husband, she could still say that "God is good."

Secondly, he said "as you have promised." The Spirit had promised Simeon something, and he believed. Though it wasn't until the end of his life that God fulfilled His promise, Simeon stayed faithful. God's timing is not our timing, nor is His patience our patience.

For Simeon, God had promised something specific; he knew what the reward of his faithfulness would be. What is it, exactly, that God promises us? What can we expect for a life lived in faithfulness to Him?

Paul gives us a glimpse of this in Galatians 4:4-7:

⁴ But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. ⁶ Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

In this passage, Paul lays out the groundwork for becoming a follower of God; Jesus Christ was sent to redeem us from the death penalty that we deserve as a result of our sins. When we choose to believe and accept Him as the Lord of our lives, then we become adopted into the family of God.

When we become children of God, Paul tells us that we are promised two things. First, as adopted children, God sends the Holy Spirit, His physical presence here on earth, to be with us and to guide us. Secondly, because we are adopted children, we are also then heirs to His Kingdom, meaning that when we die, we will not just be resigned to death, but we will spend eternity with Him in heaven.

These are the rewards of lives lived in faithfulness.

Transition: In Simeon and Anna we see an example of a faithful life. This is the truth: we exist in a fallen world, meaning a world ruled by sins, with the presence of God surrounding us; the only thing that we're promised in this life is that God will be with us, and that it will be worth it someday when we do go to heaven and receive our reward.

Big Idea: God promises us his presence in our lives right now and true peace in the world to come. This next year, let's rest in the presence and wait on the promises of God.

Conclusion:

I want to come back to the idea of New Year's Resolutions that we were talking about at the beginning of the message. New Year's resolutions are great. They are a way for us to refocus and reprioritize our worlds which, at this time of year, often seem as if they are spinning violently out of control.

But, as we begin thinking and planning for 2012, are we asking ourselves, "Where is God in all of this?" Or are we simply setting our own goals, relying on our own selves, unaware that God is present with us and has designs for us.

I know for myself, it is much easier to take control and plan out my own life rather than live in the uncertainty of what God would have for me. But is that truly life-giving and satisfying?

I'm reading a really interesting book right now called "Moonwalking with Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything." The book is written by a free-lance journalist who decides after covering a national memory competition that he will train for the one next year. Now, at the memory competitions, mental athletes compete in events like memorizing randomly shuffled decks of cards the quickest (some under a minute!) and memorizing unpublished poetry. Throughout the book, Josh Foer talks about his encounters with and lessons from other competitors as well as studies on memory and the human brain. While writing an article on the World Memory Championships in England, Josh met Ben Pridmore, a memory champion who had been memorizing 50,000 numbers in pi. Ben is described as wearing a "worn-out "one Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish" Dr. Seuss T-shirt with a badly stretched collar and a fanny pack. He was also sporting an enormous wide-brimmed black Australian steer-hide undertaker's hat that he professed to have worn every day for the last six years." He writes that, "Ben had been working on a book called "How to Be Clever," which teaches readers how to calculate the day of the week for any date in history, how to memorize a deck of cards, and how to scam an IQ test. "The

book is about making people think you're brainy without actually increasing your intelligence," he told me. "The problem is I haven't written very much because I always have more important things to do, like watch cartoons. If I tried to write a book on how to improve your life, I'd be rubbish at it, because I haven't got the faintest idea how to improve my life."

To me, this is such an interesting statement. Here is a man at the top of his game, in many respects, who can perform memorizing feats that I cannot even imagine doing. He has perfected his craft and achieved a lot, and in spite of all of this, he himself doesn't feel like he has it altogether.

Having amazing accomplishments and achievements does not necessarily mean that we are living a fulfilled life. It doesn't mean that we are living the life that God calls us to.

So much of what we typically look for in a "good" year has to do with our own abilities, achievements, or plans. But where does God fit in all of this?

Big Idea: God promises us his presence in our lives right now and true peace in the world to come. This next year, let's rest in the presence and wait on the promises of God.