

THE ANSWER FOR HUNGER

Texts: Luke 2:22-35; Isaiah 9:6-7

12/27/09

Introduction

Christmas is over. The radio stations have gone back to secular music. All inflatable Christmas yard art is at least 50% off. And the long return lines at the stores have already formed.

In the church though, the “Feast of Christmas” has just barely begun. It’s time to savor the banquet for a while. All these weeks we’ve spoken of our hunger pangs for justice, beauty, relationships, and spirituality. What can fill our deepest human hungers?

Today is the day to celebrate that in a world of hunger we’ve been given a taste of satisfaction. Let’s not be in too much of a hurry to put away the decorations, shelve the Christmas carols, and start our diets again. Let’s linger awhile at banquet table and marvel at the generosity of the feast.

- 1. When I lived in Denver, Colorado I always noticed the quote by Edward Bonfils at the top of the editorial page of the Denver Post: *There is no hope for the satisfied man.* Now I don't know what Bonfils had in mind when he wrote it, but Simeon is a good illustration of its truth.**

Simeon was far from satisfied, and he was full of hope. Rembrandt's portrait of Simeon holding Jesus in the temple catches the moment of the hunger of a lifetime finally fed by the promise of God.

Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace.

If you look closely at the picture you'll notice that Rembrandt painted Simeon with his eyes shut. This was Rembrandt's last painting that we know of. He was almost totally blind when he painted it. Perhaps he's trying to tell us that those of us limited to seeing Jesus in our hearts will still satisfy the hunger of our souls.

Simeon was the embodiment of the holy hunger of God's rank and file people. He is the longing of the Old Testament heart, seeking the "consolation" of Israel. These folks were hungry enough to be hopeful about God's promise of a savior. They had not blunted their hunger with life's junk food. They weren't looking to Rome or even the Jewish priesthood to answer their longing. Nothing less than God would do. And it is the hunger of Simeon that sees Jesus for the feast he is.

We live in a culture that has taught us to quickly gratify every longing, and to medicate every sense of unfulfillment. But that first Christmas Jesus was a banquet only for the hungry; the full looked elsewhere. We should not be so quick to try filling the God-sized hole in our lives with the latest technological toy or self-help guide. It's the human hunger for justice, relationship, spirituality and beauty that drives us on to the presence of God in Christ.

For those seeking justice, Jesus came to put the broken world right. For those seeking relationship, he offers forgiveness that can heal the breach between each other and our God. For those seeking beauty, Jesus is beginning of a new heaven and new earth. For those seeking spirituality, he is God with us.

There is no hope for the satisfied man. But there is abundant hope for the unsatisfied one. Enough to keep us passing every substitute until we come to God in Christ. And then enough to keep us wanting more of him as we offer him our deepest hungers.

2. But Jesus is far more than an answer for personal spiritual hunger – yours, mine, or Simeon’s. It seems that this banquet is being served for the sake of the whole world.

Simeon can see beyond the needs of his own heart. And he tells us that the salvation he has glimpsed in Jesus Christ has been:

...prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the gentiles and for glory to God’s people Israel (vs. 31-32).

Jesus is received by the hungry. But he did not come only for the hungry. Simeon makes it clear that what has been born in Jesus Christ is intended for all.

Let’s linger on the “all” for a moment. Jesus was no narrow national savior. His salvation was intended for more than the Jews. He is meant for far more than the democratic nations of the west. In Jesus we see God’s universal intent for human beings.

That’s no easier to say this Christmas than it was in Simeon’s day. The tensions today between Christianity, Islam, and vocal unbelievers in any faith make claims about a God for “all” a contentious thing.

We do need to be witnesses for God’s gift in Jesus Christ. But we need to be witness in ways that Jesus himself would approve of. Martin Luther said many centuries ago that a Christian is but one beggar telling another beggar where the bread is. It is from that kind humility, in that kind of posture, we offer Christ for the hunger of the whole world.

But there is a great difference between that and saying Jesus is bread for me but he may not be bread for you. Jesus is not the savior of this local gathering of Presbyterians. He is the one sent by God for the salvation of the world.

I think it would do us a world of good as a congregation in the coming year to remind ourselves that we are located in a sea of human hunger, no matter how prosperous or humble the address of the house. And we understand that hunger because it is our own. But we’ve also tasted the banquet and we are here to invite others to do the same. How will we tell them where the bread is? Who will we invite to the feast? To what trouble will we go to excite their hunger?

The Christ of Simeon’s hope was not born in a corner, to be cherished by a few. The hunger to which he speaks resides in every human heart. The filling that he offers is needed by every human soul. And we have been entrusted with the light of his appearing. If we have received the light then we are to be witnesses of it.

3. The hungry are fed! That is the promise of the coming of Jesus Christ. The invitation to the banquet is for all. And yet all don't receive it in the same way.

This is the part of the Jesus story that doesn't do well on a Christmas card. After Simeon talks about the universal intent of God's salvation in Christ, he reveals a more serious side.

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 hearts of many will be revealed.

How else can we say it? Not all are in touch with their hunger. Not all are open to being told that they can't feed themselves. Some are hostile at the thought.

The coming of Jesus into the world was not simply God's benevolent and benign act to throw a banquet for whoever cares. Like most invitations it requires a response: will you come, or will you not?

Choices must be made. The bible pictures it as a choice between light and darkness. Shall we come into the light of God's provision for our hunger or remain in the darkness of our attempts to provide for ourselves?

If you've ever had people over to entertain, and you haven't had time to get the place as clean as you want, you know the value of "mood lighting". If you keep the lights low you can hide a multitude of dirt.

With the birth of Jesus Christ the wattage of God's just, beautiful, relational, spiritual light went way up. And folks like us have to decide if we are willing to live our lives in that light. Expect to discover some neglected dirt that will need to be cleaned up. Expect to confront some things about yourself you've tried to ignore.

But Simeon is saying that there will be some who prefer to live the dimly lit life; to satisfy their deepest hungers on their own. The light of Jesus coming is too intrusive and reveals more than they want to face.

The light of Christ is calling some of us to a place of decision today. Will we accept the invitation to his banquet or not? The biblical stories of Christmas are not all sweetness and light. God is coming and decisions must be made. Joseph, King Herod, and the Magi all must decide what to do. What was it that Mary said in her song?

He has filled the hungry with good things, but the rich he has sent away empty?

Christmas is a good time to ask ourselves, “Am I so rich in the things of my life and our world that I have no room for God’s gift in Jesus Christ?” Or, “Am I in touch with a hunger that only God in Christ can begin to satisfy?”

Conclusion

Sovereign Lord, as you have promised you now dismiss your servant in peace.

The words of Simeon, a deeply hungry man who finally glimpsed his invitation to God’s expansive banquet table. In Christ justice, beauty, relationship, and spirituality are being served beyond measure.

There’s a place at the table for you, too. Just make sure you come hungry.