

BEYOND HOPE AND DESPAIR

Scriptures: Luke 2:25-35

There are two types of people in the world: optimists and pessimists. One of the most famous optimists of our time was former president Ronald Reagan. Reagan had a favorite story about a boy shoveling a pile of manure who says, “I know there is a pony in here somewhere.” That is an optimist. On the other hand some people are instinctive pessimists. One of my favorite stories is about a woman who greeted the minister after church by saying, “I so appreciate your sermons, pastor. Each one is better than the next.” That is a pessimist.

You see both types when it comes to making predictions for the coming year. Since this is the time of year when pundits make predictions for 2009, I went online last week to look at some of the predictions that had made for the year 2008. Here are a few samples. Early in 2008 Jim Cramer on CNBC made this statement: “Should I be worried about Bear Stearns in terms of liquidity and get my money out of there? No! No! No! Bear Stearns is fine. Do not take your money out” (*Mad Money*, March 11, 2008). It turns out he was a little optimistic. Before the year was over, Bear Stearns lost 90% of its value and sold for a pittance to J. P. Morgan Chase.

Another example is this statement from a Goldman Sachs oil analyst named Arjun Marti. In the spring of 2008 he said, “The possibility of \$150-\$200 per barrel [oil] seems increasingly likely over the next 6-24 months.” That turned out to be overly pessimistic. Oil is now trading at closer to \$40 a barrel, and gas prices are the lowest they have been in years.

One more. Before 2008 began William Kristol on Fox News Sunday said, “Barack Obama is not going to beat Hillary Clinton in a single democratic primary. I’ll predict that right now” (Dec. 17, 2006). I guess whether he was pessimistic or optimistic depends on your point of view. (All of the above were from the online version of *Foreign Policy* magazine.)

The point is that almost everyone tends to approach a new year optimistically or pessimistically. But how would you categorize Simeon, the devout old man whom Mary and Joseph met in the temple? In some ways Simeon is incredibly, almost naively optimistic. He takes the newborn Jesus in his arms and says to God, “My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” He is looking at a wrinkled little baby and he sees the deliverance of God. That seems overly optimistic.

But in the next breath Simeon is jarringly grim. He says to Jesus’ mother, “This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” I doubt any of you would want to hear words like that about your newborn child.

Is Simeon an optimist or a pessimist? He does not quite fit either category. If he were a pessimist, he would not be looking forward to the consolation of Israel, as verse 25 says. In this context the consolation of Israel refers to Israel’s deliverance from suffering and oppression. He is not a pessimist if he is still looking forward after all these years to Israel’s deliverance. On the

other hand, he knows that his own days are numbered. He says to God, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace.” That is a polite way of saying, “I am about to depart this world, aren’t I, Lord?” Holding the baby Jesus, Simeon anticipates the coming of God’s kingdom, but wonders if he will be around to experience it.

Simeon does not fit the categories of optimism or pessimism, hope or despair. Simeon is not an optimist or pessimist. He is a person of faith. It is faith that brought Simeon to the temple to worship God that day. Did you notice that little detail? Simeon met Jesus because he came to the temple. He came to the place of worship. I am not saying that church is the only place you can meet Jesus. The shepherds met Jesus in a stable. Some of the disciples met Jesus when they were fishing. Jesus can encounter you anywhere. But over and over in the gospels and in the book of Acts people meet Jesus when they come to worship. Jesus preached his first sermon at his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. The gospels have numerous stories of Jesus teaching people and healing people in the synagogue on the Sabbath. According to the book of Acts, when the apostle Paul went to a new city to tell people about Jesus, he often went to the synagogue in that city, and when there was no synagogue, he found the place where people were gathering to worship, even if it was down by a river.

Simeon came to church that day, not because he was optimistic or pessimistic, but because he trusted God. He did not know if the Romans would still be ruling Jerusalem in the coming year. He did not know whether life would be better or worse. He did not even know if he would live to see the new year. But he knew that God was present with him. He did not know what the future held, but he knew who held the future, and that was enough.

Over the years I have read some fascinating stories about the Christian church in China during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 70s under Mao Zedong. For more than 10 years Christian worship in China was banned. More recently as Christianity has at least come to be tolerated by the Chinese government, Chinese Christians have told stories about those years when churches were closed. One man took home the altar from his church when the church was closed so that it would not be destroyed. Despite his son’s urging to make it into a table, he kept it as an altar in his home, and when the church was reopened more than a decade later he returned it.

I also read that during the years, many Christians in China kept a special bag in which they put the money they would have put in the offering if they had been in church. On the first Sunday after the churches were reopened, they brought the bags with them to church, not having missed a single Sunday’s giving.

Other stories were told of Christians turning the lights low and whispering the hymns as they met and worshipped in their homes. One woman from Shanghai said that every Christmas Eve during the Cultural Revolution, she and her family went to stand outside their former church which had been converted to a warehouse. They stood in silence, not allowed to pray or sing or go inside, because this was as close to their church as they could get.

Those Christians in China remind me of Simeon. During the Cultural Revolution they did not know if things would get better or worse. They did not know if prosperity would come to

China or if the economy would totally collapse. They did not know whether Mao would be overthrown or become even more oppressive. They did not know whether their churches would be reopened or whether its members would be hunted down and killed. They were not optimists or pessimists. They were people of faith, people who knew that their salvation was not in the ups and downs of their circumstances but in the faithful promises of a God who was personally involved in their lives.

So what will 2009 bring? Will you get a raise or a pink slip? Will your retirement savings grow or evaporate? Will the troops come home or will more be sent over? Will the cancer in your loved ones go away or will it pop up in someone new? Those are frightening questions that I cannot answer. I cannot tell you what the future holds, only who holds the future. Beyond hope and despair is faith. Beyond optimism and pessimism is a person—the Lord whose birth we just celebrated, the Savior who will bring you through whatever you circumstances you have to face if you will only follow him.

- Ken Onstot
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