

YEAR END AND COUNTING
Rev. Gary Magarrell DECEMBER 27, 2009

Can you believe we have reached the end of yet another year? Like most years, 2009 has been eventful both for the world and for each of us in our own life. Some may look back and rejoice and others may well say thank goodness this year is finished and we can go on to new things.

I am always amazed by people who have a great memory for events which happened in the past. We can all remember the events but the details are not as sharply etched in our memories. However, we all know people who remember details long after the events, remember names, birth dates, addresses, phone numbers, dinner menus, etc. They are indeed blessed with a gift.

As I look back on 2009, I sense it has been a very good year for me. However, I am conscious of so many things on our earth that are frightful. There are wars around the globe with many people homeless as a result. Many are slaughtered by those who value life very little as long as their objectives are met. Genocide is not dead but very much alive especially in Africa. Terrorists still kill indiscriminately, causing havoc in communities where people just want to be left in peace. The economies of the world took a tumble with the financial crisis in nations and in each of our personal lives. In Canada we ended the year with wrangles at the national level using tactics to degrade rather than build up.

We also have good news stories to remember. We watched in fascination as our American brothers and sisters celebrated their democracy in the inauguration of Barack Obama as their new President, opening up a new era of hope and expectation in an otherwise appearing tired nation.

Each of us could stand up and speak of the good and the bad in our own lives this past year. We all have a story to tell of survival, pain and joy in 2009. Our stories are full of people's names, persons who have affected our lives for good and bad, people we want to thank and others we will be pleased to forget.

We have just come through a very busy period as we prepared for and then celebrated Christmas. Most of us overate on the food especially the Christmas baking and vowed we would never overeat again! However, we also know we will do the same thing next year.

All of us are first and foremost human, with all our strengths and weaknesses. All that we are we bring to worship as we gather here today, a people who have just passed through the celebration of Christ's birth and now looking forward with anticipation to a new year.

In our Luke reading this morning, we read of the activities of Mary and Joseph shortly after the birth of Jesus. They are now in Jerusalem and as is the custom of young Jewish parents, they bring Jesus to the temple to be circumcised, that custom which marked a boy as a part of the Hebrew family. This presentation occurred eight days after Jesus

birth. It was also a time known as purification when Mary as a mother was seen to be free to come back into society.

When they got to the temple, they met an old man named Simeon. When he saw the child he became very excited for he was sure this was the messiah they had so long waited to welcome. As he took Jesus into his arms to bless him, Simeon spoke to God. He declared he was now ready to go to God because his eyes had seen the glory of God in this special child.

What he says is very interesting. He declares he has seen now God's salvation coming into the world, the salvation promised to the Hebrews for centuries. However, he then says that this child will be a light to the Gentiles and the glory of the Hebrew people. In other words, he senses that this baby will change the world for he will declare that his coming is for all people of the world not only the Hebrews. In his way he is proclaiming the Messiah has come to bring salvation to all people now and forever.

Then, he goes on to say to Mary and Joseph that their child is set for the fall and rising of many of Israel. In a sense Simeon was summarizing the work and fate of Jesus. Jesus will be the cause of many falling he said. It is not God who causes men and women to fall; men and women when confronting Jesus judge themselves. When confronted by Jesus, we see our shortcomings as we face his goodness. If we remain when confronting Jesus coldly unmoved or actively hostile, then we condemn ourselves.

Jesus will also be the cause of many rising Simeon states. It is the hand of Jesus which lifts men and women out of the old life and into the new, out of the sin into goodness, out of shame into glory. In other words, seeing Jesus can cause us to become much more than we are.

Then Simeon predicts that Jesus would meet with great opposition in his lifetime and work. He was really pointing to a clear fact: towards Jesus Christ there can be no neutrality. We either surrender to him or we go to war with him. And as a recent theologian remarked, it is a tragedy of life that the pride of men and women keeps us from making that surrender to Christ. It is that surrender to Christ that is our victory. It is only then we know the depth of God's love and forgiveness.

Luke's story then moves on to speak of an old prophetess named Anna. Luke tells us she is a widow. She has known sorrow and has not grown bitter. Sorrow we know can do two things: it can make us hard, bitter, resentful and rebellious against God. Or, it can make us kinder, softer and more sympathetic. Sorrow can deprive us of our faith or make our faith deeper and richer.

Anna we read was eighty-four years old. Yet in spite of her years she never ceased to hope. Older age can cause us to give up the life in our hearts until the hopes we once cherished are extinguished and we become grimly resigned to things as they are. Really, it all depends on how we perceive God. Do we believe God is distant from us or do we believe God is always near at hand? Do not let the years extinguish hope for you is Luke's clear warning.

Anna never ceased to worship – she remained in God’s house. We are a part of God’s people, God’s worshipping people and God gave us the church as a priceless treasure. We too need to value our church and its importance to our growth and sustenance in the faith. Finally, we are told by Luke that Anna never ceased to pray. Both private and public prayer is important to our life and our hope and we need to remember this true statement.

This passage’s message about the importance of hope is critical to us as we enter 2010. Where would we be without any hope? We have had stories this year of people who were kidnapped in foreign lands who when released spoke of the one thing that kept them alive – hope, hope for future release from captivity, hope to see family once again, hope to be able to pick up the pieces of their lives and get on with living life to the fullest.

And so, as we approach 2010, let us do so as a people of hope, a people who know that God is with us whatever we may have to face. We need always to remind ourselves that God does not will harm on us but rather God feels for us and sustains us as we go through the valleys and climb the mountains.

More than anything, we need to remember that as we face the New Year and all it will bring, both joy and sadness, that God is beside us so we indeed are never alone. Simeon said: “Lord, now let yours servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light to the gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”

May that faith be our faith, for we have seen Christ, we have felt his presence and we have responded in grateful thanks and wonder. We have celebrated once again the birth of the Christ child and have renewed our sense of family and commitment to our fellow men and women.

While we are resting somewhat now in this Christmas week, we know life’s pace will pick up with a vengeance in January once New Year’s Day has passed. Whether or not we brave the crowds for the Boxing Day sales, we know life pushes on quickly and relentlessly.

Our personal decision has to be whether we will be a victim of whatever comes or whether we will be an active participant in life and wring from it joy, excitement and contentment. The choice is ours and we know which way is best.

So, into 2010 we go! It is bound to be an adventure for ourselves, those we love and for this our congregation where we worship in the fellowship of believers. Amen