

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
1st Sunday after Christmas
December 31, 2017

The Falling and Rising of the Year

Luke 2:22-40; Galatians 4:4-7

Today, on this last day of 2017,
with the wonder of Christmas morning already fading into memory,
we find Mary and Joseph taking their first timid steps
as the parents of God's Messiah.

Doing their best to be law-abiding Jews
they have made their way to Jerusalem and up to the Temple
for the traditional dedication of their newborn son.

I remember my first experience of traveling with a newborn in the car.
It was the trip across the Blue Ridge mountains from Charlottesville, Virginia
to the Shenandoah Valley.

After a nerve-wracking week with Langley in neo-natal intensive care,
everything felt precarious, and very unsafe.

With a grip on the steering wheel that would have strangled a moose,
and every passing car seeming a dire threat,
I was fearful for the well-being of this new little responsibility
who slept in her car seat, blissfully unaware of the dangers of living.

Being a new parent in the 21st century can be stressful enough.
Imagine how Joseph and Mary must have felt
being responsible for their little bundle,
who was nothing less than a **cosmic assignment**
announced to them by the heavenly host.

**And now, with the wonder of Christmas behind them,
they must move on to the hard work of living.**

This is a good story for us today
as we stand on the cusp of a new year
and look back over all that has happened in the year gone by,
and look ahead — with hopes and fears — to the year ahead.

We lift our eyes to the horizon where the sun is just rising,
and we wonder if the darkness of the past year will follow us.

**The year 2017 certainly was a whirlwind of eventfulness,
spinning off dark clouds in every direction...**

America continues to live in a climate of polarization and tribalism,
fueled by the intractably partisan politics of **Washington**,
and exacerbated by the loose talk, “alternate facts,” and irresponsible rhetoric
spewed out all over Twitter and other social media,
even as the skeletons of sexual scandal seem to lurk in every closet,
sometimes rattling their bones right out in the open.

In **Charlottesville**

the blatant racism of the white supremacist movement reared its ugly head.

In **North Korea**,

a maniac continues to starve his own people so he can build more missiles.

In cities around the world,

ISIS-inspired madmen ram their vehicles into crowds of humanity.

But then the **Las Vegas** shooting reminded us

what we already knew from the Mother Emmanuel tragedy in Charleston,
that America is perfectly capable of producing mass murderers and terrorists
without a single Muslim lifting a finger to help.

If we are troubled by the ominous realities of our world
and fearful for what they may mean for our own families
we are in good company with Mary and Joseph,
at this point in their story.

It must have been with a desperate desire to get their bearings in a chaotic world,
that these young parents made their way into Jerusalem
to undergo the traditional purification ritual required
by the Law of Moses.

Coming to the Temple

they are acting on their conviction
that whatever salvation, whatever new reality,
their special child may bring to the world,
it will be a **gift of God**
who has promised **blessing to Israel**
and through Israel to **all the families of the earth**.

Upon arriving at the Temple,

they are greeted by **Simeon and Anna**,
two elders at the Temple,
who spend their days praying and hoping and watching and waiting
for the consolation of Israel.

At the first sight of Jesus and his parents,
these two elders see the answer to their prayers.

Simeon exclaims:

*a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to the people of Israel.*

And **Anna** speaks of Jesus

as the one who will fulfill the hopes of all
who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

After the encounter with the two wise elders,
Joseph and Mary make their Temple dedication of Jesus
as required by the law.

Two turtledoves or two young pigeons,
were the customary sacrifice for a family
too poor to afford a lamb.

What we have here is a scene that should look a little familiar to us:
a beleaguered community of faith, holding to its religious tradition;
a mother and father bringing their infant child
to undergo the ritual of initiation;
representatives of the larger community, a man and a woman,
standing with the parents
affirming their faith that God's hand is powerfully at work
in the life of this child.

This scene is not too many shades away from our own **sacrament of baptism**,

And Simeon's words to Mary foreshadow our sacrament:

*This child is destined for the falling and the 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.*

What exactly could this mean? The falling and rising of many?

The order is interesting. Falling and rising.

In terms of human history we often speak of "the rise and fall" of something -
the rise and fall of the Roman Empire,
the rise and fall of a politician,
the rise and fall of a business mogul or a Hollywood star,
the rise and fall of a corporation,
the rise and fall of a football player, or coach, or team.

But with Jesus, the order is reversed:

First a falling. Then a rising.

Mary's child will fall:

he will fall to the conspiracy of the Jewish leaders;
he will fall to the raw power of Caesar and Pontius Pilate;
he will fall to the overwhelming evil rampant in the world;
he will fall to the calloused and sinful hearts of God's people.

And Mary will witness his fall

and the world's rejection of her child will pierce her mother's heart
with unimaginable pain.

But Mary is a ponderer of words.

And when she sees her child fall, she will remember the words he spoke in life,
that...

*Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,
it remains just a single grain;
but if it dies, it bears much fruit."*

The wonder of Christmas morning begets more wonder.

The mystery of the Christ child is this:

after his falling comes his rising,
and with him, the rising of the many
who have trusted him enough
to fall with him.

And so today we stand between

the falling of one year
and the rising of another.

Perhaps our own time might be kept in perspective

by remembering the struggles of a past generation.

A little more than 100 years ago, about the time this sanctuary was being built,
as these resurrection windows were begin fitted into place,

American theologian, **Walter Rauschenbusch**, told a story
about the falling and rising of the years.

When the **19th Century** died

its Spirit descended

to the vaulted chamber of the Past,
where the Spirits of the dead Centuries sit on granite stones together.

When the newcomer entered, all turned toward him,
and the Spirit of the **18th Century** spoke:

“Tell thy tale, brother.

Give us word of the humankind we left to thee.”

“I am the Spirit of the Wonderful Century,” said the **19th Century**.

“I gave humankind the mastery over nature.

Discoveries and inventions,

which lighted the black space of the past like lonely stars,
have clustered in a Milky Way of radiance under my rule.

One man does by the touch of his hand

what the toil of a thousand slaves never did.

Knowledge has unlocked the mines of wealth,

and the hoarded wealth of today

creates the vaster wealth of tomorrow.

Man has escaped the slavery of necessity and is free.

The **19th Century** went on:

“I freed the thoughts of men. They face the facts and know.

Their knowledge is common to all...

“I broke the chains of bigotry and despotism. I made men free and equal.

Every man feels the worth of his manhood.

“I have touched the summit of history.

I did for mankind what none of you did before.

They are rich. They are wise. They are free.”

The Spirits of the dead Centuries sat silent, with troubled eyes.

At last the **Spirit of the First Century** spoke for all.

“We all spoke proudly when we came here in the flush of our deeds,
and thou more proudly than we all.

But as we sit and think of what was before us, and what has come after us,
shame and guilt bear down our pride.

Your words sound as if the redemption of man had come at last.

Has it come?

You have made men **rich**.

Tell us, is none in pain with hunger today

and none in fear of hunger tomorrow?

Do all children grow up in good health and with sound education?

Do none die before their time?

Has the mastery of nature and new technology

made men free to enjoy their lives and loves?

You have made men **wise**.

Are they wise? Or cunning?

Have they learned to restrain their desires and addictions?

Have they learned to deal with their neighbors in love and justice?

You have set them **free**.

Are there none who toil for others against their will?

Are all free to do the work they love best?

Are none in chains on account of gender, race, or creed?

You have made men **one**.

Are there no barriers of class to keep men apart?

Do the few not wield economic power at the expense of the many?

Do men no longer spill the blood of other men for their ambition
and the sweat of poor for their greed?

As the Spirit of the **19th Century** listened, his head sank to his breast.

“Your shame is already upon me,” he said.

My great cities are as yours were.

My millions live from hand to mouth.

Those who toil longest have least.

My human wreckage multiplies.

Class faces class in sullen distrust.

Their freedom and knowledge have been turned to bonds of oppression.

Give me a seat among you,

and let me think why it has been so.

The others turned to the **Spirit of the First Century**,

“Your promised redemption is long in coming,” they said.

“But it will come,” he replied.¹

So **here we stand** in the 21st century, at the cusp of a new year.

And our lament is as old as the human race.

But we gather today as those who have beheld **the child of Christmas**,

and we say to God — we say with Simeon and Anna —

My eyes have seen your salvation.

And we proclaim with this old man, and even older woman,

that those who fall with Christ, will also rise with him.

This is the meaning of **baptism**,

the hope of all who are looking

for the redemption of the world.

In Jesus, the Christ, falling is not the end, but a necessary beginning.

Suffering is not an indication of weakness or failure,

much less of abandonment.

Pain is a sign that we are alive and longing for redemption.
Pain endures while strength grows.
Suffering persists, while faith deepens.

This is astoundingly good news
because it means our suffering, and the suffering of the world,
is **not meaningless**;
suffering is **not utter darkness**,
but is rather the darkness of the womb,
the womb that bears the light of the world.

We may look back on the year that is past,
and forward to the year that is to come,

...and be assured that our redemption is coming.

Indeed the fullness of time has already come...

In Christ the pattern is set:
after the falling, there is always a rising.

The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness will not overcome it.
Thanks be to God.

¹ Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and Social Crisis*, 1907. (Reprint, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991) 211-213. I have made some adaptations to language, and paraphrased a few lines.