

TAKE CHRIST IN YOUR ARMS!

December 27, 2009

Rev. Mark F. Bartels

Old Testament Lesson; Isaiah 63:7-16

Epistle Lesson; Galatians 4:1-7

Sermon Text; Luke 2:25-38

A couple of weeks ago, on a Sunday morning, it was kind of inclement weather. It was before church started and I was out in the narthex, greeting people, as they came in. A gentleman, about my age, walked into the narthex and said, “Brrr. It is icky out there.” And then he said “Hey, Pastor, there is a sign out in our parking lot that says, *'Reserved for Elderly'*. How old do you have to be to qualify as elderly?”

I thought to myself, “*Hey, I have an AARP card. I wonder if I qualify?*”

We have this reserved parking sign out in our parking lot, *'Reserved Parking for the Elderly'*. Why do we have that out there? It is because we accord special honor to our senior members. We want our senior members to be able to come and worship with us, unimpeded.

And, we should accord special honor to the senior members among us. You know, when Paul was writing to Timothy, a pastor, he particularly told young Timothy to be careful in how he dealt with the senior members of the congregation. He told him, “*Don't rebuke the older men harshly. Treat them like they are your father.*” He said the same with the older women. “*Treat them like they are your own mother.*” Special honor is to be accorded to the senior members among us, certainly according to the Fourth Commandment, but,

also because of the wonderful witness that is displayed to us very often by the senior members of our congregation. The senior members of our congregation, just by their very lives, by their very witness, by the very fact that Sunday, after Sunday, after Sunday they come to church. They sit in the pews. They sing the songs. They sing the hymns. They confess their sins. They listen to the sermon. And, just by the very fact of doing that Sunday, after Sunday, after Sunday, do you recognize the awesome witness that is to the faith of Christ our Savior? These are people who have shown us that faith is not just a passing phase. It is not just something you do, when your children are going to school here, at Holy Cross. Faith is a lifetime trust in Jesus, as our Savior. *“Faith has gotten me safe thus far and faith will take me home.”* These are people who through all of the trials, troubles, struggles, falling down and sinning, and then knowing that their sins are forgiven, find their peace, comfort, and joy in Christ our Savior week, after week, after week. That is a powerful testimony to the faith.

And so, I think it is really noteworthy that the very first, little congregation who gathered around the baby Jesus when He was forty days old, the first time Jesus was in the temple, in Jerusalem, there was a little congregation who gathered around Him. Who was the congregation? It was Mary, Joseph, and two senior members of the Holy Christian Church, Simeon and Anna. I want us to consider how powerfully these two senior members were used to really build up the faith of Mary and Joseph, in particular.

The first thing that happened is this. The Bible tells us that Simeon had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not die, until he saw the Lord's Christ. (Now, we don't know for sure if he was a senior. The Bible does not tell us how old he was. But, we assume that he was a senior member of the Holy Christian Church.) That particular day, the Holy Spirit led him to go into the temple. There, in the temple, the Holy Spirit showed him Jesus. He took Jesus in his arms

and said some very specific words. Now, what he said was nothing new. This wasn't something that Mary and Joseph had not heard before. Remember, Mary and Joseph had been told by the angel. Joseph had a dream. Mary had the angel appear to her. The shepherds certainly must have recounted what the angels told them. They had been told,

This is the Christ.

This is God's Son.

This is the Savior of the world.

This is the One who will sit on the throne of His father, David, forever.

This is the One whose Kingdom will never end.

Mary and Joseph had heard all of that. The Bible says that Simeon took the baby Jesus in his arms and he spoke this.

“Lord, now let Your servant depart in peace,
according to Your Word:

For my eyes have seen Your salvation,
which You have prepared before the face of all people;
A light to lighten the Gentiles,
and the glory of Your people Israel.”

The Bible tells us that Mary and Joseph “marveled at what was said about Him”. Now, it was nothing new what they were hearing, so why were they marveling at what they heard? It was because this was the first time they were able to witness a bold, living, faith in Christ, the Savior. This man was putting into practice what the message of the angels had been. This man was willing to take the baby Jesus in his arms and say, “*I stake my eternal destiny, my eternal destiny on this little baby. I trust that He is the One by whom I can say, 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.'*” He knew this was the Good Shepherd. He knew this was the One who would keep His flock safe, even in the face of death. He knew this

was the One who was going to defeat sin. By defeating sin, He would make it possible for a Christian to say, *“I am not afraid to die. I am ready to die. I know my sins are forgiven. I know I have a Savior. I know, because of His work, when I close my eyes for the last time, clinging to Him, I am going to be in Heaven.”* How that must have built up the faith of Mary and Joseph, to hear that senior member of the Holy Christian Church say, *“I stake my eternal destiny on this baby. I trust in Him. I believe in Him and I cling to Him.”*

I had a phone call from a doctor, one day. It was a young female doctor. She said, “Could you come down to the hospital? I need to talk to one of your members and I would like you to be in the room, when I talk to him.”

It sounded pretty important, and so I got in the car and drove down. I asked her to explain to me what was going on. This was a senior member of our congregation, who she explained to me, was very, very likely, irreversibly in the process of dying. She said, “I am going to tell him that, so somebody better be there with him.”

And so, we went into the room. She sat down by his bedside and I sat down by his bedside. Then she very, very skillfully and eloquently laid out the situation before him. She really did it gently. When she was all done, she said, “Do you understand what I am saying?”

He said, “Yep.”

And then, to make sure, (and this was the first time she actually said these words), she said, “I am saying that you are probably going to leave this earth, pretty soon.”

And he said to her, “That is good. I am ready. I am tired. I believe in my Savior.”

After visiting with this man, I got in my car. As I was driving back to church, I got on my cell phone, because when people do a good job in their vocation, in their work, I like to let them know that. You

know, God has given us all an earthly vocation, where we are to serve Him. So, I called this doctor. When she answered the phone, I said, “This is Pastor Bartels, and I just wanted to tell you that you did an excellent job explaining to my member what was going on and explaining that he was about to meet his Maker. I wanted to commend you. You did that very tenderly, very lovingly, and very gently.”

There was a pause on the end of the line, and then she said, “Pastor, I learned a lot more from him, than he did from me.”

I thought, “There is a Simeon. There is a Simeon! Lord, now let your servant depart in peace. My eyes have seen Your Salvation, which you have prepared before the face of all people.” What a testimony of faith from a senior member of the Holy Christian Church.

I love the fact that when we are done with communion, here at Holy Cross, we do what the church has done for centuries. After we commune, we sing what is called the Nunc Dimittis, also known as the Song of Simeon. Simeon, having taken the baby Jesus in his arms, was ready to say, “*Lord, I am ready. I am ready to go to Heaven. I am ready to depart in peace. I have a Savior. I trust in Him.*” After we have communed and we have literally taken the body and blood of Christ to ourselves, (no less than Simeon, who held Jesus in his arms), and we have heard that our sins are forgiven, we are ready to say that, too. “*Lord, let your servant depart in peace, whether I am 15 years old, 55 years old, or 105 years old. I believe in my Savior. I am ready.*”

Someday, when you are sitting in church and either you are getting bored with the sermon, or you just have some time on your hands, I would encourage you to open up your hymnbook, and start flipping through the hymns. Start reading the last verse of every hymn, just the last verse. I think you will be surprised to find out how many of the last verses of hymns are what we call 'funeral verses.' They talk

about dying. They talk about going to Heaven. They talk about being in glory, about being with our Savior. That is the culmination of our faith. That is why we trust in Christ, in the first place. What a wonderful expression of faith we find in so many of our hymns! Then there was Anna. Anna was 84 years old. Anna, also, as an 84 year old member of the Holy Christian Church was so happy to see her Savior. She was ready to tell everybody who was around, tell everyone who was around about her Savior! What a witness of her faith.

It was like recently, when I was at a nursing home and was visiting an elderly woman of our church, an elderly member of the Holy Christian Church. She is hard of hearing, a little bit hard of hearing, and so you have to talk pretty loud, when you talk to her. I was in her room, and it was close to Christmastime. We were holding hands, as I retold her the whole account of Luke, chapter 2, which you are so familiar with. I recited that to her. Then I said, “You know the Savior who was born to the shepherds, He is your Savior, too.”

And she said, “Yes!”

I talked about how He had come to forgive all of her sins and because of what He had done, she had a Savior and He is Christ the Lord! And she said, “Yes, pastor.”

Next, we had the Lord's Supper. I led her through a confession of sins. She confessed her sins, and then she expressed her trust in Christ as her Savior, her belief that she was receiving the body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness, and how thankful she was for that. We talked a little bit, after the little church service we had in her room, there in the nursing home. And then, I left.

I was walking down the hallways and some distance from her room this young man in his thirties was approaching me. When I was about ten feet from him he said, “Hey.” And then he stopped. I thought, “*That must mean I should stop.*” So, I stopped.

He said, “Hey, a person could get to Heaven, listening to you.” I looked at him kind of quizzically and then he said, “I was standing outside that lady's room, and I heard what you said to her. A person could get to Heaven listening to you.”

The first thought that went through my head was, “Anna.” There was an Anna! How many of you would be comfortable if I would go where you are with your peers and at the top of my voice, while all of your peers can hear what is going on, shout out about sin and a Savior. How many of you would stand there and say, “Yes, Pastor. Yes! I believe that.”

There she was. She did not care if the whole world heard. She was happy to have everybody hear that she had a Savior. That is an Anna!

Thank God for the Simeons and Annas who are not afraid to express their faith, who have gone through the thick and the thin, who have held on to Christ all of their lives. They are in our midst, great witnesses of faith!

The last thing I want to close with is that Simeon also did tell Joseph and Mary something they had not heard before. Simeon told Mary and Joseph,

“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 thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul, too.”

Simeon was, by the power of the Holy Spirit, telling Mary, in particular, that it is not easy to be a Christian. It is not easy. There will be many people who will speak against Christ. He was telling her there will be many people who will speak against Him. The way of the Christian is the way of the cross. He even told her a sword will pierce through your own soul, too. She would see her own son, Jesus, die on the cross. He was preparing her, this senior member of the Holy Christian Church, was preparing her for something that

would not happen for 33 years. But, who better to have it come from than a senior member, who I am sure had been through many times of suffering in his own life? He was ready to say, *“You know what? To bear the cross for our Savior is a joy. It is a privilege. It only draws us closer to Him. And it causes us to cling to Him, more and more.”*

And so, Lord, now let your servant depart in peace. My eyes have seen Your salvation, which you prepared before the face of all people.

Amen