

# RESTORATION AND HOPE

*Mary Ann Pastuck  
Camrose United Church  
Jan. 1, 2006*

Isaiah 61:1- - 62:3 Clothes of well being and right relationship  
Luke 2:22 – 40 Jesus is presented in the Temple

Have you ever looked forward to something and when it happened, it was so much more than you anticipated? Maybe this was your experience at the time of your marriage or the birth of your first child, or a special vacation you had planned for a long time. This was somewhat like the experience of David Livingstone, the explorer and missionary to central Africa in the mid-1800's. In his journal he tells about his discovery of the great falls, which he named the Victoria Falls, and what that experience meant to him. He had heard from the natives that there was something up the river, but he was not sure what it was. He could hear the roar of the falls for miles and he could see the spray five miles away. He said he could never explain the splendor that fell upon his soul when he looked on the falls for the first time. Suddenly, right before his eyes, the Zambezi River was a mile wide; it sloped slightly and then cascaded in a 400 foot plunge in a display of awesome splendor. He said for several minutes the sight literally paralyzed him. He knew that something was ahead but his discovery was far beyond his wildest imagination.

This is exactly what happened to Simeon in the gospel text we heard today. He knew the Messiah was coming and he waited and prayed for the day to arrive. He was told by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death until he would see God's Messiah. Every time parents brought their children to the Temple he was filled anticipation that possibly one of them was the child he was waiting for. Then Mary and Joseph arrived at the Temple and Simeon, now an old man, took the child up into his arms and praised God saying:

*"God, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to you word; for my eyes have seen your restoration and hope, which you have prepared for all peoples."*

The scene is a moving one; an old man now ready to die holding a six-week-old baby, who is at long last "the restoration and hope for all people".

The joy of Simeon's discovery exceeded his expectations. He did not know what it all meant, which is true of anyone who makes such a great discovery. I am certain that Columbus had no idea of the magnitude of his discovery or that he was opening a whole new world. It never dawned on the Wright brothers that they were the pioneers of space travel. Little did Simeon know that the child he held in his arms was to have such a dramatic and forceful impact on the course of human history. But he did know that something great and significant was taking place and he was part of it.

The fact is Simeon was an exception, because the first century world was not prepared for the coming of this Christ. It is true that the nation of Israel had anticipated the coming of the Messiah for centuries. The whole nation expected him and the fibre of

their stories, art, literature, and songs carried this theme for more than 300 years. Because of this expectation they were willing to bear the indignities of exile and Roman occupation. But the birth of Jesus was so unexpected, not as to his coming, but because of the manner of his coming. The Messiah did come, but they did not know it, because the manner and the style of Jesus' life was unexpected.

John the Baptist was the first one to raise some doubts when he asked, "Are you the one who is to come, or must we look for another?" The fact that John has such doubts is startling since he had been so close to Jesus. His doubts grew from the fact that Jesus did not fulfill his nationalistic expectations. He was no aggressive deliverer, no majestic and severe Messiah in the sense that he would swiftly smash evil with a mighty sword, chasing all the political foreigners from the land and bring political freedom from Rome.

He was the unexpected Jesus. They expected him to come with fanfare. He did not. They expected Jesus to bring political freedom from foreign occupation; instead he brought freedom from broken relationship and guilt. They expected a Jesus who would dazzle them by miraculous feats. But instead, he healed the sick, cared for the poor and fed the hungry. They expected a Messiah who would make life easier, reduce taxes, increase employment, and bring down prices. He didn't. If anything, he made life harder. He talked about crosses and not about crowns. He talked about his way of life being harder and the entrance into it being narrow and few would enter into it. He talked about loving your enemy and the wrong others have done to you as God has forgiven you. Those who do not leave all behind and set their minds and hearts on the Realm of God, he said, are not worthy of him. They expected a Christ who would be a smashing success, but to them he was not because he died the shameful death of a criminal. He was the unexpected Christ because he did not fit into their scheme or plan of things. They wanted a Christ they could keep for themselves exclusively as part of their nation, but his life was like a river, a current so strong that no bank could contain it.

Jesus did not come then where men and women expected him to come. He may not come today where we expect him to come. We have a tendency to look for God to come among us in the bright spots of the world, in the creeds and cathedrals. But he was found in the shadows, by the pool of Bethesda, with the crippled and diseased.

A man jumped into a cab in New York City and told the cabbie to take him to God. Without hesitation the cabbie drove him to St. Patrick's Cathedral. As the man got out of the cab he asked the driver, "Are you sure that God is here?" "If God is not here, God is not in town," the driver answered. One can only wonder if it ever entered the mind of the driver to take the man to Bellevue, Harlem, or Washington Square or in our context, the inner city.

Today, Christ comes as an angel that troubles the waters. He comes as he did in the first century – the disturber of peoples souls. We can feel quite satisfied with our lives until Christ comes along. In the day that we confront him we discover his presence. He offends our prejudices and challenges our basic axioms; he reveals our shabby respectability for what is. Today, he is not a figure of history that lived 2000 years ago. He is not a Christ in a stained glass window. He is not eternally a baby in a manger in Bethlehem. He is a living presence. He is an all-invading Christ, a life-revolutionizing Christ, and for many that is intolerable.

Jesus is saying to us, “You cannot wrap me up in a proof-sheet of logical, rational reasoning. You cannot have me gift-wrapped for a Christmas present. You cannot preserve me in your theological formulas or your religious incitations.” The fact is, Christ breaks through all our notions about him. The dynamic of his life cannot be confined, but he is ever revealing himself in the most unexpected ways.

Expected or unexpected, Christ came. The world will never be the same since his coming. He came into the midst of life. His tears were salty like our tears, and when he cut his hand, his blood was red and crimson like our blood. He was a tradesperson, who laboured in his father’s carpentry shop, knew first hand about irritable customers and at times found it hard to collect his bills and make ends meet.

He craved human friendship. He shared in the anguish of parents over the death of their child; he suffered in the despair of the unemployed in the market place. He knew the plight of the poor and the shame of the outcast. He identified with the “undesirables.”

He grieved over the stubbornness of men and women. He laughed with little children. He died bleeding, but not before he had felt our ultimate doubt when he cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” He “was crucified, dead and buried” - a phrase which is the creed’s blunt testimony to his humanness. That Jesus came to share our lives there is no doubt.

We can look out at the bewildering and terrifying conditions in our world today and say as the Christmas Hymn states: “Jesus Christ is born for this.” This Christmas was probably not the same for some of you. The loss of a loved one, or the way of life has greatly altered your life, but Jesus showing us God’s love helps us get through that. Some of you will leave this service and go back to the side of a loved one where you have been keeping faithful vigil. For others this year has been one of misfortune or business and financial reversal; or the deterioration of a relationship with your family or with friends. Jesus showing us God’s love will help us get through that.

Today the world is on the dizzy edge of disarray. Today millions of refugees roam the earth and there are more homeless than ever before. Today as we begin a new year we need to lift our voices and sing:

*Good Christian friends, Rejoice  
With heart and soul and voice,  
Christ has opened the heavenly door,  
We are blessed forever more,  
Jesus Christ was born for this.  
Jesus was born to bring restoration and hope.*