Name of Jesus
Peace, Seattle
January 1, 2012 epk
Luke 2:21-40

JOY AND SHADOW

One week after the Christmas feast, and we've landed in the New Year. So…how's it going so far? Professional prognosticators are weighing in on all manner of what awaits us in 2012, what the trends are and where those trends are likely to take us. Some of it is hopeful; others not so much.

There are the proverbial questions about the economy and the environment. And the election of course. But at the beginning of it all, on January 1st, we allow ourselves a moment of optimism.

It's a nice myth to believe in, if you can manage, our culture's myth of new beginnings:
- that the clock started over at midnight,
- that circumstances that dominated my life up until 12 o'clock last night have been swept away by one tick of the clock,
- that the world is fresh, the tablet is clean, the road open,
- that this time my resolve, though tested, will hold firm, and my spirit remain unbowed.

It's a nice myth to believe in, if you can manage…
And some folks, apparently, can—at least until the "bills of Christmas" (yes, that's "bills" not bells) find their way to your inbox or mailbox.

But I, for one, have never quite been able to pull it off.

Don't get me wrong…I don't mean to pooh pooh the New Year-New Beginning ritual.
I participate in it as much as many do.
- I'm as eager as any of you to see my bad habits disappear in the rearview mirror.
- I, too, want to eat more healthily, and exercise more regularly.
- To stay on the high road instead of falling into the ditches on either side.
- I, too, long for alternatives to words that are too quick to fix blame on others or to offer excuses for my own bad behavior.
- I want to do a better job caring for relationships and taking care of the things that truly matter.

Eleven hours in is too early to say that I won't succeed, at least partially, in this New Year.
But, if experience is any guide, there's a very good chance that in spite of deep intentions, my resolve will be challenged before the sun sets at 4:28 this afternoon.

It's a rich gospel that greets us on the first day of the New Year. One, like the New Year, filled with hopes and expectations; but it also holds surprises…and shadows.

Mary and Joseph—still learning the ropes of parenthood, still living off the adrenaline that helps new moms and dads survive the sleep deprivation of those early weeks—fulfill the customs passed down through the generations of their people.

As their baby receives in his flesh the sign that marks him as a son of Abraham and child of promise, they give him his name: **Jesus** – or, in the Hebrew—***Yeshua***: he delivers, he rescues, he saves; the name given to them by God's messenger before he was conceived.

When, later, they journey to the Temple in Jerusalem to present Jesus to the Lord, something unexpected happens. After they offer the sacrifice, while they're still on the Temple grounds, an old man approaches them, his wrinkled face a mingling of wisdom and joy and ecstasy.

He reaches toward them with arms outstretched, beckoning for the child, and in that split second when parents intuit whether a stranger should be trusted or not, they assent, and pass their bundled boy into his arms.

The man, Simeon is his name, mumbles a prayer as he looks into the face of the infant, and then he begins to sing: a song about a salvation which is being prepared for all peoples, Jew and Gentile. A prophet's oracle.

Joseph and Mary don't quite know what to think. Simeon confirms what Mary had learned from Gabriel's visitation, and what shepherds had told them both the night their baby was born.

But he doesn't stop there. He goes on to speak mysteriously and mystically to Mary about the journey that awaits her. The will of God is confirmed in Simeon's song, but an ominous sign is also given to her. **The old man's words are a two-edged sword:**

> THIS CHILD, he says, 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. (Lk 2:34)

Yeshua, it seems, is to serve like some sort of MRI instrument, peering into the very heart and marrow of people's souls.

All this joy, a son safely brought into the world under extraordinary and difficult circumstances, visitations by first angels and then shepherds and now this man, Simeon.

A SWORD WILL PIERCE YOUR OWN SOUL TOO, he says, and with those words, a dark shadow flees across the scene.

Even this early in Luke's story of Jesus, with the baby still in diapers, there are hints that the path ahead for him and for his parents, will have more than its share of trials.

I think that there's something here in Simeon's word to Mary that every one of us can identify with, whether we're a parent, spouse, or friend.

William Stafford captures the essence of it for me in his poem, **With Kit, Age 7, at the Beach**:

We would climb the highest dune,
from there to gaze and come down:
the ocean was performing;
we contributed our climb.

Waves leapfrogged and came
straight out of the storm.
What should our gaze mean?
Kit waited for me to decide.

Standing on such a hill,
what would you tell your child?
That was an absolute vista.
Those waves raced far, and cold.

'How far could you swim, Daddy,
in such a storm?'
'As far as was needed,' I said,
and as I talked, I swam. [1]

[1] From, *The Rag and Bone Shop,* edited by Robert Bly and Michael Meade.

"And a soul will pierce your own soul, too." Parents know that experience viscerally. But parents don't have a monopoly on the pain that accompanies deep love.

On Friday I went up at Elma and Elmer Johnson's apartment to convey the love and prayers and blessings of our congregation and our faith as Elmer moves through the final days of this life.

Elmer is no longer eating, only drinking now, but Elma wanted him to receive Holy Communion. So we figured out a way that could happen. And as we gathered—Elma, daughter Carie, and I—around the table with Elmer in earshot nearby, I read this text, and the words leapt off the page:

"AND A SOUL WILL PIERCE YOUR OWN SOUL, TOO."

How many times in the course of their 70 years together had their souls been pierced as they accompanied each other through difficult and at times tragic experiences?

The three of us received Christ's body and blood, and then surrounding Elmer in his bed, I held out the cup and Elma took her finger, dipped it in the wine, and traced it on Elmer's lips…

"The blood of Christ shed for you."

"If the future were not the promise of Jesus Christ but the predictable outcome of present trends," writes James Kay, "despair would overwhelm us... If trends predict anything, it is that death and dissolution bring an end to every human heart and hope."

But the message of the gospel "…is that we can never take our own projections more seriously than God's promises. When we least expect it and when there is no evidence for it, God's power comes into this godless world in ways the world itself could never predict or foresee."[2]

However the New Year begins, however our lives and the lives of those we love may end, the God whose face we behold in the Babe of Bethlehem promises to be there, turning all things toward newness in ways both tender and fierce, so that all might experience the joy and belonging of becoming children of God.

Prayer:
Abba, Father, you have claimed us as your own dear children and we are as precious in your sight as the baby in Mary's arms. In this New Year, when our lives become marked by failures small and great, and our souls are pierced by losses beyond our ability to fathom, turn our sorrow into joy as we put our trust in the Word become flesh, who is our Crucified and Risen Lord. Amen.

[2] James F. Kay, writing in *The Christian Century,* 1997.