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So, now what?  
Martin Grove United Church  
December 31, 2017  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 2:22-40

This is one of my favourite services of the year. Not because it's New Year's Eve Day, but because this is the first "normal" service after Christmas. Are you surprised? I know. I know. For some people this time of year and this service are really lame. Most of us probably came here today expecting a low turnout. Perhaps some of you expect no real sermon - that I will just come into the congregation and ask you to share Christmas stories with me. We've just come through all the build-up to Christmas, which included lots of joyful singing. We had our Longest Night Service. We had our Candlelight Christmas Eve Service where we enjoyed belting out many favourite carols. We had our Reflective Christmas Eve Service which I found very special this year. Today, we are back to normal. Back to just us. Where is the fun in that?

Not only that, but all our preparations for Christmas are now in the past. Advent is over. Turkeys have been eaten. Presents have been unwrapped. Toys have been played with. Some toys are already broken. If we've been lucky, we've spent time with family and friends that we don't see too often. There is nothing left I look forward to. Where is the fun on that? For many people, Christmas is over. For many people, there is nothing now to look forward to, except extended dark days, more snow, and even colder temperatures. Yes, we know in our minds that the days are getting longer again, but we know it will take many weeks before we actually feel that in our bones. Where is the fun in that?

And the season of Christmas is one of the few times during the year when you can approach friends - and even strangers - with a big, cheesy grin on your face and give them a warm greeting. Without being arrested I mean. I'm sorry, but you can't do that any more. Tonight, on New Year's Eve that sort of behaviour will still be OK - but then we are finished for another year. By tomorrow at the latest, you have to stop being nice to other people.

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One year during Advent while I was going home on the GO train and passing through Union Station, I dropped \$20 at Tim Hortons for the benefit of the customers standing in line behind me, and then I watched from a distance while customer after customer put on broad smiles at receiving an unexpected gift of free refreshments. Now that Christmas is over, I won't be doing that again. Good cheer? Cheer yourself. I'm done!

Which - strangely enough - is why I enjoy this service and this time of year that I call, "apres Noel" so much. Yes, maybe we do stop being nice to strangers, but at least we start being ourselves again. You see - I love advent and I love Christmas, but in the final analysis, I enjoy normal life even more. I like Christmas, but I like what we are left with after Christmas even more. We have just survived the "exciting" part of Christmas, the breathless part, full of anticipation and wonder and magic. Full of full-voiced singing and many things that delight. But today, all that has burned away. And we are now left with ... well, what are we left with after the sugar and debt induced frenzy we call "Christmas" is over for another year? What is the long-term, slow-burn "left-over" from the excitement of Christmas? What are we left with - today?

Obviously, there is something. Even common sense tells us that the birth of a child is - in part - the end of a story. But clearly, the birth of a child must also be the start of a new story too. The event of Christmas may be over, but the meaning and purpose of Christmas surely lies in the future. In our future. Advent is a journey, remember, and that's how journeys work.

In our reading from Luke, Jesus's parents are on a journey too - and they take a still very-young Jesus to the temple as was required by their tradition. And, they meet Simeon. And Simeon announces both the beginning of a journey and the end of a journey. Simeon's own journey ends, because he was just waiting for a sign from God of the coming messiah, and that sign came to him in the form of baby Jesus. After blessing the family, Simeon is now prepared to die. But Simeon also announces the beginning of a journey - specifically, the journey that Jesus will embark upon when he begins his public ministry. A journey that will include the falling and the rising of many people, and the revelation of God's glory. Jesus and his family also meet Anna, a prophet, who also

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pre-sages the significant journey that Jesus will eventually be on.

I always wonder, after going to the temple and meeting two different people who had messages for and about her infant baby ... how would Mary have felt walking home again later? Perhaps Mary was thinking how grateful she was that her pregnancy had ended well, and she was safe again. But what would she feel hearing those words from Simeon and from Anna? Safe? Probably not. Mary and Joseph, walking home, had already started down their own journeys of bewilderment and wonder. That's a journey familiar to all parents. Whatever else happened on that trip, there is no doubt that that visit to the temple caused many things to change. Journey always lead to change.

So - if journey always leads to change, and if Advent is a journey. Then this Advent, all of us must have had the potential for change. Perhaps that's the long-term, slow-burn "leftover" from Christmas. Because each year, we are invited - as we ourselves mature - to look for a more mature and helpful understanding of Christmas. When we were young, we thought Christmas was about waiting for Jesus. OK - we were waiting for presents, but we understood that we were supposed to be waiting for Jesus. But as we age and mature, we have probably noticed at some point that babies do not in fact come from Christmas trees. Moreover, we come to realize that the gifts we want at Christmas are already present in our own lives, if we just look for them properly.

Besides, Advent - which is a season of waiting - has always bothered me a bit. I mean, why is there all this interest in waiting? Why - every year - do we pretend that we are waiting for the birth of Jesus when Christ is already present? Sometimes it feels like we choose to wait in Advent because we are busy, and with all the other "important" things we have to do around Christmas, we put other parts of our life on pause.

I want to share a true story about a friend of mine. He decided after many years that he had to actually get back into shape. This story is not about me by the way, because I am still in denial about getting into shape. My friend had moved past his denial. And he decided that he could manage 30 minutes a day to work on his personal health. So he began at the start of a new year. Around March, I asked him how his fitness plan was working. He said he had successfully made time for 30 minutes per day, 5 days per week for his physical health. I congratulated him. I asked him if he was now

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stronger than before. He said, no. I asked him if he was more fit than before. He said no. I asked him what had changed for him, and he said his endurance was better. I didn't understand how his endurance could have improved without also becoming either stronger or more fit, so I finally broke down and asked him what his fitness routine was. He told me proudly that he had been praying. He had been praying that God would make him fit. He was spending 30 minutes in prayer, 5 times per week, expecting that God would give him a more fit body. I won't repeat here what I said to him.

But how often do we do that ourselves? How often do we pray for something that we could achieve ourselves by just working for it? How often do we wait - even in prayer - for something that is already within our grasp? How often do we expect God to do something for us that we are not willing to do for ourselves? How often do we choose to wait instead of getting active in our own salvation?

Are we - like Simeon - waiting to see Christ in our midst? Christ has already come. Christ is already here. There is no need to wait. There is only the need to look. Look in church by all means. But look in other places too. And if you struggle to see Christ in our midst, then you are invited to be Christ in our midst. I know that sounds crazy, but for many people in our own community, that will be enough. You will be enough. Remember, you and I - simple people that we are - are the hands and feet of Christ. What more do you need to be?

Christmas came. Christmas went. A baby was born. And birth is certainly a miracle. But the miracle of birth is completely overshadowed by another miracle. That is, the miracle called "life". Normal, everyday life.

So, now that Christmas is over, I hear someone asking, "Now What?" Well, I don't know, but whatever it is, I do know that it will be disguised as "normal life". And I look forward to finding out with you just what that "normal life" is in 2018. I look forward - with you - to both seeing, and being, Christ in our midst this year. What more could we need than that?

*Amen.*