

I. Intro. The cusp of a New Year is a good time for reflecting back & looking ahead

A. Our Advent & Christmas series has been "Yes, let it be!"

1. It draws from Mary's trusting exclamation to an angel who announced to her God's exciting yet unbelievable purpose that would be fulfilled through her
2. The theme has been translated for us into a more contemporary tone with the phrase on your bulletin cover, "Bring it on, God!"
3. But what was Mary so boldly urging God to "bring on"?
 - a) When she uttered those faith-permeated words, "Let it be with me according to your word" were the implications clear to her?
 - b) I think she was saying "yes" to God's vision for her ... with nary a clue as to what it would really mean for her

B. As a congregation it would be easy to enter into 2018 coasting along doing the same things we've always done

1. But it doesn't take much faith as a church body to keep on doing the familiar ministries in familiar ways
2. As I'll return to a little later, a new year is an excellent time for us to be thinking about our direction as a congregation: in other words, where we're going and to what God is calling us
3. So with vision & direction in mind, I invite us to enter into 2018 with this focus question: *What might it mean for God's people to tell God, "Yes, let it be"?*

II. To get us started with focus Q, let me make 3 observations from the story of the holy family & Simeon & Anna

A. 1st observation: God's purposes were revealed to Mary & Joseph from an unexpected place, at an unexpected time

1. Focus on vv. 22-24 (*re-read*)
 - a) To our Gentile ears, these verses seem unimportant, something to gloss over to get to the main action w/ Simeon & Anna
 - b) But these verses do 2 things:
 - (1) Show us how devout Mary & Joseph were as Jews
 - (2) They set up an element of surprise

2. Biblical background

a) 2 different OT laws are being fulfilled here by Mary & Joseph, so their trip to the Temple is for 2 purposes at same time

(1) 12th chapter of Leviticus is about purification after childbirth

(a) Women were considered ceremonially unclean after giving birth ... woman who bore a boy had to stay out of the temple & not touch holy objects for 33 days after baby's circumcision

(b) Then they had to come bring a sacrifice offering to the temple ... So Jesus was at least 40 days old when this happened

(2) Read *Exo. 13:2 & 15*

(a) *Because God claimed the 1stborn sons of the Egyptians and that Passover event is what secured the Israelites' escape from Egypt, so God also claims Israel's own firstborn*

(b) This is one of the laws upon which our concept of firstfruits giving is based ... that 1st & best belongs to God

b) These actions in 22-24 show us Mary & Joseph as good & faithful Jewish parents

3. It also means they were going about their own business, just "doing the right thing" when God surprised them thru Simeon & Anna

a) When Mary & Joseph entered Temple that day, they were unaware of what would happen & who would meet them ... They just thought they were obeying the biblical laws ...

b) They didn't know they were about to receive additional confirmation of this child being the fulfillment of God's purposes for God's people

4. What I'm saying is: The revelation of God's purpose can come at surprising times & from surprising sources ... new insights from God sometimes come when God's people are not looking for them

B. (2nd observation) For these biblical characters, **not all dreams & visions are fulfilled in the same timing ... God works at different speeds**

1. Mary & Joseph, Simeon & Anna all received visions of what God was going to do but those visions were fulfilled at different times

2. For *Mary & Joseph*:

a) Each received a vision from an angel, recalling back to the Advent stories we've been telling for a month now...

(1) Mary's vision was the announcement of a miraculous pregnancy in advance (earlier in Lk. 2) ...

(2) Joseph's vision explained this pregnancy after it had already been discovered, when he was considering divorcing Mary quietly (Matt. 1:19-24)

b) For this young couple, the timespan from vision to fulfillment was very limited

(1) In the big picture, 9 to 12 months go by quickly

(2) Didn't have to wait years to see God's purposes bear fruit

c) Sometimes God moves fairly quickly from the time that people recognize God's purposes to the time when they experience those purposes coming to pass

3. On the other hand, *Simeon & Anna* felt God at work on a different timeline

a) For Simeon:

(1) We often picture him as an old man, but in fact we don't know Simeon's age ... Actually, we don't know how long he had to wait from when he received his Holy Spirit revelation to when Mary & Joseph & Jesus appeared in the Temple

(2) However long he waited, his anticipation & excitement at seeing & holding this child were obviously great ... his response: praising God & giving a blessing to the Holy Family

b) For Anna:

(1) Her wait was clearly a long one

(a) Husband died after only 7 yrs of marriage, but she didn't remarry & lived most of her life as widow ... maybe 55 or 60 years that way

(b) How long did she wait for this moment? she was at least 84 yrs old when this scene happened & possibly older

(2) She obviously had to wait years to see God's purposes fulfilled in this baby named Jesus

4. The contrast of fulfillment time for Mary & Joseph compared w/ Simeon & Anna shows God works @ different speeds in fulfilling God's own purposes

C. (3rd observation) **God's purposes are good & powerful, but they're not pain-free**

1. As we were reading along in Luke 2 it sounded so joyful, even wondrous until ... Simeon's 2nd little speech, which is remarkable for how it introduces a somber tone to this passage (*read vv 34-35*)

2. Here is prophecy ... here is recognition that pain & sorrow & rough times will also be part of this fulfillment of God's purpose

a) Jesus certainly did cause the rising of many in the 1st C. and later who have found new hope & eternal life thru him (hopefully us included)

b) But he also caused the falling of many people in his day who opposed him & rejected the crazy things he stood for:

(1) After all, a peasant king who taught servanthood and nonviolence as the ways to greatness with God was certainly not going to be welcomed by those who wanted to retain violence & religious power for themselves

(2) And no mother on earth has borne a more piercing sword of grief than to watch the agony and cruel death of her own sinless 1stborn child!

3. Simeon's prophecy reminds us that the fruit of God's purposes in this sinful world are not promised to be pain-free ...

a) In this story we see that God's loving and ultimately triumphant purposes for the world can still result in pain, even for those who are closest to what God is doing

b) Simeon speaks a word of brutal honesty amid all the good news here

III. (3 Implications for the church)

A. Poised at edge of a New Year, we naturally want to know where God's going to lead us ... to see glimpses of God's purposes for us in 2018 ...

1. This is NOT the sermon where lead pastor comes down from Mt. Sinai & reveals to the congregation the stone tablets on which God revealed to him their unifying focus for the next year or 2

2. That model may work for some pastors & congregations but it's not a good fit for WMC or for me

3. So instead, while we continue to seek God's specific purpose & direction here, let me offer 3 implications for the church, drawing from those 3 observations from the Gospel story

B. 1st, We should not expect a vision of God's purpose to come from 1 single source or only in 1 way

1. Many churches have experienced major growth & vitality only when they deliberately changed something & purposely re-examined their direction

2. Sometimes God sets something new & life-giving in front of His people when they deliberately open themselves up to God's desires

3. BUT God does not always dramatically work this way with the church

- a) The seeds of God’s vision for us have often already been planted among us and around us ...
 - (1) either in ministries that a few people have been quietly doing
 - (2) or in ways that we’ve seen society or the community changing
- b) We may only need to listen well to what God has already been doing,
- c) like glowing embers, we may simply need to give those embers more fuel and not quench the oxygen, by providing room for the Spirit to blow

4. Recall church’s multi-year visioning process which Cindy described here for us about 4 months ago, in terms of a set of concentric circles of our primary relationships we will focus on as a congregation ... like ripples spreading from a drop of water



- a) Brief explain of 4 circles, which you’ve seen as poster on wall of foyer
- b) You also have this today in your church boxes as a magnet

CIRCLE ONE: GOD
We begin at the center by seeking to strengthen our relationships with GOD. As we gather for stimulating corporate worship services we desire to worship God while employing all of our senses as our faith is nurtured. We will eagerly and eagerly release each other's diverse gifts to contribute in our worship services. In our planning we will explore including intercultural worship components. We also seek to incorporate spiritual disciplines in all aspects of our lives as we joyfully affirm our primary identity as beloved children of God.

CIRCLE THREE: LOCAL SETTINGS
Our focus moves outward as we seek to strengthen our relationships with our neighbors in our LOCAL SETTINGS. We desire to highlight the numerous ways WMCen are involved with community organizations while providing initiatives to create new connections. We will continue to be involved in "Renewing a Vision" of the Mennonite Conference and MCLUSA's "Journey Forward" process. In an effort to enhance our relationships with others we will increase our understanding of diversity and intercultural competencies. As a congregation, we will continue to participate in and to make more visible our partnerships with the Elkhart County HOPE Network and with Prairie View Elementary School. We will also discern ways outside groups could utilize our facilities.

CIRCLE TWO: CONGREGATIONAL LIFE
Building upon strengthening relationships with God we move outward from the center as we seek to strengthen relationships within our CONGREGATIONAL LIFE. Beginning with the miracle of our children that God entrusted to us, we will increase our investment in our children and youth ministries. We will also seek to provide vibrant, formational, and engaging ministries for adults of all ages. Within our body of faith we will create opportunities to increase our capacity to relate to each other while creating new and deepening ongoing relationships. Recognizing the importance of story, we will look for opportunities to increase the use of story throughout church life as a way to strengthen our relationships. As a faith community we will also faithfully tend the resources we have been given.

CIRCLE FOUR: BELOVED WORLD
Finally, we look more broadly as we seek to strengthen our relationships with God's BELOVED WORLD. We will actively seek opportunities to engage in God's activity in the world, especially among refugees. Participating in the Global Church we will continue to celebrate, nurture, and evaluate our partnership with Twin Bible Institute as well as engage in ongoing support of the Ros Bahary Two-Way Mission in Ecuador. We will continue to arrange for opportunities for intergenerational service learning trips within the US and abroad. As we care for God's creation we will clarify appropriate structures and internet links for creation care ministries at WMC.

- c) To the best of our listening ability, your pastors and church leaders have discerned a directional statement for the next 3 to 5 years, shown here in a

brochure format

(1) In each of the 4 concentric circles of relationships, we've summarized the ministries we feel God is calling us to, some of them familiar & a few venturing into new territory

(2) You'll find this brochure also in your church boxes ...

(a) take it home & look it over. This will be the focal point of activity for our ministry teams in our church life



(b) Put the magnet somewhere it can remind you to let your life in God also ripple out into all 4 of these kinds of relationships

C. 2nd implication: *Patience & flexibility* are called for as we long for God's purposes to be fulfilled

1. Mary & Joseph learned about the Messiah coming into their lives & then 9 months later it happened. Anna the widow waited a whole lifetime to see it.

2. Once God gives us a vision & a purpose, the turnaround time may be rather short until we see results ... Or it may take a lifetime of fervent waiting ...

3. God's great purposes will be fulfilled, but the timing of that fulfillment is God's, not ours ...

a) After the last of the writing Jewish prophets went silent with Zechariah & Malachi, there were about 400 years when the Jews lived expectantly, fervently praying that Messiah would come as he had been prophesied.

b) The Temple was being rebuilt, God's people were suffering and the time seemed right, yet the Messiah didn't come along, to the bitter disappointment of Jewish leaders.

c) Recall words of Gal. 4:4 "*When the fullness of time had come, God sent His Son, born of a woman ...*" It was God's sense of timing at play for the entrance of Jesus into our world. It was not according to any human theory or system

4. After we do our best job of listening to God's voice for our direction, God's purposes will be fulfilled according to God's timing, regardless of what our directional statement may say

D. 3rd implication: God's purposes in us, when lived out, will produce resistance

1. Not everyone was happy re. Jesus' birth at the time... & later as an adult, his ministry brought about the very opposition that Simeon had foretold ... lethal opposition

2. The truth of God's purposes has a way of flushing out silent opposition

a) In this sinful world, there will always be those who oppose God's ways & judge themselves w/ their own deeds

b) *Read John 3:19-21*

c) When our deeds are done according to God's purposes, God's light will be seen, but the world will not always like it ...

d) & even those of us, like Mary, close to the center of God's activity, may not be spared a sword

3. Let us not pretend that following God's purposes will always make life easier for us, or make us popular ...

a) Biblical purposes may draw resistance when in our lives, people see ...

(1) (when people see) Support for sanctity of all life, not only opposing those killed in the womb, but those killed on the battlefield, in our prisons and in our minority communities

(2) (when people see) Relationships between the sexes based on mutual respect, sexual integrity and refusal to misuse power

(3) (when people see) Business ethics that refuse to cut corners, exploit employees or submit false reports

(4) (when people see) Simple lifestyles that value relationships and generosity more than luxurious comfort & high-tech stuff

(5) (when people hear us) Being voices with the voiceless in our society, including abuse victims, the poor, the marginalized, communities of color, and immigrants

b) From our history of martyrdom & discipleship, we Mennonites know the truth of this 3rd implication ... but in today's world, it's still hard to be reminded of it.

IV. Conclusion

A. As we look & listen for God's purposes for WMC in 2018 & beyond, the story of the Holy Family, Simeon & Anna reminds us we need to be prepared ...

1. For God's purposes to come in surprising ways
2. But also for resistance if we're faithful to living out those purposes
3. Also prepared for God's purposes to come in the fullness of God's time, rather than our timing.

B. Bottom line:

1. God's redemptive purposes in the world are loving, trustworthy, and will not be thwarted...
2. we just need to humbly prepare the way, boldly celebrate what God's already doing, & courageously say "Bring it on, God!"