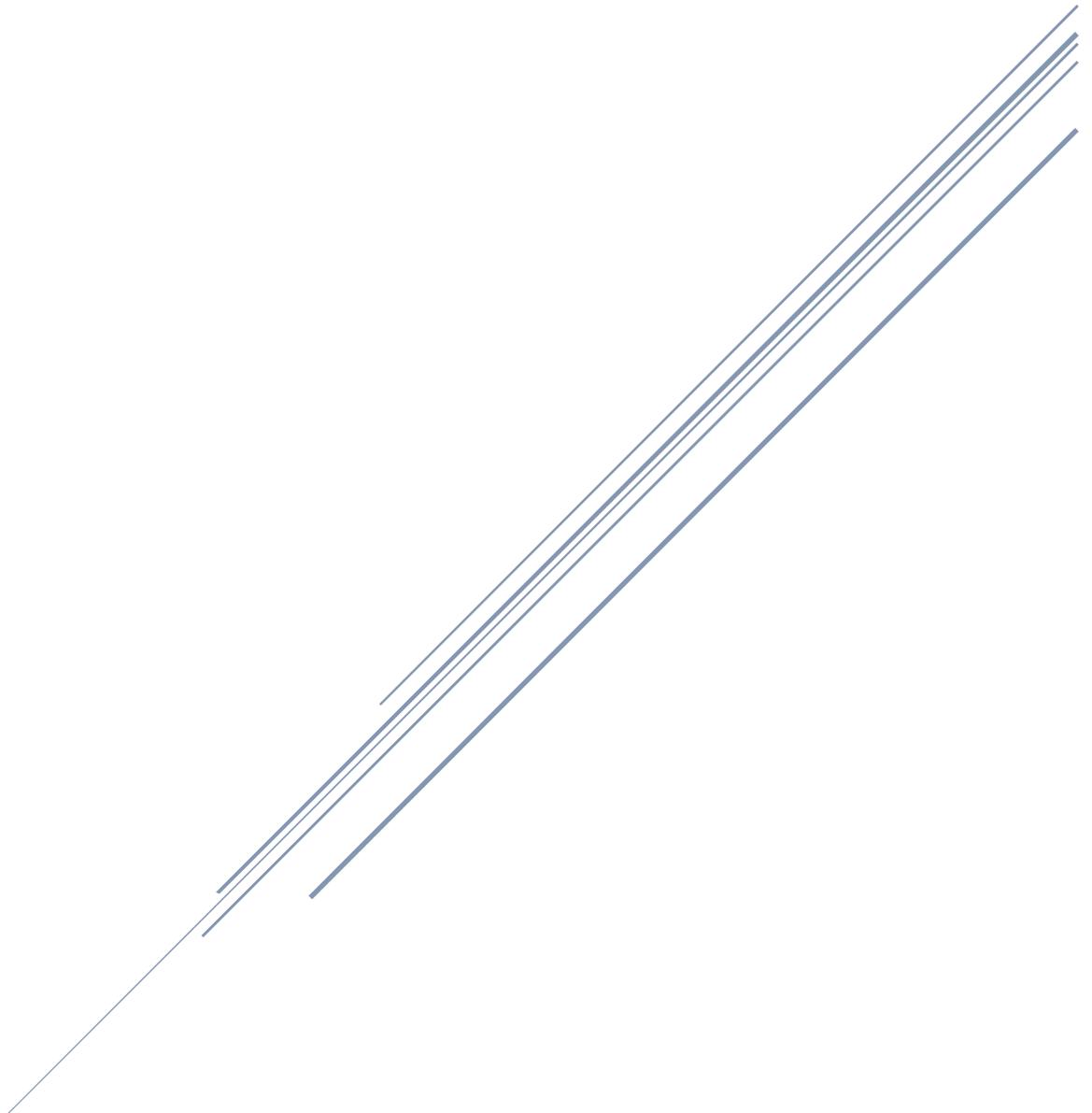


# WHAT DO YOU SEE?

A Sermon Inspired by Ben Breedlove

*Luke 2:22—40 and Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3*



Dec 28, 2014,  
By Rev. Dr. Dan De Leon, College Station, TX

## **“What Do You See? - A Sermon Inspired by Ben Breedlove”**

Today – this first Sunday after Christmas, I’m offering this sermon written by Rev. Dr. Dan De Leon of the Friends Congregational Church in College Station TX. I present it to you today just about word for word because I couldn’t have said it any better if I’d tried.

Chicago. 1860. The Republican Convention’s in town. But the GOP are divided over who their nominee will be. Tensions are high when the third ballot is cast. Ohio switches four votes from Salmon P. Chase to Abraham Lincoln. And with that, the lawyer from Illinois clinches the nomination. Ohio makes its announcement, and one man starts crying, but another man starts quoting the Bible at the top of his lungs: “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: <sup>30</sup>For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,<sup>31</sup> which thou hast prepared before the face of all people...”

These are the words from what’s referred to as Simeon’s poem. We heard it today in Luke’s gospel. Those words have been used in Christian liturgies, set to music by composers from William Byrd to Gustav Holst; and for centuries Christians have spouted off those words whenever they see something or someone that resembles a savior.

But whether it’s Abraham Lincoln or Peyton Manning or some other gifted individual, their appearance of being a savior comes with a certain level of proof. Public speaking skills or athletic prowess or charisma or just having that “it” quality, it’s enough to make the soul that longs for salvation cry out, “Lord, I’m convinced! My eyes have seen your salvation!”

But Simeon and Anna had no such proof. And these weren’t fair-weather fans of God. Simeon and Anna weren’t just waiting for some good-looking warrior smacking of charisma to be the one who would console Israel and liberate the oppressed in Jerusalem. Simeon was righteous and devout. Anna, whose husband had died only seven years into their marriage, had spent her entire life since then as a widow -- never leaving the temple, fasting and praying. Eighty-four years old, and she’s still devoted to this discipline of waiting. But when Simeon and Anna see Mary and Joseph’s baby, when they see that 8-day-old scrap of a human being, wrapped in rags, they are convinced that this is salvation in the flesh.

Lauren Winner is Assistant Professor of Christian Spirituality at Duke Divinity School. She points out that Simeon and Anna aren’t the first instance of dramatic faithfulness in the gospel of Luke. Mary is certainly faithful to God. Elizabeth’s husband, Zechariah, is so faithful that the first thing the man says after 9 months of being mute is a

prayer. The shepherds “watching their flocks by night” are faithful enough to go all the way to Bethlehem and see the baby.

But, as Lauren Winner says, Simeon and Anna’s faithfulness takes the cake. At least Mary and Zechariah and the shepherds had visits from angels for proof. Simeon and Anna had no burning bush, no talking donkey, no angels. All they had was this baby. But somehow Simeon and Anna saw Jesus and they saw the salvation of the world.

Now, that’s vision! Do you have vision? Do we have vision? Can we look at something that’s completely void of proof of being anything more than what’s right there in front of us and see something more? Because essentially that’s what vision is: Vision is being able to see something that isn’t immediately visible so clearly that we believe it, and in that belief finding peace; peace enough that our souls might echo the words of Simeon: “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now release your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation. My eyes have seen your vision.” -- My eyes have seen your vision.

You probably don’t know the name Ben Breedlove. He posted a YouTube video 3 years ago this December that got millions of hits worldwide. Ben Breedlove had a disease called hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. It’s a thickening of the heart muscle that makes it work harder. The video he posted had him holding up white note cards that told the story of his struggles with the disease. Every now and then he flashes this infectious smile. You should check it out when you get a chance. But what makes the video even more powerful is that Ben Breedlove died that Christmas Day. He was 18 years old.

Ben had a vision. He shares about it in the video. He tells about how when he was four, he had a life-threatening seizure where his blood sugar dropped to 14. He doesn’t remember much about that day except one thing. He remembers being rushed down a hallway on a stretcher by two nurses and his mom running alongside. He looked up and saw a light shining over him, but it was so bright that he couldn’t make out what it was. He pointed up and said, “Mom, look at the bright light,” but she couldn’t see it. There weren’t any lights on in that hallway. Ben says it was a peaceful feeling that he never forgot. That’s all he could say about it: that he felt peace.

Later in the video, Ben mentions his second brush with death. It happened on December 6<sup>th</sup>. He sat down on a bench and passed out. He stopped breathing for three minutes. Ben says that during those three minutes, he could see the EMTs going to work on him with shock pads. He heard them say, “His heart has stopped and he has no pulse.” And then he had another vision.

Ben found himself in a white room with no walls; it just went on forever. There was no sound, just that same peace he felt when he was four. He was wearing a suit and so was his favorite rapper, Kid Cudi, who was there with him for some reason. He looked in a mirror and his first thought was, "We look good!" And as he kept looking at himself, he couldn't stop thinking how proud he was of everything he'd ever done. He says it was the best feeling.

And then Kid Cudi took Ben over to a glass desk, sat him down and put his hand on Ben's shoulder, and Ben's favorite song of his came on at that moment at the part where it says, "When will the fantasy end? When will the heaven begin?" And then Kid Cudi said to Ben, "Go now."

That's when Ben woke up to the EMTs doing CPR on him. He says, "I didn't want to leave that place. It was so peaceful." He ends his video holding up note cards that say, "Do you believe in God or angels? I do."

Ben had a vision and Ben had vision, because Ben witnessed what he could only describe as overwhelming peace to the point that his whole life seemed to revolve around this confident, joy-filled belief in that peace. Ben's vision is maybe what made it easier for his family and friends and YouTube fans to release him in peace.

That's the kind of transcendent, transformative power that vision gives us. It's God's gift to us. And I'm not just talking about visions of the afterlife, I'm talking about visions that are so powerful that they inform and sustain our belief to the point of transcending and transforming our lives and the lives of those around us.

I try to remind us of our church's vision pretty regularly. The New Year is good time for that. It is the vision of the Basalt and Carbondale Community United Methodist Churches to offer God's extravagant welcome to all. That sounds good like Ben Breedlove's vision sounds good. But can we see it? Can we see God's extravagant welcome being offered to all? Because if we can't see it, if it just sounds good and we can't see it, then there's no way we can believe it; and what's a vision without people believing in it?

Simeon and Anna looked at a sleeping, burping -- messy infant wrapped in rags and saw the salvation of the world. Can we look at the childish and hurtful ridiculousness of this world and see God's salvation? Can we see God welcoming every human being into the eternal embrace of a love that will not let us go?

Can we see the tormenters and the tormented -- those who bully and those who are bullied being reconciled to one another in this hospitable space that we call church, just as the prophets before us saw the lion lying down with the lamb? Can you see it?

Can we see all individuals and all families participating in the full life and ministry of the Church based solely on their devotion and faith -- rather than on some charitable exceptions? Exceptions that say, "It's okay that your gay, or it's okay that your transgender, it's ok that you're poor or black or disabled -- or just plain rude -- You're still welcome here despite that"? That's not good enough! Jesus didn't say we were to 'tolerate' our neighbor.

We have to see the authenticity of who we are being fully embraced in the life and ministry of the Church, not in spite of, but in celebration of who we are; because as Paul says in Galatians, "We are neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or female, but we are all one in Christ Jesus"? Can you see it?

Can we see the marginalized, the outcasts, and the oppressed being welcomed with open arms into the warmth of the congregation, just as Jesus said that he had come to bring good news to the poor and to set the captives free? Can you see it?

That's a glimpse of what offering God's extravagant welcome to all looks like.

God's servants in this place help me see our church's vision of offering God's extravagant welcome to all as more than just words on paper.

Because of this congregation, I can see that vision and I believe it. I break the bread of Holy Communion with you and I see that vision, and I believe it. I receive the juice of the cup of God's love with you, and I see that vision and I believe it.

I believe that the poor *will* receive good news.

I believe that the captives *will* be set free and the oppressed *will* overcome.

I believe that people of all faiths *will* open their homes to one another in peace.

I believe that the words 'homosexuality' and 'Christianity' *will* be uttered in the same sentence without a feeling of tension but with a sense of peace and belonging.

I believe in the power of forgiveness to heal all scars that keep us from welcoming one another into mutual communion and peace.

And I believe that the church will return to its roots of being that picture of Pentecost where people from all walks of life, speaking different languages, gathered together and worshiped God regardless of what skeptical onlookers thought about that

scene, because the fiery passion and love of Pentecost is what made the skeptics see and believe and know peace.

Joy Moore is Associate Dean for Black Church Studies and Church Relations at Duke Divinity School. She writes, "Our announcements of Christ's birth into human history should render sufficient joy that the present circumstances cannot diminish the intrusive signs of God's peace." The world has resolutions, but we have the Word of God. The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of our God stands forever. The world has resolutions, but God has given us vision. So, what do you see? By God's grace, what do you see?

Above all, can we look in the mirror like Ben Breedlove did in his vision and see someone looking back at us who is fearfully and wonderfully made? Can we look in the mirror and see someone who is blessed and beautiful, forgiven and free, redeemed and sustained by the love of God? Can we see someone in the mirror who is one of a kind and essential to God's still-speaking voice and still-creating hand in this world? Can you see it? Believe it. Amen.