

Sermon It Would Have Been Enough

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St Giles Presbyterian Church, December 27, 2020)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Vaccines are coming, some are already here. That indeed is good news for our communities, our country and around the world that have been besieged by the COVID-19 pandemic for much of the 2020. In Canadian political debate between government and oppositions, much attention has been focused on the approval and initial roll-out of vaccines. Less so on the total number of vaccines that Canada has already bought or secured for its citizens.

According to the Amnesty International, in a report released in early December, Canada has bought from 7 different vaccine developers, enough to vaccinate over 150 million people, with the option to vaccinate 50 million more. That would translate to a vaccination coverage of 5 to 7 times over its total population. That puts Canada the worst offender (by far) among rich countries hoarding in advance these life-saving drugs.

Yes, I understand that Canada does contribute to COVAX, a global mechanism designed specifically for the purpose of developing COVID-19 vaccines, and distributing them equitably around the world. Yes, I understand the government has suggested that once all Canadians are vaccinated, some remaining doses would be made available to other countries. Who could fault a government for wanting to take more care of its own citizens first? But 5 to 7 times more?

In a world that is increasingly inter-connected, in a pandemic that has ravaged much of the planet, in the global context where politicians and health experts have often repeated the same mantra: No one is safe until everyone is safe....That 5 to 7 times over coverage for Canadians...that bothers me. How much is enough?

Thinking about the idea of 'enough', I am reminded of the Hebrew word '**Dayyenu**', which means 'it would have been enough for us'. 'Dayyenu' is also an upbeat Hebrew song that is often sung during the Jewish holiday of Passover, over a gathered meal, a tradition that dates

back a least a thousand years. It is sung as a repeated refrain, after recounting each act of God's kindness, God's salvation.

The song starts: If He had brought us out from Egypt and had not carried out judgements against them — Dayyenu — it would have been enough for us. Keep in mind that the English translation doesn't quite do justice to the song, as the original Hebrew is both poetic and rhythmic. The acts of God's salvation also follows a particular sequential order. So for example,

If He had fed us the manna,
and had not given us the Shabbat, Dayyenu.
If He had given us the Shabbat,
and had not brought us before Mount Sinai, Dayyenu.
If He had brought us before Mount Sinai,
and had not given us the Torah, Dayyenu.
If He had given us the Torah,
and had not brought us into the land of Israel, Dayyenu.

Note the repeated structure of...if He had done this, and had not done that, it would have been enough for us. In the context of the Passover, this repeated refrain of 'Dayyenu' has a implied suffix...that is 'to say Hallelujah, praise the Lord'.

Dayyenu = It would have been enough for us to praise the Lord.

Imagine being taught this song from childhood, and singing it year after year as one's family gather around a table to celebrate the Passover feast. Imagine, how would that shape one's understanding of the world? How would that shape one's relationship to God?

The word 'Dayyenu' did not appear in the story of Simeon meeting baby Jesus, in Luke 2, in the passage that we read today. However, the idea 'it would have been enough' was certainly present.

Simeon was a righteous and devout man who lived in Jerusalem. The Scripture informs us that Simeon had been waiting for the consolation of Israel. The Holy Spirit had revealed to him that 'he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah' — the anointed, the Christ. It would appear that the wait had been for quite some time.

When baby Jesus was about eight days old, his parents Mary and Joseph took him to the temple, presented him to the Lord, according to the Law of Moses. The ceremony had most likely included a rite of purification for Mary, a rite of circumcision and consecration for the baby, as every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord. A sacrifice of a pair of doves or two young pigeons would have been devoted in accordance to the Law, thus reflecting the meagre social status of the parents.

At about the same time, Simeon was moved by the Holy Spirit and he went into the temple. When he saw the baby, Simeon took hold of him in his arms and praised God saying,

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation...” (v.29-30)

Dismiss your servant now in peace, it indeed has been enough. In similar way, I imagine Anna the prophet proclaiming ‘Dayyenu’. Anna, daughter of Phanuel from the tribe of Asher, was a prophet. She had married to her husband for a short seven years, had become a widow since then until the ripe old age of eighty-four. The Scripture describes her as ‘never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer, night and day’. Just when Simeon was praising God while holding Jesus, Anna also came, and began to praise God. To the gathering crowd, Anna spoke to them about the child, who is the long awaited redemption of Jerusalem.

It is curious as to why the author of Luke recorded the words of Simeon but omitted the words of Anna. Anna, after all, was a prophet of the Lord who lived in the temple of the Lord. Her words would undoubtedly carry more weight than Simeon, who was a commoner though righteous and devout.

In any case, both Anna and Simeon rejoiced in seeing baby Jesus, the long awaited Messiah who was to redeem Israel, and bring salvation to the people of God. Anna and Simeon would not have lived long enough to see how God would finally achieve that salvation through Jesus, they would not have witnessed the cross or the resurrection. What they saw was a glimpse of the coming Kingdom.

Dayyenu, it would have been enough for them to praise God.

Several things about Anna and Simeon inspire me, several things we could take away. First is 'prayerful waiting'. We live in an impatient society of instant messaging, TV dinner and same-day delivery. Perhaps COVID-19 has slowed us down a bit, but we as a society still has difficulty waiting for God's salvation. Prayer counters that impatience. Prayer is a deliberate act that humbles oneself before God, an act that seeks to relate to God, to build a meaningful connection to our creator. God may not grant what we seek in prayer, but God always listens.

Second takeaway is the act of 'giving thanks'. It is a response to what God has done, is doing. Living in prayerful and devout lives, both Anna and Simeon were able to recognize the act of God entering into affairs of humankind. They may not see the whole picture — no one could. But even just a glimpse was enough to trigger a spring of thanksgiving welling up from within.

The final takeaway is 'proclaiming hope'. Fear divides, the politics of fear can sometimes win the day, but hope always triumph. A genuine hope, especially hope that is based on what God is doing, (such hope) never ceases. Simeon, after thanking God, "for my eyes have seen your salvation", he continued to proclaim in verse 31, "which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel." Simeon then said to Mary in verse 34, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

Simeon and Anna were not naive, they knew more waiting was ahead of them, more suffering, perhaps even death. The power of Rome was still dominant in their time. However, they knew and we ought to know also that God had been faithful in history. God continues to be faithful in our lives. God will be faithful in all that He has promised.

As we, the community of faith of St Giles Presbyterian Church, concludes the year of 2020, and prepares to enter into the new year of 2021. May we learn to wait prayerfully. May we give thanks generously. May we proclaim hope, in every opportunity.

Dayyenu, it is enough for us to praise our Lord.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.