

MESSAGE for Jan 1, 2012**Luke 2:22-40***Hope in Our Future***The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller**

Did you survive Christmas? I hope so! You must have or you wouldn't be here, I guess!

Did you know that many people experience a huge letdown after Christmas? I do. I don't want it to end. We spend all that time and energy and resources getting ready for Christmas, working towards it, looking forward to it, getting excited about it. Then it comes and it's over. It's gone and it's back to "normal." Whatever normal is?!?!

It kind of reminds me of vacation. You spend time and energy and resources to plan and prepare for a vacation. It's awesome to get away, but then you have to come home. That first day back is so hard. You feel deflated and defeated, dragging yourself to work or school. No one has any sympathy for you. If you dare mention that you're feeling kind of down, people just glare at you and snort, "Geez, you just got back from vacation. I wish I could go on a vacation!"

Ever been there? I'm guessing we all have in one way or another.

Did you know that there's a name for that experience? It's called P.E.D. (Post-Event Depression). And there's medication for it... Of course, I think the best remedy is to go back on vacation! For some people P.E.D. is a big problem, and the remedy isn't so easy.

For example, Buzz Aldrin is known around the world as the pilot of the Lunar Module on Apollo 11. He was the second human being to walk on the moon along with Neil Armstrong, doing so on July 20, 1969. It took years of planning and preparation for them to go on that vacation. Their success stunned the world.

Did you know that the 39-year-old Aldrin found it very difficult to readjust to life on Earth? He suffered from P.E.D. in a huge way.

- * His marriage of 21 years broke-up soon after his return.
- * He remarried in haste and was divorced for a second time within two years.
- * His military career ended after an unhappy tenure as commander of the USAF test-pilot school.
- * Depression and alcoholism nearly destroyed this hero's life.

Fortunately, with help and hope, Aldrin got his life back together and continues to live a very productive and fulfilling life making this world a brighter place. And he is still doing that today.

I wonder, how many of us are struggling with a mild, or maybe even a major, case of P.E.D. now that Christmas is over?

We have leftovers everywhere, over-stimulated kids, messy homes, relatives who stayed too long, Christmas trees that are dropping needles everywhere – how did they get back there? – toys that are out of batteries for the umpteenth time, and bills, bills, bills wondering where the money is going to come from to pay for them. No wonder so many people are suffering from P.E.D. this time of year. Where is our hope?

Truth is – and I speak from experience – truth is, living in hope isn't always easy. Most of life is lived with uncertainty. The reality of the 21st century is uncertainty. And yet, many people live with hope in spite of the uncertainty. And they do it every day because sometimes that's all they have.

Consider this:

A young family was struggling economically. They are having a hard time of it and feeling absolutely hopeless. They cannot see a way out of their circumstances. On a whim they buy a Powerball Lottery ticket and they win. They win big. They win over \$52 million. They stand before the television cameras and news reporters just beaming with joy.

Depressed? Not a chance!

Hopeless? No way!

A new day for them – you bet!

And yet, all they hold in their hand is a ticket. They didn't have the money yet. On one hand, nothing has changed for them. On the other hand, everything has changed for them. They hold in their hand a promise of hope. They hold the ticket for their future.

Now, compared to the promise of hope that we have in Christ Jesus a Powerball Lottery ticket may not be the best metaphor. And yet, that's exactly what we have. We have won big. Fifty-two million dollars is peanuts compared to what we have won with Christ Jesus.

He is our salvation.

He is our redemption.

He is our reason for being and our hope for the future.

On the one hand, with Jesus nothing has changed for us. On the other hand, with Jesus everything has changed for us. Jesus is our "ticket" for a hopeful and brighter future.

Mary and Joseph know something about this hope for the future in Jesus. As new parents, trying to adjust to a new way of life, they encounter two remarkable people in church one day: Simeon and Anna. Both Simeon and Anna proclaim the fulfillment of God's promise of hope in Jesus.

They announce that in Jesus, a whole new way of God's love and grace is coming into the world. They announce that in Jesus, God is already at work restoring what sin has broken. They announce that this baby Jesus, who was only 8 days old, was God's promise of hope for the future. Can you imagine what Mary and Joseph might have been thinking in worship that morning?

Simeon grabs baby Jesus and lifts him up and starts praising God, saying, "Lord my eyes have seen your salvation. This is your gift of hope. I can die now a happy man." And he gives him back to Mary and Joseph. What???

Anna then sees this and starts running around telling everyone in church that day that "Jesus is the one. The one in whom we have hope because he is our redemption. He is the one for whom we live."

Can you imagine worship that morning?

Simeon and Anna speak as if God's promises had already come true, and yet, all that Mary and Joseph held in their hands was baby Jesus. Nothing had changed for them, on the one hand. And yet, on the other hand, in Jesus everything had changed for them already. Jesus had changed everything.

Simeon and Anna were saying, "Hey everyone Jesus is our 'ticket' for the future. He is our hope for the future and what a glorious future it will be. The future is here, now!!!"

The future is here, now. It's January 1, 2012, a brand new year. Today is the first day of a new year. Today is the first day of the rest of your life. So I want to offer you some advice. I got this advice from a pastor named, Steve. Pastor Steve said (and I agree with him) that we ought not put Jesus first this year. That's right! Do not put Jesus first this year.

Let me explain.

So often at the beginning of the year we often set or reset our priorities for the coming year. By the way I love this time of year. I love the newness this time of year brings. I love looking forward to what God is going to do in my life in the coming year. So I make a list of priorities. Perhaps you do too. And I reevaluate those priorities. They haven't changed much over the years.

1. God/Jesus
2. Family
3. Church/Career

It looks like this. I wrote them down. (show the list printed on board) It's not a great list. It's not a big list. But it is a list. Looks good doesn't it? But as Pastor Steve points out this isn't very effective when you get right down to it. This approach to our priorities is flawed.

What does it mean to put Jesus before my family? Do I ignore my family so I can spend time Jesus? Or my career, do I stop working so I can put Jesus first?

The problem is this approach separates the priorities in my life. And Jesus gets removed to be placed on an island somewhere off by himself. It's the biggest island of course, but an island nonetheless, separating him from everything else in my life. So I need to go there to be with Jesus at the exclusion of my family or career or anything else. Oh no... I don't want that...

In reality it doesn't work. In Colossians 1:15-20 we are told that Jesus is first before anything and above everything else. We told that God created all things through Jesus and for Jesus. That means Jesus is connected to everything. His cross is the means through which Jesus holds all things together, connecting us to God and everyone in a whole new way. Through the cross Jesus has reconciled all things to himself.

So Jesus is first – yes!

First in order – yes!

First in importance – yes!

That's because Jesus is at the center of everything – yes!

So this year, please don't put Jesus first in your life, put him at the center of your life! Jesus is not the top priority before all the other priorities! He is the top priority in every priority!

Not Jesus, then family. But Jesus in my family.

Not Jesus, then my career. But Jesus in my career.

Jesus then becomes the hub of my life, connected to every area of my life, like a wheel. He keeps our lives rolling along because he is our hope for the future. Kind of like this... (show the wheel with Jesus at the center).

With Jesus at the center of our lives, connecting us to everything else in our lives, love wins over hatred – every time, generosity wins over stinginess – every time, forgiveness wins over bitterness – every time, and life wins over death – every time.

Jesus is our ticket! He is our hope for the future! May 2012 be for us the year that we “let our light so shine before others, that they see our good works and give glory to God in heaven.” Happy New Year! Amen.