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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

1 Samuel 1:20-28; 2:18-21; Luke 2:22-40

26 December 2021

Dare to Imagine: Revelation

*Opening Prayer:* God, revealed most clearly in Jesus, the Messiah, laid in a manger in Bethlehem, far from his hometown with his teenage mother and stepfather. Your will and way were revealed in ways that we still try to understand today. We celebrate your presence here among us, as one of us, a real person. We marvel at a God who created us in their image and yet would become like us in order to love, care for, and inspire us to be who we were created to be. Fill us with your wisdom and insight as we live this way in the world. In Jesus name, Amen.

*Message:* The Messiah has come. Hallelujah! In Bethlehem, the city of David, Jesus was born to Mary and Joseph, a fulfillment of God's promises. God's unfailing love has carried the people of Israel this far as they struggle under the great empires of history. God has not and will never forsake or abandon us, human beings created in God's own image. We continue in our Advent series this morning as we dare to imagine God's revelation in our world.

While I must confess that when I hear the word *revelation*, I often think of the last book of the bible, I continue to remind myself that even in the final book of scripture, revelation and in our own scriptures this morning, revelation is a form of the root, *reveal*. When something is revealed, we might be able to finally see it as it is because it was covered or disguised before, or maybe, because we are able to see it more clearly than before. Light reveals things to us. Other times, our focused attention reveals something that we may have overlooked before. Can you

remember a time when something was revealed to you? We sometimes call these experiences moments of revelation. Some examples that come to mind for me are opening Christmas presents, turning the light on in a room to find something that I am looking for, or as a licensed elementary education teacher, solving a particularly difficult math problem.

Can we imagine today that something this Christmas season has been revealed to us all over again, and maybe even for the first time? What are some realizations or revelations that you have had over this holiday season? In my third sermon here at Hutterthal in January of this year, we looked at the early years of the prophet Samuel's life and reflected on the art of listening well. In that moment, we explored the story of the boy Samuel at the tent of meeting in Shiloh as he served and grew up under the priest, Eli. This morning, we look at the birth and early days of Samuel and their connections to the Jesus story. The background of these two stories binds them together. The world, into which Jesus and Samuel are born, is a dark, broken, and dismal place. In the Jewish Bible, 1 Samuel follows Judges directly. The book of Judges ends with the men from the tribe of Benjamin attacking the village of Shiloh and kidnapping women to be their wives, leaving the author of Judges to remind us that all of this happened before there was a king in ancient Israel. In the Christian Bible, 1 Samuel follows Judges with Ruth in between. Ruth also has its moments of darkness and brokenness as we follow Ruth and Naomi through their experiences of loss. However, the hope that ends Ruth's story sustains our own hopes for Hannah in 1 Samuel even as she grieves her barrenness or lack of children. The background of our story in Luke has similar flavors of despair and hopelessness as the people of Israel are still quite aware of their place in the world under the thumb of the Roman Empire. In the book of Matthew, Herod slaughters all of the baby boys of Bethlehem in fear of the King that has been born. What a contrast to the God-child born in Bethlehem, helpless and vulnerable, completely

dependent on his family and community to protect him. We see this background come into even clearer view as we hear the descriptions of Simeon and Anna in Luke. Simeon has spent his entire life in devotion to God's promises, praying for the consolation of Israel, abundantly aware of how the world is broken, in need of salvation. Simeon is drawn to the infant Jesus among all of the people milling about the temple that day and speaks over him the great things that will come about. His words still are not entirely hope-filled as he tells Mary that her own soul will be pierced. When Anna finds Jesus, she has spent many, many years worshipping in the temple, patiently waiting in hope of the arrival of God's promised King.

Even in this background, we find God's revelation. We realize that sometimes the difficult work of following Jesus is patient endurance and commitment even in the face of the most dismal and depressing circumstances. What joy Hannah must have felt when she first realized that she was pregnant. What relief Anna and Simeon must have felt when they noticed the Spirit's leading to this baby boy. I think about how easily sometimes that I have given up when the darkness of our world seems most overwhelming. With little computers in our pockets and experiences at our very fingertips, the power of the "now" tempts us to think that God's revelation and unveiling comes easily and quickly, but we are reminded by Hannah, Simeon, and Anna that we may or may not find God's ultimate purpose fulfilled in our own experience. We may never hear the answers in our lifetimes.

I can only imagine how Hannah must have felt as she was weaning Samuel and preparing to let him go. She had waited so long for children, enduring the mockery and ridicule of her husband's other wife. Yet, when Hannah becomes pregnant, God's revelation comes to her: she will give Samuel over to God's work. As long as he lives, he will serve the Lord. I wonder if she wept quietly as she continued nursing Samuel, dreading the journey to Shiloh. I wonder if her

tears soaked each robe that she took to Samuel when they visited him each year. We find God's revelation in Hannah's experience as we realize that the transformation that God inspires in us often leads us to difficult decisions, in which we are asked to sacrifice what seems most important to us so that we can embrace the Jesus way. We dare to imagine the revealing of God's way as not always getting what we want or being able to hold onto everything that we call our own. We dare to imagine a God who reveals so much more depth and substance to our lives.

In Luke 2, we see or hear how something of God's nature is revealed to us. We realize that what we have always thought about God has been challenged or disrupted. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures or the Old Testament, God has acted of God's own volition in the course of human history by calling a particular people into relationship so that the world can see and experience what God's vision for the universe has always been. Suddenly, this way of intervening in our world is modified as God becomes a human being. I cannot understate this: God does not come as a grown person, appearing out of thin air. We dare to imagine that God comes as a baby, helpless, vulnerable, unable to speak or communicate with anything other than a cry. We dare to imagine that God took first steps as a toddler, that God did family chores as a small child, that God may have watched younger siblings as a teenager, and that God may have had arguments as a young adult with Joseph about how God was not going to take over the family business or continue to be a laborer for the Romans. We dare to imagine that God walked and talked and slept and ate and hoped and dreamed and loved and taught as Jesus of Nazareth. We dare to imagine the unveiling of God's truest self in a human being shaped by a particular culture, language, and worldview 2,000 years ago.

At the end of both passages, we find that God's will and way are revealed or unveiled for us most often in the day-to-day common experience, not always through some extravagant

religious experience. Both families return from the place where God is thought to be most present to their homes, where God continues to work in providing Hannah more children and in providing the boy Jesus space to grow in wisdom, stature, and favor. In our daily living, God reveals to us how we can join the redemptive and hope-filled work of Jesus, even when our experiences seem dull and dreary. The air that we breathe, the very breath of God, is the same air that Jesus breathed in and out, providing the sustaining element of our common human experience. Will you dare to imagine with me today God's revealing then in first-century Galilee continues to inspire us and lead us in a different way today?

*Closing Prayer:* Let us pray: God revealed and unveiled, help us to see who you are and how you are working in, around, and through us today. This Christmas season, give us ears to hear and eyes to see your Spirit's leading. Inspire us to welcome those who need your love, care, and compassion as your family was welcomed long ago in Bethlehem. In Jesus name, Amen.