

## **“The Gift of Revelation”**

**Isaiah 9:2, 6-7; Luke 2:24-35**

December 17, 2023

In the hushed anticipation of Advent, as we reflect on the scriptural narrative of Simeon’s divine revelation, our minds turn to the story of a modern beacon of faith, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. His life, a testament to the enduring power of divine revelation in the darkest times, mirrors the expectant hope that Simeon held in his heart. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian born in the early 20th century, found himself in the throes of a world unraveling at the seams. The rise of the Nazi regime in Germany posed a moral and spiritual quandary that shook the foundations of many Christian faithful. Yet, in this climate of fear and oppression, Bonhoeffer’s faith did not waver; instead, it was illuminated, much like the revelation that dawned upon Simeon when he beheld the infant Jesus. As we delve into Bonhoeffer’s journey, we find a man deeply rooted in his faith, yet acutely aware of the tumultuous world around him. His theological pursuits led him down a path of profound spiritual exploration, where he grappled with the essence of Christian ethics and the role of the church in a society marred by injustice and brutality. Bonhoeffer’s theology was not one of quiet contemplation alone; it demanded action. His decision to return to Germany, despite the dangers and the comfort of a safe haven in America, speaks volumes of his commitment to live out his faith. In the face of systemic evil, he chose resistance, becoming a voice of defiance against a regime that sought to warp the very tenets of Christian belief for its nefarious ends. His involvement in the conspiracy to overthrow Hitler was a decision born not of hatred, but of a deep love for God and humanity. It was a choice that mirrored the prophecy of Simeon, who foresaw the rise and fall of many in Israel and a sign that would be opposed. Bonhoeffer, in his opposition to the Nazi regime, became a sign of God’s enduring truth in a world that had strayed far from it. In Bonhoeffer’s writings from prison, we find a man undimmed by the encroaching shadows of his cell. His letters and notes, penned in the solitude of confinement, resonate with a hope that transcends his immediate circumstances. They speak of a faith that sees beyond the present darkness, a faith that anticipates a future where God’s justice and peace reign supreme. As he faced his final days, Bonhoeffer’s faith did not falter. His execution, just days before the collapse of the regime he opposed, was not a defeat but a testament to the power of a life lived in true alignment with God’s will. In his martyrdom, we see the echo of Simeon’s words, a light of revelation to the Gentiles and a glory to God’s people.

In this Advent season, as we ponder the story of Simeon and the infant Jesus, let us remember the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. His journey reminds us that revelation is not just a moment of divine clarity; it is a call to action, a challenge to live out our faith authentically and courageously, even in the darkest of times. Bonhoeffer’s life stands as a beacon, reminding us that the light of God’s truth, though it may flicker, will never be extinguished. In our moments of waiting and anticipation, may we find the strength to hold fast to our convictions, to listen for God’s voice in the tumult of our world, and to act with the courage that comes from true revelation. As we close this reflection, let us hold in our hearts the image of Dietrich Bonhoeffer - a man of faith, a seeker of justice, a servant of God’s eternal truth. His story, interwoven with the divine narrative of revelation, challenges and inspires us to be bearers of light in our own journeys of faith.

As we turn our hearts and minds to the concept of revelation in the context of modern Christian thought, it is vital to recognize the continuity and evolution of divine understanding that bridges the gap between ancient scriptures and our contemporary world. Revelation, in its essence, is not confined to the mystical experiences of prophets and saints of old, but is a living, breathing reality in the life of the modern believer.

In the tapestry of Christian thought, revelation has been understood in various ways. The early church fathers saw it as God’s self-disclosure in history, culminating in the person of Jesus Christ. This foundational belief set the stage for centuries of theological exploration and understanding.

Fast forward to the present day, and we find that the concept of revelation has expanded and deepened in its application and understanding. Contemporary theologians like Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr have emphasized revelation as an ongoing dialogue between God and humanity. They propose that revelation is not static but dynamic, unfolding in the complexities and nuances of human experience. In this light, revelation becomes a multifaceted concept. It is not only about the

grand moments of divine intervention but also about the quiet, subtle ways in which God communicates with us daily. Modern Christian thinkers like Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen have explored this idea, suggesting that revelation can be found in the simplicity of our daily lives, in the quiet moments of prayer and contemplation, and in the midst of our struggles and joys. The evolution of the concept of revelation in Christian thought also encompasses the idea of personal and communal discernment. This is evident in the writings of contemporary spiritual leaders like Joyce Meyer and Beth Moore, who advocate for a personal, experiential understanding of God's revelations. They encourage believers to seek God's voice in their individual journeys, emphasizing that revelation is as personal as it is communal.

Moreover, modern Christian thought has been marked by a growing awareness of the social and ethical dimensions of revelation. This perspective, championed by theologians like Jürgen Moltmann and Gustavo Gutiérrez, posits that revelation has a transformative power not just for individuals but for societies. It challenges us to see God's revelatory work in the pursuit of justice, peace, and reconciliation in our broken world.

As we reflect on these evolving understandings, we see that revelation is a bridge that connects the eternal with the temporal, the divine with the human. It is a concept that has grown and matured over the centuries, yet remains rooted in the fundamental truth of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ.

In our own journey of faith, this expanded view of revelation invites us to be open to the myriad ways God speaks to us. It challenges us to listen not only with our ears but with our hearts, to seek not only with our minds but with our souls. It calls us to be attentive to the whispers of the Spirit in the Scriptures, in our daily experiences, and in the world around us. As we continue in our Advent journey, let us embrace this rich and dynamic understanding of revelation. Let it be a lens through which we view our world, a guide in our walk of faith, and a source of hope and inspiration in our lives. For in the unfolding story of revelation, we find the very heartbeat of God, pulsing with love, wisdom, and grace for all humanity.

In the heart of our message today lies a sacred endeavor: to interlace the timeless wisdom of traditional scriptural insights with the vibrant perspectives of contemporary Christian thought. This fusion is not a mere academic exercise; it is a spiritual journey, one that seeks to enrich and deepen our understanding of the divine revelation. As we navigate through the scriptures, we are not just revisiting ancient texts; we are engaging in a living conversation with the Word of God, a conversation that has been ongoing for centuries and continues to this day. The voices of the past – the prophets, the apostles, the saints – echo in these sacred writings, offering us profound insights into the nature of God and His workings in the world.

But our journey does not stop there. We also listen attentively to the voices of the present – the modern theologians, the scholars, the spiritual leaders – who offer fresh perspectives on these ancient truths. Their insights, borne out of a context vastly different from that of the Biblical era, provide us with new lenses through which we can view the timeless truths of the scriptures. This weaving together of the old and the new, the ancient and the modern, creates a rich tapestry of understanding. It allows us to see the scriptures in a new light, to uncover layers of meaning that we might have missed, and to apply these eternal truths to the complexities of our contemporary world.

As we embark on this journey of exploration, let us do so with open hearts and minds. Let us be receptive to the wisdom of the ages, and let us be attentive to the fresh insights of our times. For in this sacred weaving together, we find a fuller, richer understanding of the divine revelation – a revelation that speaks to every generation, every context, every heart. In this, our objective is clear: to discover the unchanging truth of God's Word, illuminated afresh for our journey today. Let this be our quest, our joy, our commitment as we delve into the wonders of His revelation.

In Luke 2:25-35, we find the profound encounter between Simeon and the infant Jesus, a passage rich in theological and prophetic depth. Simeon, described as a righteous and devout man, was waiting for the "consolation of Israel," a term deeply rooted in the Jewish Messianic expectation. This "consolation" is often identified with the coming of the Messiah, seen as a source of redemption and comfort for Israel, an expectation deeply entrenched in Jewish tradition and prophecy. The Holy Spirit's role in Simeon's life is highlighted, as it was revealed to him that he would not die before he

had seen the Lord's Christ. This aspect underscores the divine orchestration in this encounter, where the Holy Spirit guides Simeon to the temple at the precise moment Joseph and Mary bring in Christ. It's a moment that not only confirms Simeon's faith but also unfolds as a divine revelation, affirming the identity and mission of Jesus.

Simeon's prophecy about Jesus brings to light the dual aspect of His mission: He is a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory for Israel. This dual role is significant in understanding Jesus' universal mission of salvation. His coming serves as revelation to the entire world, revealing God's way of salvation beyond the Jewish people. Commentaries: and a sword will pierce even your own soul-- to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed. Additionally, this revelation and fulfillment of God's promises through Jesus are seen as aligning with Old Testament prophecies, such as Isaiah 42:6-7, which speak of a covenant to the people and a light to the nations. However, Simeon's words also foreshadow the division and conflict that Jesus' mission would bring. He predicts that Jesus would be a sign to be opposed, and that this opposition would reveal the innermost thoughts and attitudes of many. This aspect of Jesus' ministry is crucial in understanding His role not just as a savior, but also as a figure who challenges and exposes the inner spiritual state of individuals and society. Furthermore, Simeon's prophecy to Mary about a sword piercing her soul is interpreted as symbolizing the deep pain and sorrow she would experience, particularly in relation to Jesus' suffering and crucifixion. This element of the prophecy highlights the personal cost and the impact of Jesus' mission on those closest to Him.

In conclusion, Luke 2:25-35 is a passage that encapsulates the essence of Christian revelation – the arrival of Jesus as the Messiah, who brings light and salvation to both Jews and Gentiles, but whose mission also entails suffering, opposition, and a profound spiritual challenge to the world. Simeon's encounter with Jesus thus becomes a powerful symbol of Advent's expectant waiting and the fulfillment of God's redemptive plan in Christ. In the luminescent trail of Simeon's prophecy and the Messiah's arrival, modern Christian thinkers like N.T. Wright and Timothy Keller offer illuminating perspectives on the concept of revelation in today's context. Their insights, like beacons in our spiritual journey, guide us in understanding how God continues to reveal Himself in our contemporary world.

N.T. Wright, a towering figure in modern theology, views revelation not merely as a historical event but as an ongoing narrative. In his works, Wright emphasizes the 'now and not yet' aspect of God's kingdom, suggesting that revelation is a continuous process. God's kingdom, he argues, is already here but not fully realized, a concept deeply embedded in the Christian hope and our understanding of Jesus' teachings. Wright's approach to revelation invites us to see God's work not as a distant historical fact but as a living, breathing reality in our everyday lives.

Timothy Keller, known for his profound yet accessible theological insights, approaches revelation as a means for personal transformation and societal redemption. In his perspective, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is not just about individual salvation but also about the renewal of the whole world. Keller often speaks about the transformative power of the Gospel, how it changes us from the inside out, impacting the way we live, work, and interact with others. This holistic view of revelation encourages us to see God's hand not only in our spiritual lives but also in the broader context of social justice, cultural engagement, and human flourishing.

Together, Wright and Keller paint a picture of revelation as a dynamic and multifaceted concept. It's a narrative that continuously unfolds in the personal, communal, and cosmic realms. Their teachings challenge us to view revelation not as a static event confined to the pages of Scripture but as a vibrant, ongoing dialogue between God and His creation.

In embracing these contemporary insights, let us be inspired to see revelation as a daily encounter with the divine, a journey of discovery where every moment holds the potential for God's self-disclosure. In the words and ideas of these modern Christian thinkers, we find a rich tapestry of understanding, weaving together the ancient and the new, the historical and the personal, the divine and the human.

Expanding further on Wright's thoughts, he often speaks about the resurrection of Christ not merely as a past event but as the start of a new creation, a fundamental change in the world's order. This

view places the Christian narrative in a larger context, where the resurrection is the beginning of God's plan to remake the world. For Wright, understanding revelation involves seeing ourselves as active participants in this ongoing narrative, called to live out the resurrection life in our present reality. Keller, on the other hand, frequently addresses the practical implications of revelation in the life of the believer. He discusses how the Gospel changes our approach to issues like money, power, and sex, reframing these not as ends in themselves but as means to serve God's purposes. Keller's emphasis on the Gospel's transformative power in every aspect of life invites us to see revelation as not just a set of doctrines to believe but as a new way of living, shaped by the reality of Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

In their writings and sermons, both Wright and Keller emphasize the Bible's narrative arc, from Creation to New Creation, and how each part of Scripture contributes to this overarching story. This narrative approach to Scripture helps us see the Bible not as a collection of disjointed stories and teachings but as a cohesive narrative of God's ongoing revelation and redemptive work in the world. As we reflect on these modern interpretations of revelation, we are challenged to broaden our understanding and to see God's ongoing work in our world and our lives. The insights of Wright and Keller beckon us to engage with Scripture and our faith in a deeper, more holistic way, recognizing that revelation is an ongoing, dynamic process that invites our participation and transformation. Therefore, as we journey through our faith, let us do so with an openness to the ever-unfolding revelation of God, guided by the profound insights of thinkers like Wright and Keller. Let their interpretations enrich our understanding and experience of the divine, leading us to a deeper, more engaged Christian life.

In the rich tapestry of Christian literature, authors like C.S. Lewis, Henri Nouwen, and Thomas Merton illuminate the intricate dance between faith, reason, and personal encounters with God. Their writings, each distinct in style and perspective, converge on the profound truth of experiencing the divine in deeply personal ways, while also engaging the intellect and reason.

C.S. Lewis, with his unique blend of literary brilliance and theological insight, takes us on a journey from staunch atheism to a profound Christian faith in his autobiographical work, "Surprised by Joy." This journey is marked not by blind acceptance, but by rigorous questioning and heartfelt searching. Lewis describes his encounter with God as both an intellectual awakening and an emotional experience of joy and wonder. His story is a testament to the idea that faith and reason are not mutually exclusive but are deeply intertwined in the human experience of the divine.

Henri Nouwen, a master of spiritual empathy, guides us through the depths of the human heart in his contemplations. In "The Wounded Healer," Nouwen explores the idea that our deepest wounds can become sources of healing and understanding. His approach to personal encounters with God is one of vulnerability and openness, suggesting that it is in our brokenness that we often find the closest communion with the divine. Nouwen's reflections encourage us to embrace our imperfections and to see them as pathways to deeper spiritual understanding and connection.

Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk and mystic, brings a contemplative and mystical dimension to understanding personal revelation. In works like "New Seeds of Contemplation," Merton delves into the introspective journey of the soul towards God. He speaks of the importance of silence, solitude, and inner peace in cultivating an awareness of God's presence. Merton's perspective highlights the mystical aspect of Christian faith, where encounters with God transcend rational explanation and venture into the realm of the ineffable and transcendent.

These thinkers collectively emphasize that personal encounters with God involve a complex interplay of emotion, intellect, and spirit. They challenge us to not only seek God in the intellectual realm but to also open our hearts to the transformative power of His presence in our lives.

In sum, the insights of Lewis, Nouwen, and Merton present a holistic view of the Christian experience. They encourage us to embark on a journey that encompasses the mind, the heart, and the soul, recognizing that each aspect plays a vital role in our understanding of and relationship with God. Through their writings, we are invited to explore the mysteries of faith, engage with our doubts and questions, and open ourselves to the transformative power of encountering God in all aspects of our lives. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.