

Luke 2:22-40

²²When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³(as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), ²⁴and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. ²⁷Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, ²⁹“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” ³³And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.

³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” ³⁶There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. ³⁹When they had finished everything required by the

law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.⁴⁰ The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

“My Eyes have Seen My Salvation”

It seemed like Christmas had not even ended, and the world was ready to move on. On Christmas afternoon, I was in the car on my way to the airport to fly out to visit family, listening to the radio. The commercials were no longer about Christmas sales and gifts, but about weight loss plans and New Year’s Eve parties. The radio stations that were non-stop Christmas music that very morning, were now back to their “regular” programming. Before the day was over, the world was moving onto the next thing.

It can sometimes feel like that is what happens with the story of Jesus – we spend time with the baby in the manger, and then before we can blink twice he is an adult being baptized in the Jordan River. But today is the day we get to savor the infancy of Jesus – those first tender days when he cooed at his parents, snuggled in close at naptime, and probably had his share of nights when he cried more than he slept. Our reading for today, before we fast forward in time to his trip to the temple when he was 12, and then to his adulthood, is one that shows us the infant, and how he was raised.

Mary and Joseph were devoutly Jewish. At 8 days Jesus was circumcised, and now, at 40 days, he is brought to the temple. Mary has come for her purification, and the family has come to participate in the ancient practice of presenting their child to the Lord. Part of that presentation and setting aside their child as belonging to God is making a sacrificial offering. Mary and Joseph are so poor that they can only offer a pair of turtledoves or two pigeons as their sacrifice.¹ In their presentation of their son, Mary and Joseph demonstrate their confidence in God’s promises. We would not expect less from these two. Mary heard the voice of an angel

¹ Commentary on Gospel by Holly Hearon (workingpreacher.org).

and proclaimed that she would bear the son of God. They followed the civil rules - traveling to Bethlehem for the census, and now continue to follow the religious rules of traveling to the temple. Their devotion is evident, and provides the basis for our understanding that Jesus was raised to be observant of the laws – both civil and religious - and to practice his faith from the time he was born.

Mary, Joseph and Jesus enter the temple grounds. There are over 30 acres of land and buildings, and many people were there. The odds of Simeon and Anna running into Mary, Joseph, and their child were slim to none. However, the Holy Spirit guides Simeon to the temple that day, and the encounter happens. Jesus upbringing is not the focus of the passage – it is what happens when he is brought to the temple that Luke wants us to experience. Jesus is recognized by someone outside of the family for who he is by Simeon and Anna. Not only did these two see him, they saw him for who he was – different from any other infant who entered the gates before or after. Author Madeline L’Engle – she wrote a *Wrinkle in Time* – says this about the meeting, “eight days after the baby was born he was circumcised and he was called Jesus, because that was the name the angel had told Joseph to give him... How remarkable, how beyond the bounds of ordinary possibility, that two old people should see a small baby and recognize that he was the Light of the World! Was it perhaps because they were so old, so near to the Beyond, that they were able to see what caught up in the cares of life could not see?”²

L’Engle’s description of Simeon and Anna is so beautiful, and so true – that these two aged individuals were so near to the Beyond that they could see what people caught up in the cares of the everyday could not see. Simeon recognizes the child at once – he knows that this child is the salvation he has been waiting so long to see with his own eyes. He had been

² Imaging the Word

promised that before he died, he would see the salvation of the world, and he knows this is it. His faith in God is so deep, so complete, that he knows this promise will be answered. He woke up that morning, and went about what he usually does. Washed his face, ate breakfast, visited with friends, and maybe went out to the shop. But then he is called to the temple by that voice in his gut that he cannot ignore – the voice of the Holy Spirit. And he goes. Anna, the widow, was 84 years old. She had not left the temple since the death of her husband, and she too knew that she would see the savior before she died. They are together when the young couple comes in, and they immediately know. Simeon reaches out his arms to hold the baby, and the tiny Jesus is placed in his calloused hands. The old man cradles the infant, and you can see the joy on his face, the Light of the World brings light to his eyes. Simeon gazes into the eyes of Jesus, and he recognizes him. The child whose conception was announced by angels and whose birth was marked by a star looks back, and Simeon sees him for who and what he really is. God. Simeon is so close to the Beyond, that he can see the Beyond in this child. He prays, he sings, he offers these words to God, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

But Simeon does not stop there. He has some hard words for Mary to hear as well – words about the life and death of her son. In him will be the falling and rising of a great nation, and in that, Mary’s heart will be broken. Anna too, recognizes that this child is different, that he is their salvation. She is called prophet, and her words are not recorded by Luke. But her response made enough of an impression, that when Luke writes this account more than 70 years after the destruction of the temple, the gist of Anna’s response remains. Like Simeon, she

praises God, and she tells everyone who will listen to her that this child is the redemption of Israel. He is the one for whom they have waited for so very long.

In Anna and Simeon we see the first response from those outside the immediate family and those present at the birth. We also see patience. These two had waited for so long – their entire lives - to see their salvation, and here he is. They saw him with their own eyes, and Simeon tells God that he can “go in peace” – the final promise of his life has been fulfilled. Just as the calendar moves pages from year to year, just as the Christmas decorations are put away and we begin to look forward, the cycle of life also continues here. In the beginning of the life of Christ, we see the end of the lives of Anna and Simeon. In the newness of the life of Christ, we see two aged individuals with wisdom, knowledge, faith, and patience that we can all learn from.

If we were to make a list of things our culture values, youth would be at or near the top of the list. There are products to hide wrinkles, cover grey hair, make us look younger, act younger, and appear to be younger. The Holy Grail, it seems is really the fountain of youth. How many times have we heard phrases like “60 is the new 40” or been really excited because the cashier at the grocery store asked to see our ID when we bought a bottle of wine. Supermodels advertise entire skin regimens to take years of our face in a matter of weeks, and yesterday I saw an infomercial for facelifts that can be done quickly and discreetly. Being seen as “old” is frowned upon in our culture, and I wonder how Anna and Simeon would have fit in today.

“Old” has become a bad word to use to describe someone. Yet, I argue that it is from those who are older than we are that we can learn the most. Certainly in a family setting, but also in community settings. Two teenagers took their infant into the temple, and it was those who had more wisdom, experience, and knowledge who proclaimed with full force that this child

was the messiah for whom they had been waiting. Perhaps it is easier to see beyond the immediate when you have lived a full life and have a different perspective? Perhaps, the time spent waiting had cultivated a sense of patience in the two? But it was through their eyes that we experience Christ in today's reading. We can also see the benefits of being part of a larger religious community. These young parents had no idea what to expect that day -remember Mary was still a teenager. And they come to their house of worship and can draw upon the experience of those who have raised children. It is at church that we can experience the same thing. In this reading, it is the old who clearly can see and name their salvation, and they guide the young. There is a community present in the temple, just as there is a community present here. A community that provides a safe space for those in all ages and stages of life to worship and work together. We see youth being led by those who are 10, 15, and 20 years older than them. We watch as some of our retired members teach Sunday School. And if you have ever been to dinner with the Mothers of Young Children group, you have seen those who have gone before passing their wisdom along to those who follow behind.

When babies are born, we have such hopes for them. Parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles and siblings and friends dream and imagine their futures. What will be the first words she speaks? How far will his first steps take him? Will they cry when they get on the bus to go to kindergarten or look back and wave? Is he a writer or is she a scientist? Will they like sports? Who will the first girlfriend or boyfriend be? Who will be the last? Weddings, families, careers are all imagined, hopes created, and wishes wished for the life of this child. There is a wider circle beyond the immediate family who hope and wish the same things, and here at church we do that also. But sometimes, we need to hear about the things beyond wishes and dreams. Not only when raising children, but just traveling through life. Couples marrying can benefit from

the wisdom of those who have been married for 30 years. Students heading off to college may want to hear about the times that will be hard, not just the parties and fun. When a spouse dies, those who have experienced similar events can offer council and support. Sometimes, we need the voices of those who have gone before to say the hard things to us as well - to help us correct when we have veered off course, or see the situation in a different way. Simeon and Anna, as much joy as they proclaim, also have hard news to tell. We can imagine it took courage for Simeon to tell Mary and Joseph all that he knew about the life of their son. And we must also have the faith and courage to say that hard things, in love to one another. Simeon was preparing Mary for the difficulties that lay ahead, and we have that responsibility to each other to do that as well. To say that there will be nights when the baby will not sleep and you will want to do anything to make the tears stop – both yours and the child’s. To say that after the divorce there will be days that the world does not make sense. Someone to say that the honeymoon will end, and reality will set in, or that in time the pain of death does lessen and you will find a way to move forward, even if you cannot see it now. Not to encourage you to focus on the negative, but to provide a safe loving space to come when it happens. Those who have gone before have the wisdom to share for those who come after.

I get to spend a lot of time with the “older adults” in our congregation – it is something I truly enjoy. It is rare for me to leave a visit, a lunch or a field trip without learning something from those who have lived longer than I have and who have experience to share. I’m not going to tell any tales – I think what happens on the bus stays on the bus -- but what strikes me is how my faith is deepened by the time we spend together. Whether it is hearing about a devotional practice of one who has been reading the Bible for hours every day for over 70 years, or hearing a grandparent talk about praying for their grandchild, the work God is still doing is evident. Not

only am I privileged to hear the marvelous stories of youth in a time before my birth, but there is almost always a nugget of wisdom in the conversations we have. It is not an intentional “now I’m going to teach you” but a natural part of our time together. Sometimes it happens in the kitchen at Friendship Table as we gather to cook and serve, sometimes it happens at a table in Chik fil-A. Those who are closer to the beyond, as L’Engle put it, have a way of showing how they encounter Christ that is fearless and bold. The concerns of “what might people think” are no longer immediate, and so often what is spoken by our oldest friends and members is their encounter with Christ. They help me see Christ in ways I had not imagined.

Simeon encountered God. And he recognized his salvation – he saw the salvation of the world and he announced it to all who would hear. He had patiently waited. He had sat for a long time waiting for this child to enter into his life, and when the child arrived, he tenderly cradled him and announced that this was indeed the event he had been waiting for all these years. How do we recognize the light of the world in our lives? How do you see the Christ-child each day? Together, we recognize him here. Together we see him when we feed the hungry, when we teach children, when we sing music or attend meetings. Together we encounter the living Christ. We learn from each other, we speak the truth in love, and we proclaim the ways in which the light of the world has broken into our world. Each of us is at a different age and stage. And each of us has an experience with Christ to share with one another.

As we look back on the year that has just ended, and look forward on the year that is ahead, ask yourself this – How have you seen the child that was born to Mary and Joseph not just as a baby, but as God with us? Who helps you recognize the light of the world when you may miss it? What memories of those who are older and wiser help you listen for God? Who are

Anna and Simeon for you? Or, are you Anna or Simeon, showing Christ to those around you? How do you recognize God in your midst? And how do you respond when you meet Him?

One way we recognize Christ in our midst is when we come to this table. We sit with all those who have come before, and will come after, and we experience Christ. We cannot hold the child as Simeon did, we cannot gaze into his eyes as Anna had the chance to do. What we can do is gather here – we can see our salvation in the breaking of the bread and the raising of the cup. We can touch Christ when we touch hands passing the plates of bread and juice. We tangibly experience Christ at this table – we respond to the news of his birth and later his death by remembering and encountering him here. Just as we move forward in time packing up the Christmas decorations and turning the calendar page, the Christ child moves forward as well. He is born, he lives, and he dies. Through this act, our eyes can indeed see our salvation. Through our community, we can share that experience with each other. As we make resolutions for this year, I encourage you to consider making some different resolutions – resolve to find a way to recognize Christ everyday. Resolve to not only recognize Christ, but to share that recognition as Simeon and Anna did. Resolve to defy the culture of youth and hear the words of wisdom of those who went before. It was in a child that an old man saw his salvation. How will you see that child, and how will you respond to the ways he will shape your life? In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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