

Luke 2:22-35
Simeon's Post-Partum Praise Song
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Dr. Sanjay Gupta, neurosurgeon and chief medical reporter for CNN, tells the story of bringing his young daughter to pre-school one morning. From the rear-view mirror, he noticed her reaching into his medical bag next to her and pulling out his stethoscope, putting it up to her ears and looking at the diaphragm, the chest-piece at the end of the device. His thoughts ran immediately to her future medical career, proud that she was already emulating her father. She then brought the chest-piece to her mouth and said, "Welcome to McDonald's. May I take your order?"

Ah the dreams parents have for their children! Now, Dr. Gupta did not go on to observe that working at McDonald's may carry its own dignity or worth, and didn't explain how a child of a health care provider was so well-versed in the language of McDonald's, but you get the picture: most parents have aspirations for their children. Even parents like Mary and Joseph. Maybe especially like Mary and Joseph, given the presence of angels surrounding the pregnancy and birth.

I'm certain that many of you have a photo album or digital file filled with details of your first years. Maybe there are pictures of a baby shower, from the hospital, baptism pictures, first step pictures, high chair with gooey food pictures. Parents take those pictures and keep those pictures not only as a record of life's moments, but also—if we're honest—as a record of the earliest beginnings that forecast our dreams for our children.

The closest thing we have of a family photo album of Jesus Christ is what we read in the first two chapters of Luke's gospel. He's assembled a detailed photo album—a string of descriptive snapshots for us to consider. And we can't help but notice, if we look carefully, that they all have something in common. All of them reflect the joy and gladness, the victory and consummation, the fulfillment and peace that has come with this little baby Jesus. All these snapshots in the first two chapters of Luke's gospel say to us: "Hey, look at what God's been doing." Luke's album reminds me of a manger scene I saw in front of a church. It was the traditional manger, full of hay, but filled with nothing else other than a bright yellow diamond construction sign which said "Caution: God at Work".

This morning we look at one of Luke's last images. We see 40-day old baby Jesus. But there's something different about this snapshot. While it reflects all the themes of fulfillment it adds a new twist to the importance of Jesus' birth. There's a new dimension here which can illumine our lives this Advent season.

Mary and Joseph and Jesus were Jews and were still bound by the ceremonial laws given to God's chosen people. Mary and Joseph were in the temple that day to do two things. The first was to offer a purification sacrifice. The second was to consecrate and dedicate their baby to God. Jews were required to dedicate all their first born, whether animal or human.

Luke captures some rich and significant detail to show the poverty into which Jesus was born. You remember the earlier barn scene; not exactly the Bethlehem Marriot. Here Luke observes that Mary and Joseph sacrificed two pigeons in the temple. Jewish law said that you must sacrifice a lamb, but the poor who couldn't afford a lamb could sacrifice two pigeons. So, Jesus, our King, was born to parents in poverty.

They probably didn't expect to bump into old man Simeon in the temple, or listen to his prophetic words. But Simeon was there for a purpose too. Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit had seen to it.

We don't know much about Simeon, but he is described as a righteous and devout man who was waiting for the consolation of Israel, which simply means that he was longing for the Messiah, as were many of his day. But Simeon had an edge. He had been told by the Holy Spirit that he wouldn't die before his waiting was rewarded. Simeon was promised that he wouldn't die before his hope had been fulfilled. Now, we don't know how old Simeon was when he had received this astounding revelation. We don't know whether he had been waiting for years or days. But what exciting news! And just what did the Spirit tell him? "Look for a tanned and muscular military type charismatic leader on a white horse disguised as a baby?" No, apparently this: "look for a baby with two ragamuffin, poor and homeless-looking parents? You'll know them when you see them."

In the temple courts Simeon saw this unlikely trio, took the baby in his arms and said: "Sovereign Lord as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

Simeon was like that soldier in the U.S. cavalry out west long ago. He was assigned by his superior to keep watch all night until sunrise, and then he would be dismissed. So, the soldier watches at his post in the fort, he waits and waits, the hours go by slowly, and then he sees the rising sun. He can go in peace, for his rest has come.

That's how it was with Simeon. He could now go in peace, for he saw God's rising Son, Jesus the Messiah. He had witnessed his Savior.

In his words of praise to God Simeon said two things about this baby Messiah. He spoke of God's preparation and of this baby's world-wide impact.

The preparation is, of course, the history of the Old Testament, the perpetual redemption of the people Israel at the hand of the redeeming Lord. From the promise to Eve, the promise to Abraham, the deliverance of his people from bondage and captivity in Egypt, and the renewal of the covenant with Jeremiah and the prophets, God was at work preparing the world for the Messiah. Simeon knew this history, and he was holding the high point of all this in his arms. Baby Jesus. Savior Jesus. Simeon could go in peace.

The world-wide impact of this baby's birth is found in the words "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." Again, we see God's promises kept. Abraham was told that from his line a nation would grow which would be a blessing to all other nations of the world. From the nation Israel of the tribe of Judah, would come a Savior for the world. Salvation is now opened to the Gentiles. Come and get it! What the early church had to so carefully learn Simeon already saw. Baby Jesus. Savior Jesus. For the world! Simeon could go in peace.

What Simeon did and said astounded Mary and Joseph. Even after angel's visits, things were still miraculous around them. Here was a perfect stranger telling them that this little baby who cried and soiled his rags, and kept his parents awake at night was to be the Messiah, the Savior of the world.

Imagine what this was like. Imagine yourself as a parent at the baptism of your child. Some old guy—maybe as old as me—comes up from the congregation, takes your child in his arms and says with all the intensity and sincerity he can muster that your child is to become President of the United States. We'd probably call the elders on foyer duty, call the police and escort this strange person outside.

Bad illustration perhaps, but you get the picture.

And Simeon said more. He adds a new twist, a new dimension to the significance of this baby. That happens when he turns to Mary—not Joseph by the way—and says that this baby will cause the rising and falling of many in Israel and that Mary herself will suffer sorrow at the treatment given her son.

With these words we receive the first glimmer of the conflicts which were to confront Jesus in his life and ministry, conflicts which eventually brought about his crucifixion and death, conflicts that serve as a theme in the book of Luke and later Acts. And as Jesus began his ministry and preached the Kingdom good news of things which would turn the world upside down—the last first, the poor rich, losing life by saving it—he suffered rejection, envy and persecution at the hands of the authorities threatened by the very real Kingdom of God. And Mary experienced ever increasing grief, as Simeon prophesied.

This Simeon snapshot from Luke's photo album is reinforced in a second snapshot in another book of the Bible, a book written to encourage the church caught up in the conflict Simeon prophesied. The Book of Revelation, best read as a drama played out before our eyes or as a graphic novel artfully illustrated, paints another snapshot for the album of Christ's birth.

Have you ever sent or received a Christmas card with a picture of a dragon on it? Or a dragon in a manger scene on a neighborhood lawn or in a storefront window? I doubt it very much.

You see, Snapshot Two moves us from the tranquility of a Bethlehem hillside and stable, or a dedication scene in the Jerusalem temple—what we usually associate with the birth of the Christ child—to the arena of cosmic warfare. We move from calm to conflict. The serenity of a bright starlit night isn't to be found in this description of the birth of Christ. No "Sweet Little Baby Boy." In the vision from Revelation the babe and mother are surrounded by something terrifying

and threatening. No “Silent Night” here. There’s a dragon in the delivery room. Listen to the drama from Revelation chapter 12. Better yet, close your eyes and imagine the images as I read them: (When was the last time you heard a preacher invite you to close your eyes? Some of you have already done that about five minutes ago, but for the rest of you, give it a try and listen carefully with your fullest imagination):

“A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne ... Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring—those who obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus.”

(OK. Open your eyes now)

Not exactly a bedtime story meant to lullaby kids to sleep. It is a picture of the conflict of which Simeon prophesied, with a new wrinkle: not only would the baby experience conflict, but those who followed this Christ child would as well.

So how does this child conquer in the conflicts he faced? What child is this?

He established a kingdom—that’s why he came and what he announced—a kingdom with a distinct character and style, unlike anything the world had seen. A kingdom populated by those who live in God’s grace and in God’s light, those who love God and their neighbors without hesitation. Those who in God’s grace and in gratitude for that grace die to self and take up their own cross each day.

During Advent, what’s to be done with this Jesus? What child is this? The righteousness and justice of Jesus Christ were so radiant that they exposed darkness wherever he went and whenever he announced the coming of God’s kingdom. **And so must Christ’s followers!** So must you, and so must I.

The days ahead, the new year ahead, will provide opportunities galore for Christ’s righteousness and justice to radiate through us, exposing darkness wherever we go and inviting others into the light. What’s ahead for us? What will we say, and to whom, about being consistently and thoroughly pro-life, about our racism and institutional racism around us, the homeless, stewardship of energy and food in a needy world, about political decision making, about choices of a career in a success-dominated world?

As Simeon held that baby, he saw painful but necessary conflict ahead. That happens whenever and wherever Christ’s righteousness announces the Kingdom of grace and shines light in the darkness. May Simeon’s words haunt us if we find ourselves too comfortable in our Christian

walk, too glib in these days of Advent, or too oblivious to the world around us. We ought to squirm a bit if our faith is never inconvenient, we're never put out of our way in serving others, we never suffer concern with and for others or for our church, we never experience opposition for doing what is right and honest, we never find the faith costly because it calls for our time or our money or our talent.

You see, we have an advantage over Simeon, even though he had the direct insight of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit's direction and sense of timing, and the gift to prophecy about the baby's significance. While he experienced joy and awe, peace and contentment at the sight of Baby Jesus, we know more fully what it meant for Baby Jesus to become Savior Jesus.

We stand in awe and wonder at the cross.

We stand in awe and wonder at Jesus being raised from the dead for us, ascending to heaven, reigning over all, sending his Spirit, saving the world.

We stand in awe and wonder at the thought of his return, because we are now in a period of the second Advent as well.

Helmut Thielicke, a German theologian, gave this description of what Kingdom building looks like:

“Christ builds his kingdom somewhat the way a monument is built—hidden from sight by high scaffolding. Sometimes we hear banging and hammering, but we see neither the workman nor what he is working on until the construction fences fall away, and the sign and token of God's majesty rises among us.”

So, people of God, the system is rigged after all! The Kingdom comes. God's will is done. Through it all—and there's a lot of “all”—the Kingdom prevails.

I imagine that as Mary the mother of Jesus stood at the foot of the cross old man Simeon's words came back to her, and she thought that this was likely what he meant. The baby was born to die. Perhaps only later, as this Jesus was resurrected, ascended to heaven, sent his Spirit among his followers, did Mary see the much fuller and richer story encapsulated in Simeon's words: this risen and ascended Lord through his Spirit sends the Gospel of grace and the good news of the Kingdom throughout the world, to Jew and Gentile. And the conflict that results whenever the gospel and Kingdom go out causes the rising and falling of many hearts.

But hear the good news and be assured of this, as the choir has reminded us today:

“Behold your Lord! He will come in power and glory,
He will rule with mercy and truth,
Hope of all nations, Light of the world.”

Amen