

First Presbyterian Church
Luke 2:22-40, “Gifts for Baby Jesus ... and for Us”
Rev. Matt Johnson 12/31/2023

So... what was your favorite thing you got for Christmas?
And what was the favorite gift
that you gave to someone else for Christmas?

We know that the actual *things* we give and receive
are rarely of lifechanging significance,
but the *fact* of gift giving certainly is lifechanging.

The ritual of giving gifts goes well beyond the items that are given:
it opens up a window into our hearts and as those who follow
Christ, the ritual of giving gifts at the time of Jesus’
birth also offers us a glimpse into the heart of God.

And what is the heart of God like?

God is delighted with us, and sings songs over us!
Zephaniah 3:17 says this, **“The Lord will take great delight in you;
in his love he will no longer rebuke you,
but will rejoice over you with singing.”**

In the incarnation God revealed the ultimate reason
for rejoicing over us with singing:
Jesus was here to restore the relationship
between God and humanity.

I’m intrigued by thinking of God’s work in our lives
as singing songs over us and even through us.

Last week we heard this singing through the songs of Mary,
Zechariah, and offerings from other poets who bring us hope.

These songs recorded in Luke 1 are, in a sense, the original Christmas gifts
which have continued to bless the faithful
from generation to generation.

So today we get to open gifts for baby Jesus from Simeon and Anna.

Three things to frame our consideration of Simeon:

His story begins with waiting,
he is guided by the Holy Spirit,
and the gift-song itself points God's people
in a new direction.

Simeon Waits For Consolation

Simeon is one of my favorite side characters in Luke's gospel.

Simeon was righteous and devout, and he was waiting for
the consolation, the comforting, of Israel.

Can you picture this elderly man whose whole life had become oriented
around praying, waiting, longing for the Messiah to set things right?

He's *longing* for something. He's waiting, just like we waited for Christmas
to come through the four weeks of Advent.

And the text tells us that what he's longing for
is the "consolation of Israel." What does that mean?

We know from Genesis and Exodus
that God originally gave a high calling to Israel.

A calling for Israel to be a light unto the nations
so that all peoples of the earth would be blessed
and worship the One, True God.

But time after time Israel fell short of their calling.

Not only that, but they turned away from God
and sought comfort and consolation in other places.

As a result, God allowed adversaries to overtake Israel
and they were exiled first by Persia and then later Assyria.

But even in the midst of this exile,
God sent hope to the Israelites through the prophets.

Isaiah writes in chapter 40,

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." (Handel's Messiah)

Isaiah saw a consolation on the way,
the fulfillment of all the things that Israel was supposed to be
and internally longed for was on the way.

We also long for consolation and comforting from God, don't we?

So Simeon was waiting for Israel to be consoled,
and God told him that he would not die
before he saw the Anointed One God was sending
to finally set things right.

The word “Messiah” is Hebrew and “Christ” is Greek,
but they mean the same thing—Anointed One.
(This is how we know that Christ isn’t Jesus’ real last name.)

Simeon was waiting his whole life for God’s Anointed.
Can you imagine his joy and delight when his eyes
first fell upon Jesus, the very one he was waiting for?
...But how would he have known?

This leads us to the second thing we see here,
which is that...**Simeon Is Led By The Holy Spirit**

3 times we hear about the Holy Spirit—

- in verse 25 that the Holy Spirit was upon Simeon,
- in verse 26 that the Holy Spirit revealed to Simeon that he would see the Lord’s Anointed One before he died.
- And then in verse 27 Luke writes that the Holy Spirit led Simeon to the temple courts that day.

This is a very high concentration of references to the Spirit.

And I think Luke is saying something to us,
he’s billboarding the Holy Spirit here,
because the gift-song that Simeon brings to Jesus
tells us so much about what God’s Spirit is about.

He’s saying, “Don’t miss that the Holy Spirit was involved here folks!”
So...we shouldn’t miss it, either, okay?
Don’t explain away the role of God’s Spirit in your life.

Back on December 20th, I got a phone call from someone I’ve never met.
It was a father inquiring about his son,
who he said was living on the streets in McMinnville
for the past three years.

He was hoping I could look out for him and maybe reach out to him
if I saw him. The name and description he gave didn’t
ring a bell with me, but I said I would keep an eye out.

But he told me he was wearing a blue and yellow coat,
gave me his height and general description.
That was a father seeking consolation.

That very night was our monthly session meeting with our elders.
After the meeting I was greeted by a couple of people who needed
help getting to a shelter.
As I was talking with them about their options and what I could do to help,
I see someone walking across the parking lot in what looks to be
a blue and yellow coat.
So I call out to this guy and ask him if he knows any shelters that are open.
I quickly figure out that this is the very guy
whose dad had called me that morning.
I let him know that God loves him and other people do, too,
and that he should come by the church some time.
I called back this guy's father the next day and let him know that I had
made contact with him and we would be ready to connect with him
at any time.

I don't know what will come of it, but I have no doubt that
this was a connection made by the Holy Spirit.
Simeon's story reminds us that the work of the Spirit
is always to point us and others toward Jesus.

There is a direct connection between the Holy Spirit
and the *consolation* that Simeon is waiting for,
the consolation that this father's son is waiting for,
and the consolation that you are waiting for.

Third, Simeon's Song Points In A New Direction

You have to picture the scene in your mind:
Mary and Joseph have purchased a couple of pigeons
and were taking Jesus in to be circumcised
according to Jewish tradition.
He's fussing and cooing, and the birds are flapping around.

And as they are entering into the courts,
walking through this great crowd of people,
Joseph carrying the pigeons in a small cage,
this elderly man pushes through the gathering of people,
and reaches out to take Jesus
from the arms of Mary.

Did they know Simeon? Was he a regular figure at the temple?
We don't know.

But Simeon takes Jesus in his arms, and he praises God.
I can see him holding Jesus up to the sky—and he says,

**“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
a light of revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel.”**

It's amazing to me that he's looking at the baby Jesus and says to God,
“My eyes have seen your salvation.”

Salvation isn't a cross, or an event, or a ticket to heaven...
it's a *person*. The person of Jesus is our salvation.
And when Simeon saw this baby, he saw the salvation of Israel.

But, and this is where it gets interesting, not merely the salvation of Israel.
The Spirit of God is moving through Israel into Jesus,
and also beyond Israel.

Simeon sings that Jesus is a light of revelation *to the Gentiles!*

In bringing salvation to all people,
Jesus fulfills all that Israel was originally
called to be. He's the glory, and the consolation, of Israel.

After all their centuries of waiting and hoping,
Israel's consolation comes not in a return to global prominence,
but through a Messiah who comes to announce
God's love for all people, and all creation.

What a reversal! The primary work of God's Spirit is
to bring about the great reversal that these songs all point to.

That's what Luke's Gospel and the book of Acts are about,
and that's what Christmas is about:

God sending Jesus to be all that his people were called to be,
so that the good news of God's reign on earth
through Jesus of Nazareth might spread to all peoples.

Repent and believe the good news,
Jesus once said, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.
That's true for us today.

Finally, we come to the gift of Anna.

We learn that Anna lived a tragic life by some standards.
Married for 7 years and then a widow for 84.
She was a truly elderly lady.

No husband, no children, but her life was not lived in vain.
Her life was a gift to the Lord Jesus that we read about in the Bible
two thousand years later.
Think about that.

She worshiped day and night, fasting and praying.
She made the temple her home.

I think we have some Anna's here at this church.
Can I get an "Amen"?

There are women in this church that absolutely blow my mind
with the willingness to serve and offer their immense
skills and time and energy to the Lord.

We are blessed and the community around us is blessed
by some amazing people, women and men, who I see here just about
every day of the week,
and I'm not even around on Fridays and Saturdays!

So Anna comes up to Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus,
and she prophecies about this child to (and I quote from v. 38 here)
"all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem."

Well. That line hits home for me in our current time and place.
We long for the redemption of both Jerusalem and Palestine
to be free from slavery to violence that begets violence.

I long to be free from news stories
about who is inflicting genocide upon whom.

Anna saw that Jesus was central
to the redemption of Jerusalem in her own day.
Not as a departure from Judaism, but in continuity with it.

These are the gifts brought to Jesus on the day of his circumcision,
the day of his inclusion in the covenant people of God.

They are also gifts for us.

We are people who long for consolation,
who desperately need the movement of the Holy Spirit,
who are being pointed in a new direction
that we cannot fully comprehend.

We are people who are awaiting the arrival of Jesus *for the second time*.
Let us learn from our brother Simeon and our sister Anna,
let us turn to our God earnestly and persistently in prayer
so that we can be ready to share in the gifts
of God who delights in us and sings songs over us.