

## Message for Jan. 17, 2021

### Luke 2.22-40

We have such an interesting story, and I couldn't help but wonder why we don't hear it more often. It usually comes up in our lectionary (scheduled scripture readings) the Sunday after Christmas. A date when we have admittedly low church attendance, particularly for clergy type folks. Luckily, we're not married to the readings and can move them around to continue our exploration and learning.

This is the presentation of the infant Jesus in the temple. We can picture something like it. A young family brings their newborn baby to church to be blessed. For this family, it was a ritual of consecration and remembrance. They bring their firstborn and an offering. This is done in thanks and praise. But also "in accordance with the Law." This phrase is used five times in this passage alone. It is to show that this child has not come to oppose the faith, but to live within it. It is also a link back to Moses who was the first to receive and share the law. This is a reminder of the Exodus story when the firstborn of Israel were ransomed and redeemed by God. Such promises continue.

For us, it might be a baptism. We can imagine new parents bringing their baby to the church to be baptized. To me, Simeon and Anna are representatives of the best of a "church family." The relationships that we form with those whom we share worship. In simpler, non-Covid times, we can even imagine doting on the family. Offering congratulations or advice to sleep deprived parents. Someone (definitely me, but maybe someone else too) might ask to hold the baby, declaring as they snuggle, that this child is precious and blessed. Imagine if this is the blessing that was declared:

*This child is destined to be the downfall and the rise of many (in Israel), and to be a sign that is rejected, so that the secret thoughts of many may be laid bare. And a sword shall pierce your soul as well.*

Can you imagine?

If you overheard those words?

If they were spoken to you?

What kind of blessing is this?

It's a question that we've asked before, and I'm sure we will ask again.  
Because the blessings of God sometimes feel very mixed.

In her song, Mary has proclaimed that "all generations will call me blessed" and here it is. Simeon blesses her and Joseph but also tells her that there will be pain in her future as well. Which is how it goes when we love deeply. To watch someone we care about take risks and put themselves out there causes us great anxiety. To see them hurt, hurts us as well. I have no doubt that when Mary was at the foot of the cross, her heart broke. When the soldier pierced Jesus' side to confirm his death, she felt that sword go straight through her soul.

This would have been Jesus' initiation into a life of learning about his faith tradition. What do you think his parents told him about that day? How would that affect his sense of self growing up? Did they mention Simeon and Anna and what they said?

Simeon was righteous and devout. He lived a life of faith and justice. And he had been waiting a long time for consolation. The Spirit had promised him that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. The Spirit is what guided him to the temple that day, and showed him what had been promised, the Messiah, comfort and solace. So this is another one of those mixed blessings. Now is his time - his waiting has been rewarded, and his death is now imminent.

He holds salvation in his arms and he sings:

*Now, O God, you can dismiss your servant in peace just as you promised  
because my eyes have seen the salvation  
which you have prepared for all the peoples to see-  
a light of revelation (to the Gentiles)  
and the glory of your people (Israel).*

This song is often called the Nunc Dimittis, the Latin of “Now You Dismiss.” It has evolved to be associated with evening worship services where our prayers declares “I have been faithful and now God will let me sleep in comfort and protection.” The Nunc Dimittis is about the fading of the old before the new.

This brings me to the New Year. Many of us have long been ready to let go of 2020. If you printed a colouring sheet for today, I would invite you to write a word of letting go. Maybe a farewell or dismissal, maybe something that you are leaving behind. Maybe enough time has passed that we are ready to also see that there were good things in 2020 as well. Perhaps you want to write down one blessing or joy of the past year.

The Nunc Dimittis is about the realization of hope. But that doesn’t just “happen.” Simeon lived a life of devotion and determination. He was open to the Spirit. Because of that he could see, in the Christ child, the fulfilment of his longing. And ours. Simeon represents our personal and universal hopes. So, I would invite you to either write down or consider your hope for the new year.

He is an example of humility and faithfulness. As is Anna. Now Anna was a widow. The Scripture tells us that she lived with her husband for seven years after which, she devoted herself to a life of faith essentially living at the Temple. She worshipped day and night, fasted and prayed. She was the daughter of Phanuel, whose name means “face of God” and from the tribe of Asher, which means happy. She was a prophet.

Now, she sees the face of God and is happy. She preaches about the child to all who were looking for redemption. She speaks to us. But we do not know what she says.

We can guess that it likely was a blessing similar to what we have heard before. Great joy and thanksgiving but also a warning that that comes at a cost. To be consecrated, made holy, requires sacrifice. To see God’s grace is to live by justice and be led by the Spirit. We have many of the same longings and hopes. For comfort. For consolation. For redemption. All are at hand. Anna and Simeon are examples of faithfulness and humility.

Let our searching be led by the Spirit.  
Let our living be according to the Law.  
Let our longings be fulfilled.  
Let us go in peace and protection.  
Amen.