

Presentation of Our Lord, February 2, 2025
Luke 2:22-40

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

What would it take for you to utter the words of Simeon in our Gospel reading today, “my eyes have seen your salvation,” as a spontaneous response to what you had encountered in worship? I mean besides singing Simeon’s song, “*O Lord, Now Let Your Servant,*” which of course we picked as our final hymn today. But what could cause you not only to sing those words, but also to believe them from the heart, to feel “that’s it! God finally is showing up to save God’s people. God is finally here to right what is wrong, to mend what is broken, and to turn this disastrously upside-down world right-side up”?

The festival of the Presentation of Our Lord comes around every February 2, but in most years it goes by unnoticed, overshadowed (as it were) by Groundhog Day. But every five or six years it falls on a Sunday, and we get a chance to engage again this wonderful story from the birth narratives in Luke. And it’s particularly nice that this year it lines up with our being in lectionary year C, the year of Luke, because it’s a story that appears only in Luke’s Gospel. It takes up the second half of chapter two, the first half being our Christmas Eve reading about the shepherds and the angels. Today’s reading continues the theme light in the darkness, of the glory of God shining into the shepherd’s long, dark night and proclaiming to them the birth of their savior.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. That’s already the third thing I want us to see in this story. I’ve got two other things to lift up first, and we’ll return to this theme after I’ve given us more context to appreciate how it is good news for us today.

The first thing to notice is these two people, Simeon and Anna, who appear in the temple as the holy family arrive for the rite of purification that was required by the ritual law of Israel after the birth of the first child. The meaning of the rite was recognizing that all we have comes from God, and just as the firstborn livestock and the first fruits of the harvest were offered to God, so was the first child. Except of course that you don’t sacrifice children. I say “of course,” but child sacrifice was actually a common practice across many (maybe all?) ancient religions – a topic for another time, perhaps. But the idea of the first child belonging to God remained, and so this rite of purification was about redeeming the child, essentially buying back the child by making another offering. That offering was ideally supposed to be a lamb, but if a family couldn’t afford a lamb they could bring doves to be sacrificed. And that is what Mary and Joseph bring, indicating that they are not people of means.

Anyway, that is all background information that Luke’s original audience would have just known, but for which we have to do a little work. Back to Simeon and Anna. And what I want us to think about in connection with them is what it was that drew their attention to this particular family. Because chances are they were not the only ones showing up to the temple that day for this particular rite. If you look up paintings of the Presentation online, you’ll find that in many of them the baby Jesus has a halo around his head. And in some the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, is shining down light on him, making clear that he is someone very special. But if you could travel back in time and be a fly on the wall at this event, what would you have seen? I don’t think you would have seen a halo, or a light shining from heaven. You would have seen a poor family, perhaps one of many, mixed in with the crowd of people showing up at the temple for various reasons. It would likely have been a day indistinguishable from the day before or the day after. So how did they know that Jesus was special, and which of the children in the temple that day he was?

Well, the first thing that Luke tells us about Simeon is that he was “devout and looking forward to the consolation of Israel.” In other words, he was trusting God’s promise, made long ago by the prophets, that God would redeem Israel, buy God’s people back from their years of captivity and subjugation and send them their own king, the Messiah. That’s the first thing we learn, that Simeon’s faith made him pay attention and expect God’s salvation. But then the second thing we learn about Simeon is that the Holy Spirit had assured him that he would get to see the Messiah with his own eyes, and that the Holy Spirit had led him to the temple, and to this family on this particular day. So we’ve got divine revelation at work here. And we don’t exactly know how that worked. Was it like the GPS in your car? “In fifty feet, enter the temple. Turn left into the courtyard. The holy family is on your right. You have arrived.” We have no idea how that actually worked, only that the Spirit led Simeon. But what about Anna? Luke doesn’t say the same thing about her. It does say that she was a prophet, though, which the Bible doesn’t often say about women. And Luke tells us that she was in the temple constantly. So she like Simeon was focused on God and God’s promises. But it is only when Simeon speaks of the child that she appears and begins speaking about him. Maybe the Holy Spirit guided her the same way the Spirit guided Simeon. But maybe it was Simeon’s proclamation that caught her attention. Now I don’t mean at all to diminish her. What I want is to connect both her and Simeon to our own experience. I don’t know about you, but I have not had direct revelation straight from Holy Spirit, that I know of anyway. But I have had my faith awakened and strengthened by another person speaking God’s promise to me, whether it was a pastor in a sermon, or my parents singing the promises in the liturgy, and teaching me to sing along, or a sister or brother in Christ being a companion and conversation partner on the journey of faith. That I have experienced, and I like to think that Anna might have been like me in that way.

The second thing to notice is the content of the revelation in the words of Simeon, and then presumably in the words of Anna too, which we don’t get to hear. This baby is God’s Messiah, and this Messiah will be an agent of rising and falling – and where have we heard that before? In the previous chapter, in Mary’s song, where God casts down the mighty and lifts up the lowly. But all of this will not be easy or comfortable. It will, in fact, be painful. A sword will pierce your soul, he tells Mary, who will have to watch her son die a cruel death as the means for saving God’s people.

Now we can come back to that third thing. God is at work in all of this, in Simeon’s and Anna’s long and dedicated lives of faith, in the revelation and prophecy that is the fruit of their faith, and of course especially in the one on whom their faith and their proclamation is focused, the Messiah who is to be offered up on our behalf, for us and for our salvation, and for that of the whole world. His life, death, and resurrection are a light in the darkness for Gentiles and Israelites alike, which is shorthand for all people.

What this story gives us, dear people of God, is an example and a pattern for faithful living that is as relevant to us in our time as it was to Simeon and Anna and those who heard them in theirs. It is an assurance that focusing our attention on God’s promises, even and especially even in difficult times, even and especially when long years of persistence in faith show little sign of change for the better, or even seem to be heading in the wrong direction... the assurance that our attention to God’s promises in Jesus Christ is not in vain. Whether you’re feeling it today or not, the words of Simeon’s song, we dare to proclaim, are true. Our eyes are seeing God’s salvation in Jesus Christ, with us today, right here, right now, in word and sacrament, shining light into our darkness and making us agents and reflections of that light into our benighted world. May our persistence be blessed, may our faith be strengthened, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.