

February 2, 2020
The Simple Presence
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Luke 2:22-40

²² When 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”), ²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

²⁵ Now 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. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. ²⁷ Guided 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, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹ “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation,
³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”

³³ And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴ Then 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 ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

³⁶ There 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, ³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ At 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.

The Return to Nazareth

³⁹ When 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.

Simeon and Anna waited for Jesus their whole lives. Waited the way all people do at one time or another, hoping, praying that what we know of this life, this world, cannot possibly be all there is. A world where institutional government is corrupt and institutional religion is complicit, where the economy is steered by the rich to make them richer, and the poor get blamed for being poor. A world where every single day, kids die of starvation and illnesses a \$5 IV can cure, while other families take their pets to daycare.

They waited and they prayed in the Temple constantly, Luke says, watching for the Messiah who would redeem Jerusalem. *God promised I will see him before I die*, Simeon believed. And while I doubt Simeon was the only one who believed such a thing, it turned out to be true for him on that day. Him and Anna both. The Bible scholar Shively Smith says every Christmas crèche should include a Simeon and an Anna, as they complete the infancy narrative no less than shepherds and wise men.

Having completed their civic duty in Bethlehem – the Roman census, you’ll remember – the Holy Family now embarks upon the sacred duty, thus their presence in the Temple. Those sacred duties were circumcision for the baby when he was eight days old and blood purification for the mama, when her boy baby was 33 days old. For girl babies, she was unclean twice as long. But with the sacrifice, she was restored; she could both worship and be with her husband.

They come in – Mary, baby, Joseph, pigeons in a basket. The pigeons make the socio-political-economic truth of the incarnation self-evident: the Messiah of the universe chose poverty as his venue within humanity. Pigeon was the sacrifice for people who could not afford a sacrifice.

See the poor. They are everywhere among you, Jesus told his disciples later, *always and forever*. To miss them is to miss him. Because he WAS them. His father, mother, brothers, sisters. Grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins.

Do not miss this point of the gospel, friends. The one who comes as the great sacrifice comes from and to those too poor to afford a sacrifice. And so pigeons must suffice. He IS the poor. To miss the poor is to miss him. Simeon and Anna didn’t miss him. They knew where to look apparently. Were they even watching for a newborn? I wonder. Did Jesus see them too? Already, eight days or maybe one month old, his simple presence moves people.

He’s no bigger than a loaf of bread, silent save maybe a burp or yawn or squeak. And yet, by His simple presence, the gospel is drawn forth in ancient words Simeon had no doubt been practicing for decades – the gospel ringing round Him, while He blinks or sleeps, or roots or toots (seriously, babies don’t have a huge repertoire) and His parents are amazed. Simeon’s poetry has two gospel notes to play: one moment in His presence

is enough to last a lifetime; being in His presence exposes our inner thoughts, for better or for worse.

Let's pray: *O let the ancient words impart, O God. That we might be changed. We have come, with open hearts. Amen.*

The Spirit led Simeon into the Temple, and after doing what was customary according to the Law, Luke says Simeon prayed out loud:

*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.*

Having seen the baby Messiah, Simeon didn't want or need another thing to be happy in this world; he could die in peace. Think about that for a second. Think about never wanting, needing, asking for anything else, ever again. No healing. No political changes. No new shoes. No extra courage. Nothing else. Ever.

How long could they have visited, Simeon and the baby Jesus, before He wanted His mama back? Ten minutes? An hour? Did they talk theology? Probably not. Peek-a-boo? Maybe. Definitely no miracles. No death and resurrection. Whatever it was, it was enough for Simeon.

I keep imagining Simeon's waiting life and comparing it to ours, how he waited all his life for this meeting and lived the rest of his life from it, never wanting, needing or begging for more. Luke's church was waiting. Everyone I know is waiting, waiting for something, some change we think will make life better for ourselves or others. The large-hearted among us waiting for change we are convinced is absolutely necessary for the well-being of humanity. Economic. Political. Environmental. Social. Familial. Personal.

Luke's first readers had just lived through a Roman crackdown. The destruction of the very Temple Luke writes about here. With it the sacred tradition of sacrifice. How bittersweet this story would have been for them. You can bet they wanted change and had invested those expectations in the one called Messiah. Not Simeon, it appears. Just His baby self was enough. Whatever else that baby chose was fine by Simeon. He could live his days in contentment and die in peace.

Friends, I want to love Jesus that much. I want to trust Jesus that much. I want to live from this day forward never needing, never wanting, never asking more from Christ than he has already given. I want this heart and mind of Simeon, that can rest in that

once-in-a-lifetime presence of Christ in the midst of the world he describes in his next breath:

*“This child is destined for the falling and the rising
of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed³⁵
so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—
and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”*

It’s a new way for me to think about Messiah – a simple, silent presence by which our inner thoughts are exposed to us and we respond, as we choose, in gratitude like Simeon and Anna, or in fear like so many others. By following him or opposing him, either way, our hearts will surely be broken for the ones who choose differently from us. For the violence and the pain involved for everyone when even a few people choose fear instead of faith. Most especially when those in power choose to live and rule by fear. There’s little people won’t do when confronted with their fear. Little they can’t justify and explain and try to sell as right.

Your own heart will be cut in two, Simeon says to Mary directly. But not just hers. The hearts of all who choose love instead of fear eventually get broken. That was Simeon’s sermon, more or less. One sip of the Messiah’s presence was enough to last a lifetime. A sermon, by the way, that Jesus will preach to a woman at a well later in the gospel. That sip reveals a person’s deepest hopes and fears, Simeon says, for better and for worse.

Exit Simeon, stage right. Enter stage left, preacher #2.

Then a second preacher-prophet enters the scene – Anna. Technically I am named for Annette Funicello, but I gladly claim this Jewish contemplative preacher, Anna. The great age of 84 — if I am still preaching at 84 it means I’m now just at the halfway mark. Maybe I haven’t even peaked. There is something about this business I have still not gotten hold of. Anna is more noted than quoted, but as eager to preach Messiah as her colleague was. Redemption was her interest, the redemption of Jerusalem. Could be she was also a religious activist. Luke says she spent her time praying and fasting. Not for herself to be redeemed, it seems, but for her religion, the Temple, their faith.

By the time Luke wrote his gospel, the Temple was a pile of rubble. Sacrificial Judaism was just a memory. And I wonder what the word *redemption* meant to the early church, given what they’d been through, what they felt they were owed. I wonder, does the church today pray for our own redemption? And what do we mean by that? Do we mean being great again, even if we’d never call it that, or do we mean holiness?

All we have of Anna is that she did not fast and pray for herself, but for the redemption of her people, expecting *that* redemption from the single source from which such redemption comes: the creator of the universe, the promiser of salvation. She isn’t in

Rome, nor at Herod's palace. She is in the Temple, from which the moral courage necessary to break the reign of fear upon the world shall be found, if it is to be found.

God knows our own land is begging for redemption. Every op-ed piece I read seems to pontificate on the lack of moral courage among our elected leaders, like it's some new thing. Friends, you do remember that the 13th Amendment passed the House of Representatives by something like two votes? We pretend otherwise, but the evidence bears out the truth. We use language like "national interest" and "global interest," but governments and institutions do not behave morally. They behave in the personal interest of the persons who stand to benefit most, usually economically. Reinhold Niebuhr has written about this extensively. It could be that having our inner thoughts revealed to us exposes us to the futility of our expectations of each other, our hope that a congressional action, another election, will somehow be the moral solvent for the problems that stress us.

That, friends, is one way our slavery to fear dresses itself in the morning. That wishful thinking that some other politician or preacher could fix this mess we're in. Maybe. But that's not the basket believers' eggs go in. The place for praying for redemption is here. The redemption for which we pray begins here – the redemption of the church, the redemption of the people of God. This is Anna's sermon. What she does, how she lives, is her sermon. We need not quote her words; let us quote her life.

What's done is done, and praise the Lord for that, I say. It's almost like a dare to suggest we believe it, that Jesus has done for us what needs doing; that it's enough to live on, no matter how many days we have left – not just this election cycle, but for all the days of our lives. All we need of him, he has done. All we can ever ask of him, he has given. We live now and forever in the joyful, graceful light of his presence.

Would you pray with me?