

Just Praise – Luke 2:22-40

Christmas – it brings such mixed feelings. I love the sacredness of Christmas, but I’ve always hated the commercialism that comes with it. The crowds, the overspending, the rush. Even though I intend to spend time in contemplation, to be silent and worship God, it seems like the time between Thanksgiving and Christmas flies by.

Today is known on the Christian calendar as the first Sunday after Christmas. The gifts are opened, the family has gone home (or will), the food is cooked, the dishes (are hopefully) washed.

Some of you are visiting with us this morning and will be returning to your own homes, some of them in warmer climates. But we who live in the Poconos, face a long, cold, snowy winter. The magic has gone and we’re back to reality.

This morning we’re going to meet two special people, Simeon and Anna.

The Bible tells us:

22 When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”), ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.”

Poor Mary. She had traveled from her home in Nazareth to Bethlehem while pregnant, had her baby in a stable, and now she had to travel again with the baby. Parents know how difficult it is to travel with a baby. So how old was Jesus when he was presented to the Lord? Why was it done? What are purification rites?

Most of us know about Moses. God gave him laws he wanted the people to follow.

In Exodus 13:2, the Lord said to Moses “Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether man or animal.”

Then Moses said to the people, “Commemorate this day, the day you came out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery, because the Lord brought you out of it with a mighty hand. In verse

12, he tells them, “you are to give over to the Lord the first offspring of every womb.” SO— Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the temple to be consecrated (or dedicated) to God. Following the birth of a son, the mother had to wait 40 days before going to the temple to offer sacrifice for her purification. A sacrifice was to be of a lamb and a pigeon (or dove). If she cannot afford a lamb, she was to bring two doves or two young pigeons. This passage shows us that Mary and Joseph were faithful to the laws of their faith. The purchase of the two pigeons shows that they were a poor family.

The people of Jesus’ time were not so much different from those of us in the world today. We often get discouraged because of the way the world is going. Jesus’ time in history, however, was also a turbulent time. We are not facing anything new in the 21st century. The Israelites were subject to Rome. They paid taxes to a government that was oppressive to them. They had a difficult life.

Their country was ruled by Herod, a ruler who had his own family killed, a ruler who was so threatened by the news of a baby “King” that he had all the male children in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under killed to remove the threat to his power. Today, various radical groups are fighting and killing to maintain their power. In our own country, we have economic “downturns”, violence in the streets—racial tension, school children being killed.

Personally, we may have lost a job, we may have family problems. Life can be hard for us, too.

We cannot avoid the post-Christmas reality and the realities of our world. We live in a disturbing world.

Now we come to Simeon and Anna. Jesus is presented in the temple and they respond.

Who were they and why are they important? They are our post-Christmas models.

By the time we meet them, Simeon was a graying saint. When he was a younger man, the text says, “It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.” We can only imagine how his heart was moved at that news.

“I’ll have a front row seat at the Messiah’s coming. I’ll be part of the revolution, get a job in the new administration.” But then years, and then decades, flowed by. And nothing happened.

Simeon was righteous and devout. He had waited many years for the Lord's coming. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God. "Your word has been fulfilled. My own eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the sight of every people—a light to reveal you to the nations and the glory of your people Israel."

A song of praise—When Mary became pregnant with the baby, she sang—when the baby John was born to Zechariah, he sang—when the angels appeared to the shepherds, they sang.

But Simeon's song of praise also says, "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace."

Why does Simeon seem to request dying, for that is what the phrase "dismiss your servant" means. He recognizes the baby as the salvation of the people. Why would he move from the beauty and light and joy of this moment straight to a request for death? And why must we focus on that request, and therefore on death, just a few days after our own celebrations of Christmas? Shouldn't Luke – and we – leave death outside our doors, just this once, to deal with it later. Shouldn't we, or at least can't we, ignore it or deny it, at least while the family's still here.

But there it is. Death doesn't take a holiday, does it? And this is never more apparent than during the holidays, a time when our hopes are regularly joined to our fears, our expectations unfulfilled, and our reunions sometimes overshadowed by unspoken disappointments or hurts.

And most of us are reminded of those we have loved and lost by a stanza from a hymn, a favorite ornament on the tree, or some fleeting but vivid memory of Christmas past.

We can imagine that Simeon has experienced love and loss, joy and despair, hope and fear, just like you and me. But his hope has been fulfilled. He is ready to leave this world and meet God. It is those of us who are left behind that sorrow, not our loved ones.

There is another shadow over the song of praise. Simeon foretells the future when he speaks of Christ raising up those who believe in him, but becoming a stumbling block for

those who disbelieve. Jesus will face opposition. Simeon told Mary that a sword would pierce her soul, as well. As Christians, we will face opposition.

Simeon has lived his life fully. He has seen the promise of God, salvation offered for all people. So he sings. He praises. We need to praise, even in the darkness.

Next we meet Anna. There may have been a time when Anna, too, dreamed of a glorious life, but her husband died just "seven years after her marriage," and things had not turned out like she planned. "Anna was very old" now, the text says. Some theologians take the age of 84, others that she lived 84 years after being widowed. If we do the math, assuming she married around fourteen, as most good Jewish girls at the time did, she was at least 105! Either way, she was old.

Anna, the Bible says, "never left the temple." You get the picture of a widow and a single man now spending most of their time hanging around the church.

Yet they are mentioned by name in our Scripture this morning. Normal wisdom would say their best days were behind them; their obvious opportunity for influence was over.

But in their old age, they had become truly **faithful** people. The Bible says that Simeon was "righteous and devout." That doesn't mean that he was a perfect man. It just means that he'd learned over the long haul of life to devote himself to staying close to God. The text goes into more detail about Anna's way of maintaining that intimacy. She apparently had a rhythm of "worship, fasting, and prayer" that built up her spirit, even when her body was breaking down.

We can also see that these two were **persevering** people. It doesn't take much to put your hope in God for a brief season, or when things are at a high or low. For 80 years, however, Anna and Simeon kept trusting God's promises. Through tragedies like the early death of Anna's husband, and through long, boring passages like the wait between God's original promise to Simeon and its final fulfillment on that first Christmas, these two people persevered in trusting God's plan.

Their world, like ours, had its share of noise and distractions. But Simeon and Anna were **Spirit-led** people. Anna was a "prophetess," the text says. That's shorthand for somebody

who expects to hear from God and who dares to speak God's Word to others. "The Holy Spirit was upon" Simeon, the Bible says. He was "moved by the Spirit," and actually went places and did things that he sensed the Spirit saying to him.

It's hard to overstate how much faithfulness, perseverance, and responsiveness to the Spirit count with God. But one indication is that, at a time when the world probably regarded them only as candidates for the rest home, God chose Simeon and Anna to do one of the most important tasks ever performed in history. The key idea is that, with a spiritual power borne of years of cultivation, this elderly pair passed on a blessing that, in a sense, primed the cannon and pump of Jesus' mission.

They named the gift that Jesus was, equipped his parents for what lay ahead, and "spoke about the child to all who were looking for redemption." They passed on the long chain of blessing that would one day, be passed to you and me—which is why I think of Simeon and Anna when I hear someone say that, "Beautiful young people are acts of nature, but beautiful old people are works of [God's] art."

Day after day, year after year, Anna and Simeon accepted and appreciated the joys that came their way. I can't help wondering if their willingness to recognize the sweet, little gifts Jehovah blesses us with each and every day is part of why He chose to reveal Himself to them. He revealed himself to Mary, to Joseph, to the shepherds wandering in their field by night. Good news and great joy—the Savior of the world wrapped in an ordinary blanket.

Simeon and Anna are role models. We need to emulate them.

1. They were faithful. Are you practicing the spiritual disciplines of "worshipping, fasting, and praying" that will nurture your spirit?
2. Are you persevering? Are you one of those who, in spite of the losses, are still waiting upon the One who is "the consolation of Israel" and the hope of us all? In a world where we expect everything in an instant, there may be no more important

ministry than to teach others what it looks like to wait with hope, trusting in the good plans of God.

3. Are you Spirit-led? Do you have words of blessing that others need to hear? Are you willing to still be “moved by the Spirit” and go where God tells you to go?

We need to practice these qualities in our own lives—

Faithfulness Perseverance Being led by the Spirit

We also need to praise God in all things, the good times and the bad, for we will have both.

Praise Him for His future coming

Praise for the sake of praise because He loves hearing it

Imagine - (we can please God simply by praising him)

Praise as resistance to sorrow.

Even though the season is over, Christmas is still alive. The magic doesn't end at Christmas. God “with us”. What could be more wonderful and magical than that.

Closing Prayer

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make *music* in the *heart**

Father, help and guide us as we go forth to do your will.