

**"Christmas at the Rehab Facility"**

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**Text: Luke 2:22-40**

**Myers Park Presbyterian Church**

**December 29, 2019**

*Luke 2:22-40*

*<sup>22</sup>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 <sup>23</sup>(as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), <sup>24</sup>and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."*

*<sup>25</sup>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. <sup>26</sup>It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. <sup>27</sup>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, <sup>28</sup>Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, <sup>29</sup>"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; <sup>30</sup>for my eyes have seen your salvation, <sup>31</sup>which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, <sup>32</sup>a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." <sup>33</sup>And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. <sup>34</sup>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 <sup>35</sup>so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too." <sup>36</sup>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, <sup>37</sup>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. <sup>38</sup>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. <sup>39</sup>When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. <sup>40</sup>The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.*

Christmas Eve was such a blessing to be part of this year. Between our six services we had 3,800 people in worship. There was so much energy, so many young families, so many children excited about the magic to unfold in the coming night. Our youth acted out the live nativities with the babies stealing the show—so appropriate for Christmas. Our largest services were at 5:00. John and Millie offered wonderful meditations. I never imagined we'd have almost 1,000 people flapping imaginary wings like angels here in the sanctuary. It was wonderful. If you really want to capture the feel of the manger where Jesus was born, come to a 5:00 Christmas Eve service at MPPC—it's a zoo! And it's wonderful. Indeed, children are at the heart of Christmas.

It all calls forth some nostalgia of days gone by for me. Jennifer and I became empty nesters last year. It's been an interesting shift in the seasons of our lives. One of the shifts has been with Christmas. This was our son's last "Christmas break" as a college student. Next year he will hopefully be gainfully employed and only get a few days off. Our daughter only has a couple college Christmases left, then she'll be off. Gone are the late nights preparing for Santa's arrival. Christmas morning starts a lot later

than it used to be for us. As empty nesters, we're more observers than participants these days. It seems Christmas is really about children, about the young.

The Bible would beg to differ. Luke's Christmas story is filled with senior citizens. It starts with old Zechariah and Elizabeth. Though they "were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments," they had no children. As Luke describes, they were "both were getting on in years." Miraculously, they became the parents of John the Baptist. Their story echoes that of Hannah and Elkanah who were the parents of the prophet Samuel in the Old Testament. John's life echoes that of Samuel's. As Samuel anointed David, so John will anoint Jesus in the waters of baptism. Christmas starts with a couple too old to have children, just as Israel's story starts with aging Abraham and Sarah—the first couple too old to have children. Their families changed the world forever.

Today's reading features Simeon and Anna. Simeon has lived a faithful life, "a devout life," as Luke tells us. The Holy Spirit is with him and has promised him he will not see death until he sees the Messiah, God's anointed one. When Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the Temple for his consecration, Simeon sees the baby, and he breaks into song. "Let your servant now depart in peace, O Lord." His song would come to be known as the *Nunc Dimittis*. It's been sung at the closing of countless worship services through the ages. Simeon's is the third and final song in the first two chapters of Luke's gospel. First, there is Mary's song—the Magnificat, a song about the coming Messiah. Then Old Zechariah bursts into song about the triumph of Israel that his son will herald. Now Simeon sings of the hope, not only for Israel, but for the Gentiles. These three songs reveal that this baby will bring about the salvation of the whole world. People "getting on in years" play key roles in its telling. God's got a purpose for all of them.

And then there's Anna, the prophet. What a life she's lived—losing her husband early, becoming a widow, taking up residence in the temple—there every time the doors opened, praying, fasting, praising God. When Mary and Joseph walk in carrying their baby, this faithful 84-year-old woman starts praising God with joy, proclaiming the redemption Jesus will bring. Don't tell Luke that Christmas is only for the young. With Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna, his Christmas story looks like an AARP convention, or at least an episode of *Golden Girls*! Luke's Christmas is for everyone, for young and old, Jew and Gentile, for the whole wide world.

Of course there's a hard part to this story too. We spare our children from the hard parts of the Christmas story, just as we would spare them from the hard parts of life—if only we could. Simeon reminds us of the hard part of the salvation and redemption Jesus will bring. Simeon sees how it will be accomplished, the conflict and pain that will be part of the redemption of the world. Frederick Buechner describes the scene in a hauntingly beautiful way. He writes:

Jesus was still in diapers when his parents brought him to the Temple in Jerusalem "to present him to the Lord," as the custom was, and offer a sacrifice, and that's when old Simeon spotted him. Years before, he'd been told he wouldn't die till he'd seen the Messiah with his own two eyes, and time was running out. When the moment finally came, one look through his cataract lenses was all it took. He asked if it would be all right to hold the baby in his arms, and they told him to go ahead but be careful not to drop him.

"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation," he said, the baby playing with the fringes of his beard. The parents were pleased as punch, and so he blessed them too for good measure. Then something about the mother stopped him, and his expression changed.

What he saw in her face was a long way off, but it was there so plainly he couldn't pretend. "A sword will pierce through your soul," he said. He would rather have bitten off his tongue than said it, but in that holy place he felt he had no choice. Then he handed her back the baby and departed in something less than the perfect peace he'd dreamed of all the long years of his waiting.<sup>1</sup>

It's such a strange shift in the joy of the moment, to hear about the pain that will come. Surely Buechner captures what Simeon must have felt. He sees the hard journey that lies ahead, he sees the conflict Jesus will bring, he sees the pain this conflict will cause, he sees the cross and the pain it will bring this young mother, and he has no choice but to be honest about that vision.

Enter the prophet, Anna. I'm thankful Luke tells us about her. Anna's praise brings us back to the joy. Anna's words remind us that redemption is what it's ultimately about. Though pain is part of the story, the story is ultimately about salvation and redemption. This 84-year-old woman embodies joy. Maybe that's why Luke lifts up these aged characters in his version of the Christmas story. Maybe an 84-year-old woman whose been through as much as Anna understands joy in a way that younger folks, those who have not experienced as much life can.

In a beautiful sermon on this passage, Presbyterian Pastor David Lewicki offered this powerful reflection. He said, "[In my] experience joy is not really joy unless it has engaged in a long, drawn-out stare down with something that threatens to push it out of sight."<sup>2</sup> In her life, this aged prophet, Anna has had her share of stare-downs with threats that seek to push joy out of sight. I don't know what happened to her husband seven years into their marriage, but his death had to bring a pain beyond my comprehension. I can't imagine life lived as a widow in first century Jerusalem, but given all the calls in the Bible to care for widows, it surely wasn't easy. It would seem to me the only thing she had to hang on to was her faith.

Maybe that's why she practically lived in the temple fasting and praying. Maybe she had to cling to that hope God had promised because that's all she had left. For the vast majority of her 84 years, her faith that God would redeem this broken world is all that got her through. Maybe it took someone like Anna, who at 84 years old had stared down more than her share of threats, to really express the joy of that moment. Maybe that's why Luke takes all this time to tell us about old Simeon and Anna.

In the midst of the Christmas mayhem, I had some time to be with an 84-year-old woman. She helped me see a different kind of joy this Christmastide. It was my Mom. She was with us for two weeks to celebrate Christmas. At her age, life is being redefined for many of her friends and family, and for her—though I'm thankful she's remarkably healthy. Her lifelong friend fell this fall and broke her hip. She had to move from the town she had called home for over 60 years to a rehab center in Johnson City, TN, where one of her daughters lives. When Mom shared the news with me, I told her maybe we could visit her in Johnson City while she was here. It wasn't too far from Charlotte. Then last month, a tragedy struck our family in my generation. My cousin's husband died suddenly. We were unable to get to the funeral because of commitments here, and Mom couldn't travel by herself from Dallas—maybe we could go on up to Lexington and see her. Then two weeks ago, my Mom's sister took a bad turn and had to be hospitalized. She's in Lexington, KY with my cousin and her family. Looking at the calendar there

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/blog/2017/12/25/weekly-sermon-illustration-simeon>

<sup>2</sup> See: [https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002fc5/joy\\_comes\\_in\\_the\\_evening](https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002fc5/joy_comes_in_the_evening)

was an opening on December 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> when we could make a road trip to see them. We could stop in Johnson City on the way to see her friend. So we did it.

I cannot begin to describe to you the joy of that trip. To watch my Mom talking face to face with her friend of over 60 years, likely for the last time, yet there was no sadness—only peace. It was joy. Then with my cousin, there was deep sadness—a sword has indeed pierced her heart. Yet, the power of being with her and her children, even in the midst of that sadness, I could feel the joy born of the love we share. Seeing that flow from my Mom was such a gift. Then **witnessing** her with her sister, **listening** to their conversations about their childhood, **hearing** my aunt say, “Lauw,” like only she can; **knowing** something of what they have both endured in their lives, of the threats they’ve faced and stared down; **watching** my Mom lend her sister her lipstick so that she could get presentable there in the midst of the Bluegrass Rehab facility, **seeing** their smiles; it was joy, there was peace. It was Christmas, a celebration of life, an incarnation of love shared by three women in their 80’s.

Luke might suggest to us that’s what Christmas is all about—joy, love incarnate, love lived out, peace and goodwill among all people. That’s surely true for the kids. It’s true for children of all ages, even those in their 80’s, for the Simeons and the Annas of our world. It’s true for all of us. It’s what Christmas is all about. Thanks be to God! Amen.