

Sermon

The Canticles of Advent — Nunc Dimittis, The Song of Simeon

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, November 28, 2021

All Saints

Psa. 25:1 To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.

2 O my God, in you I trust;

do not let me be put to shame;

do not let my enemies exult over me.

3 Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;

let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

Psa. 25:4 Make me to know your ways, O LORD;

teach me your paths.

5 Lead me in your truth, and teach me,

for you are the God of my salvation;

for you I wait all day long.

*Psa. 25:6 Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.*

7 Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;

according to your steadfast love remember me,

for your goodness' sake, O LORD!

Psa. 25:8 Good and upright is the LORD;

therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

9 He leads the humble in what is right,

and teaches the humble his way.

10 All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,

for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

Luke 2:22 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."

Luke 2:25 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.^a 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."

Luke 2:33 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."

Luke 2:36 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.

- I. Two great foci of the Christian Liturgical year are organized around:**
 - A. Incarnation — Christmas**
 - B. Resurrection — Easter**

- B. Both are preceded by seasons of preparation in which we are invited to “wake up” and be ready for the coming of God.**
- 1. To enter into intentional daily prayer and reflection. (to that end we are supplying daily devotions written by members of this church — they are in the app and on the website.**
 - 2. To ponder the stories of those who came before and whose lives we see in the passages of scripture and in the poetry they left behind.**
- C. The poems we call “canticles” because they quickly became songs that the earliest people of faith used to sing the faith in worship.**
- D. This Advent both our daily devotions and our messages on the Lord’s Day all are focussed on the poetry at the heart of our music of the season.**
- 1. Three from the Gospel According to Luke and one from the prophet Zephaniah.**
 - † *Nunc Dimittis*, The Song of Simeon
 - † *Benedictus*, The Song of Zechariah
 - † *Canticle of Zephaniah*
 - † *Magnificat*, Mary’s Song
- E. Advent is a time of Neptic spirituality
(Gk. *nepsis* = watchfulness) 1 Peter 5:8**

“Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.”

II. Today Luke tells us of an event which actually happens *after* the birth of Jesus . . . but it describes two people of faith who would have understood well the idea of disciplined, watchful waiting: Anna and Simeon.

- A. Mary & Joseph and baby**
 - 1. Purification according to Lev. 12:1-8**
 - 2. The sacrifice *should* be Lamb and dove**
 - a. They are a “hardship case” and give the pauper’s sacrifice of two birds.**
 - 3. Simeon - old man living with a promise to see the messiah before he dies . . .**
 - 4. Anna - a prophetess [84 years old?]who “never left the Temple but worshipped, fasted and prayed night and day.”**
- B. Representative of “waiting Israel.” We’ll see this as a common attribute of our forebears in the faith...**
 - 1. Waiting “according to the promise”**
 - a. Mary “According to the Promise”**
 - b. Zechariah “...promised to our ancestors”**
 - c. Simeon “according to your word.”**
 - 2. Promise is:**
 - a. God will be our God . . .**
 - † *Ex. 6:7 I will take you as my people, and I will be your God.*
 - † *Jer. 30:22 And you shall be my people, and I will be your God.*
 - b. God will remain with us . . .**
 - † *Jer. 42:11 Do not be afraid of the king of Babylon, as you have been; do not be afraid of him, says the LORD, for I am with you, to save you and to rescue you from his hand.*
 - † *Matt. 1:23 “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”*

- C. Simeon & Anna persevere in their waiting because they have cultivated the ability to trust in God’s promises of fidelity and presence.**

III. A word about Waiting

- A. Waiting = nurturing the moment which is holding a gift.**

- 1. The present moment holds a gift from God which we can discover if we are attentive.**

- B. But to do this you have to come to a place where you trust that:**

Something is happening where you are!

- 1. Not expecting that it will happen next week, next month, next year . . . But *now* where you are.**
- 2. Impatient people are *always* thinking that the “real thing” will happen tomorrow or over there.**

- C. And there is more:**

Something is hidden in the present which will manifest itself to you if you are attentive!

- D. Z & M & E & S and A are able to recognize God in their lives because they are attentive to the presence of God in their lives.**

As we make our way deep into Advent and travel closer to the joy of Christmas I urge us to “wake up!” God is with us! We can receive intimations of Divine hope for us if we will pay attention!

IV. For most of us . . . this is not our first Advent-Christmas

A. We remember what the angels say to the shepherds:

“Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

B. But what does it mean that he is “Messiah?”

- 1. Hebrew for “anointed one.”**
 - a. Used in coronation hymns and liturgies for kings.**
- 2. Not *all* Jews were looking for a Messiah.**
- 3. And those who *were* - were not looking for the child of Mary & Joseph.**
 - a. Messiah was a political term.**
 - b. A great political or military leader.**
 - c. Probably born into privilege and a family of influence (in the lineage of David).**
- 4. We have a number of writings of those who were looking for the Messiah at the time of his birth and *none* of them are expecting a baby born to poor peasants.**

V. And yet, there *were* a few whose hearts were open to something unexpected.

A. Luke’s gospel tells us about two of them: Simeon & Anna.

B. Two elderly people of faith who had been hanging around the Temple in Jerusalem for decades and who were worshipping and fasting night and day and who were looking forward to the consolation of Israel.

C. These two - enlightened by the Holy Spirit - are able to see in these pauper peasants and in their infant something that few (if any) others seemed to see.

1. That he was destined to cause “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.”

III. What are we to make of these two and what might we learn from them?

A. First of all, I think it worth noting that these two have no official standing. They are not professional religious. They are, themselves, simple people of faith - I imagine in ways similar to Mary & Joseph.

1. They do not know what they know because they travel in circles of political or religious power.

2. They know what they know because they have been willing to look ceaselessly and wait patiently for decades as they lived lives immersed in a long conversation with God (because that is what prayer is in a way - a long conversation with God).

3. They have cared enough to not give up easily.

4. They have been able to trust in the slow work of God.

- B. We might learn that the encounter with God is something that happens to ordinary people in ordinary circumstances — who have learned to patiently wait and watch for the encounters with God which so often happen amid the quotidian duties of daily life.**
- C. How amazing and beautiful that our faith has preserved in its sacred text the lives of two simple elderly believers — whose fidelity to God made them memorable...**
- D. Some years ago I used an Ignatian form of prayer which invites you to use your imagination to enter into the scene of a moment of scripture and reflect from within the scene on its meaning. I chose to be a soldier who was on guard-duty at the temple and who knew Anna and Simeon. I'd like to close the message today with that imaginative reflection...**

Guard duty at the Temple was a bit of a bore – not that I prefer excitement, mind you. I have seen my share of forced marches and bloody engagements and now that Jerusalem has been pacified enough to become a posting for those of us in pudgy middle-age, who am I to complain? Let the young men dream of battles and victories. I just want a predictable day and a good meal at the end of it. Temple duty guarantees both.

I am a people watcher; both because that is what I am here to do - keep an eye on things - and by my own nature. And if there is one thing the Temple has a lot of, it is people. There are the pilgrims - doe-eyed and amazed at the scale of the place; the tradesmen who stay busy just keeping the place in good repair; the merchants selling everything from oils and anointing balms to animals for sacrifice; the crack-pots who come to the Temple to see if they can stir up trouble - they don't last long. A cuff of the hand, a bleeding nose or busted lip, and a warning not to be seen again usually does it. I enjoy my work, but I have to say I have always been a bit mystified about why so many come to this place. This God they built the Temple to worship doesn't seem to have done much to protect them from warriors like me - and if a God cannot help you stay on top of the heap, I say it is not much of a God.

That is why it came as such a surprise to me when I realized that there were some people I had grown used to seeing and would even try to find when I was on duty. They were regulars - in fact it seemed like they might even be living in the Temple. The man was named Simeon and the woman was Anna - both of them as parched and ancient as an old scroll. And yet so alive! Both of them were animated with an inner life, an inner light that drew me close. I never spoke to either of them, but I would position myself close enough to overhear their whispered prayers about God's redemption and their hopes about the future.

Now I am just an old warrior and what do I know about the things of God. But I will tell you this - that wizened old man and that quiet but sagacious old woman are not fools. In fact they are what I hope to live long enough to become one day: gentle, peaceable, confident, and hopeful. And to think that they became what I want to be worshipping a God like the God of Israel . . . I guess the joke is on me.