

132 Seeing Salvation

Luke 2: 22-35

**First Presbyterian Church
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Our story this morning concerns an old man named Simeon. The Holy Spirit had given him a special promise. Simeon would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. After years of waiting, the fulfillment for Simeon came on the day he encountered Mary and Joseph bringing the infant Jesus into the Temple to be dedicated to the Lord. He knew that this infant was the world's redeemer. The poignant moment when ancient Simeon gathered the baby in his arms has been depicted for centuries in Christian art. Giotto, Rembrandt, Caravaggio, and the whole icon tradition have all depicted this beautiful scene. The wrinkled, stooped old man at the end of his days held the sweet, smooth child with all his years before him. For Simeon, life was complete, he could die in peace. He had seen salvation in the flesh.

As we get ready to contemplate this story, perhaps we can throw some bridges across to it from daily life. Have you ever felt "That's it. That's all I needed to do. That's all I needed to see. If nothing else ever happens, this is enough." Maybe you finished a huge project after months or years of work. A painting. A business deal. A semester concluded. A trial wrapped up. A book written. A home renovated. And you think, "It's finished! I could die in peace right now." Perhaps you came to a place of piercing beauty accompanied by one you love, and you felt, "I'm here now. This is all I could ever want. It may all fall apart tomorrow, but for this moment in this place, I feel only peace." Maybe it's about having people you love be together. One Christmas Day at the movies, I sat where I was within arm's reach of each of my children and their spouses. Mentally, I touched them all like a hen with her chicks. I turned off my phone. "They're all here, all safe, with me. It's just for a moment, but it's enough."

Maybe this is all something for which you still long. "I could die in peace right now if..." If I knew there would be enough in the bank to care for them. If I could just get out onto paper these words I need to say, hear from the piano these notes I need to play, see these colors I need to put on canvas. If I could see my siblings make up and get along. If I could see my children reconciled. If I could have a civil conversation with my once spouse.

Simeon's bucket list was bigger than my personal concerns. He was waiting for what Luke calls the "consolation of Israel." The arrival of God in the midst of his people to set all things right. Simeon ached for personal fulfillment that would only come through national restoration. He wanted to see with his eyes that God was in control and working all things for good. The Lord promised him he would see salvation in the flesh. He would die knowing God was keeping his promises. So every moment of every day he kept his eyes peeled to see how this wonder would be made known to him.

Meanwhile, Mary and Joseph had come from Bethlehem to Jerusalem. The Scriptures required two actions from them. Mary needed to make a sacrifice to complete her ritual cleansing after birth. And both parents needed to dedicate their firstborn child to the Lord. They brought the baby to the temple to present him to God. They acknowledged that the child was a gift, not a right or a possession. They would pray in effect, "This child is yours. We have no claim on him. We offer him to you by giving you this animal sacrifice. And we gratefully receive him back to raise him to know you and serve you all his days, knowing all the while that this child, just like us, is part of your treasured possession."

That's a deep part of what still occurs today when we baptize infants. We acknowledge that our children are a gift from God beyond imagination. And they are a responsibility beyond our strength. We do not possess them. We offer them to God. We say, "They are yours. Receive them. Enfold them. Keep them." We pray that as the waters are poured out, the Spirit would mark our children as belonging to Christ Jesus forever. We ask for the strength and wisdom to raise them well.

But there's even more that happens. In baptism, we mothers and fathers locate our children in the love of God the Father who dedicated *his* Son to us. We place our children into a story even bigger than our love and family. We put them into the life of the Father who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son. We are claiming this story of grace as our own. And we are asking God to write in our children as characters in this story. To put them on the team. To give them a part in the play. To give them a place inside Christ himself. I baptize you *into* the name, the story, of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So on the way to make this presentation, Mary and Joseph were interrupted. An old man came up to them and looked with wonder upon their baby. Somehow, some way, the Holy Spirit let Simeon know that out of all the people in the Temple that day, this child was the Savior. Though he was a stranger, Mary and Joseph let

Simeon take up the child in his arms. Gently, so gently, the ancient Simeon held the baby Jesus and his heart overflowed in joy. He prayed in poetry:

Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
According to your word;
For my eyes have seen your salvation
That you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
A light for revelation to the Gentiles,
And for glory to your people Israel.

His bucket list was complete. The promise had been fulfilled. He had realized the deep purpose of his life. He could be dismissed with a hearty, “Job well done.” Simeon would soon die in peace. For he had seen the Lord’s salvation. What Scripture foretold centuries ago now cooed and cried against him. God in the flesh. The Redeemer in swaddling clothes. Christ in his arms.

Simeon in his prayer spoke beyond his life, even beyond his nation, to the whole world. This child is a light to enlighten even the Gentiles. God’s grace is crashing the gates. He’s going beyond the people he first called. Through this child of Israel, salvation would reach to the ends of the earth. The great, world-reaching hope of the prophet Isaiah would be realized as this baby grew to be a man. God’s light would shine to all, anywhere, who sit in the darkness and long for grace to shine. From the infancy of Jesus, we have received our mission: this story is not just for us to receive in cozy comfort. It is a story that propels out to the nations.

Now here’s something I love about the prayer tradition of Christ’s people. Simeon’s song of praise was heard and remembered by Mary and Joseph. They told it to others who told it to Luke. And ever since Luke put down this prayer in his gospel, Christ’s people have prayed it. In fact, since at least the fifth century, Christ’s people have prayed this prayer somewhere in the world every single night. Simeon’s words even today are part of the evening prayers of Christ’s people that are offered all over the planet. This prayer will be said every night until the end of time as we know it. “My eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples.” Seeing Jesus, I have seen the truth and I can lay me down on my pillow or in my grave in perfect peace that you are doing all you promised.

But Simeon wasn’t through. After he gave the child back to his parents, Simeon said a blessing over them. And then he had a further word of prophecy. A

prediction meant to prepare his parents for the years ahead. He said to Mary in particular, “This child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed, and a sword will pierce through your own soul also.” It was a sobering moment after Simeon’s jubilant prayer. Not all who walk in darkness want a light to shine. Not everyone who is lost wants to be found. Not every person wants to acknowledge the Lord’s claim on their lives, even if he is the Lord of love. Some people would shipwreck against Jesus. Some would find their wills clashing with his. Some would see him more as a threat than a gift. It is still true today. Simeon went on to say that in meeting Jesus, the secrets of people’s hearts would be revealed. He brings out the truth of who we are. The fulfillment of our deepest longings is also death to our wanton desires. Jesus threatens us in our comfortable deadness with his vivid life. He chaffs us in our self-seeking with his call to a higher significance. He shows us who we are. If we fall to our knees and ask for his mercy, we will find him forgiving. But if we arch our backs in pride, we will find that we wreck our very lives on the rock of his truth.

That’s a frightening dose of reality. This baby will grow to be the Lord who claims us utterly, each and all. But then a darker turn still came in these words to Mary: and a sword will pierce through your own soul also. Mary, your heart will break to see your son rejected. Your soul will be pierced even as the nails pierce your son’s hands. Your heart will be stabbed even as the soldier’s spear stabs your son’s heart. You are the most blessed among women. You are also the mother of sorrows. You are the Lord’s highly favored. You will lose more than anyone in his passion.

Of course this is the way it is to some degree for all parents, and especially mothers. To have children means to have a sword pierce your soul. Sooner or later, they’ll stab you, and love will make the sting sharper and the knife sink in deeper. As someone said, “When they’re babies, they step on your toes. When they’re adolescents, they step on your heart.” It’s the way of things. It’s a price we gladly pay as parents. Though we could never know how much it will cost us, we know, even after the piercing, that we would do it again.

For Mary, the pain would be particularly great. Not only to lose a son, but to lose him through the world’s rejection. Not only to see him appear to fail, but to see him viciously murdered. All the worse because Mary knew he was innocent, knew he was all love, knew he came not to destroy but save, and knew he would not let her recoil in bitterness, or hide him away in protection. She had to stand by the cross and watch him do what he came to do.

For us who love the gospel, the serenity of the manger always falls under the shadow of the cross. Christmas is celebrated in awareness of Good Friday. In fact, the depth and meaning and fulfillment of Christmas can only be found as part of knowing the whole story. “What Child is This?” sung to the old English folk melody of Greensleeves is one of the most beautiful Christmas carols. Sadly, too often people skip the verse that gives the depth to the peacefulness of the carol. It’s not even in our church hymnbooks. But it’s crucial:

Nails, spear shall pierce him through,
The cross be borne for me, for you.
Hail, hail the Word made flesh,
The Babe, the Son of Mary.

The juxtaposition is brilliant. If you weave the verses together, you go from sweet manger to the horror of Golgotha. From soft straw to rough beams of the cross. You get something like this.

What child is this who laid to rest on Mary’s lap is sleeping?
Nails, spear shall pierce him through.
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet, while shepherds watch are keeping.
The cross be borne for me, for you.
This, this is Christ the King.
The Babe, *and the man writhing on the cross,*
The Son of Mary *whose own soul was pierced through.*

Salvation is a free gift to us. But it came at great cost to our God. Our sin is not some benign mistake of well-intentioned people. What’s in my heart is vicious. The evil in me strikes quick and lethal like a viper. I’m as likely to crack up against the presence of Jesus as fall on my knees to worship him. I’m as likely to spit on him, or worse, to turn my back and yawn at his words, as I am to answer his call to follow him. This child is set, even today, for the fall and rise of many.

Our God knew that. But he came anyway. Our God took the same sword in his soul as he asked Mary to bear. For this is not a fake salvation. It is real. It is costly. It is paid in blood. And it demands my whole allegiance, heart, soul, body and mind. It is also that for which I have been most longing all my life, though often I did not even know what I was longing for. When I yield my soul to him, even knowing it will be a way of sorrow as well of joy, I can say with Simeon, every evening, “Lord, now I am at peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation, a light to lighten the nations and the glory of your people.”