

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Seeing Salvation

Luke 2:22-40

Sunday, December 31, 2023

Rev. Max Vincent, Senior Pastor

Today we celebrate a baptism, a time when a person is claimed as a child of God's promise. Names are important in baptism. The central act of baptism is connecting the name of the person baptized with the name of the Trinity; "Ella, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." In the Middle Ages baptism was when people were assigned their names. That's why we ask in the service, "What name is given to this child?" Some people think this is also where the name "christening" came from; the child was given their "Christian" name.

Baptism reminds us of the importance of names and God's promises. Between the story we read on Christmas Eve from Luke 2:1-20 and our gospel lesson today, there is one verse that tells us that the parents of Jesus presented him for circumcision eight days after his birth and they named him Jesus. That one verse reminds us of the importance of names and God's promises. Mary and Joseph name the child according to what Mary was told by the angel Gabriel. Our Gospel reading picks up just after that, when Mary and Joseph present Jesus in the Temple forty days after his birth. As they come to present him, others see in him the fulfillment of God's promises.

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

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

arms and praised God, saying, ²⁹"Master, 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." ³³And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴Then 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 ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too." ³⁶There 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, ³⁷then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸At 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. ³⁹When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Luke introduces Simeon as a prophet. The Holy Spirit is resting on him. In the Bible, prophets are people moved by, directed by God's Spirit. The Spirit comes to them, and they speak. The Spirit tells them to go places and do things, usually explaining their actions, but always speaking at the direction of the Spirit. This spiritual direction is why the prophets often begin their preaching with the line, "Thus says the Lord."

The Spirit not only rests upon Simeon but promises him that he will not see death before seeing the Messiah. So, Luke says, Simeon, the prophet, is looking for the consolation of Israel. He has the prophet's assurance that what God spoke will come to pass. He rises each day, expecting it to happen, wondering, "Will this be the day? Is this the day I see God's promises fulfilled?"

I imagine Simeon rising early each morning, showing up at the Temple before the gatekeeper can even open

the complex. Simeon helps the gatekeeper finish his task so that he can enter the Temple area quickly. Then Simeon finds a spot where he can survey the crowds, hoping to see the Messiah approach. He looks from face to face, waiting to see the promise fulfilled, approaching him in flesh and blood.

We often think of the prophets as only speakers, preachers. Most of what we know of the prophets is the words recorded in Scripture, their preaching. Seeing, however, is as important for the biblical prophets as speaking. Many of the Old Testament prophets preach of what they have seen, visions given to them by God. Isaiah is said to preach the Word of God, which he saw. Amos and Ezekiel are famous for their visions. Ezekiel is even compared to a watchman on the city wall, ready to cry out in the night about God's approach.

Simeon, standing like a guard on the city wall, scans the crowds entering the Temple, expecting to see God's Word come to life. He is a sentry standing his post, watching for the fulfillment of God's promise.

This whole history of prophecy, being directed by the Spirit, the speaking, the seeing, is all behind Luke's description of Simeon when he says, "Simeon was looking for the consolation of Israel."

Consolation is not a word we use very much. The closest we come in modern usage is when we speak of consoling someone who is grieving. Consolation means giving comfort to someone. The word used here to describe what Simeon is looking for, is the same word Jesus uses when he speaks of the Holy Spirit as the Comforter in John's Gospel, the paraclete. Jesus says the Comforter is God with us, even in Jesus' absence.

Whenever I hear this description of Simeon, looking for Israel's consolation, it reminds me of the line from Charles Wesley's Advent hymn, "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus, "where we sing, "Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art." This is what Simeon longs to see.

The consolation Simeon is looking for, the comfort he awaits, is the fulfillment of all God's promises. Yet the promises of God for Israel mean good news for all

the nations; it is the promise that God creates a way to be with us.

As Simeon sees the crowd this day, he spots that consolation. His eyes rest on a poor family come to bring their gift after the birth of their son. Their offering identifies their poverty. The regular offering would be a lamb and a turtledove. Those unable to afford such a gift are allowed to bring two turtledoves for the offering. Mary and Joseph approach with two turtledoves. They bring with them their child, Jesus, to dedicate him to God's service.

This poor family coming to give God thanks for this child is what Simeon spies in the crowd, and in what he sees, he beholds the fulfillment of God's promise. Not just God's promise that Simeon would see the Messiah, but God's promise for Israel, and through Israel to all of us. Simeon sees in this child all that God had been promising, desiring for the world, from the beginning, the culmination of all the prophets, God's salvation is approaching in this child. God is coming to us in this child!

It is Simeon's song that explains all of this to us. As he rushes towards the holy family, he takes the baby in his arms and sings, "Now I can depart in peace, because I have seen the salvation of God, the glory of Israel, and a light to all the Gentiles." While Simeon sings, he is holding God's gift of salvation. This scene illustrates the mystery of Christmas. Simeon, holding the baby Jesus in his arms, sings about God's salvation offered to all people. He holds, treasures, the very salvation about which he sings.

The mystery of Christmas is how the eternal God enters time, how the God who cannot be contained, confines into a given space, a human form. In one of his Christmas hymns, Charles Wesley put it this way, "Our God contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made man." That's the mystery that Simeon holds up for us to behold.

The God we encounter in the Bible is not an abstract idea. Our religion is not a matter of right thinking. Jesus did not come to earth so that we could think more clearly about God. Jesus is God come to us in human flesh, a God that can be touched and held. God enters time and space in Jesus so that we can know God truly, so that we can embrace salvation and rest in the peace of God; a salvation that touches, and thus, changes our lives.

For centuries, the church sang Simeon's song in the night time prayer service. "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, for I have seen your salvation." That's not a bad way for us to spend these remaining days of Christmas, resting in God's peace and singing our praise for a salvation that can be touched, held; a salvation that changes our lives, a light to the nations.

Luke tells us of another person who saw this mystery that day, the prophet Anna. Anna joins the praises of Simeon and tells all who were longing for God's consolation about Jesus. These acts, the seeing and the telling, are important if others are going to see the light.

Go, tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere!



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