

**Simeon**  
**Luke 2:22-40**  
**First Sunday after Christmas**  
**December 30, 2007**

*“In Jerusalem at the time, there was a man, Simeon by name, a good man, a man who lived in the prayerful expectancy of help for Israel. And the Holy Spirit was on him.”*  
*Luke 2:25, The Message*

There is nothing that takes longer to arrive or quicker to leave than Christmas. For weeks we prepare for it's coming: shopping, decorating, cleaning, and baking. We work hard to set the proper mood and wrap ourselves around the holiday season. We sing the familiar carols and read the gospel stories in order to get ourselves ready for its arrival. And then the big day, the moment we've all been waiting for, finally comes. Adults and children alike rip through the artistically wrapped packages in a matter of minutes. Guests and family members devour the yuletide meal that took days to plan and cook in no time at all. Our loved ones rush in and rush out of our homes in a frenzied hurry, and before you know it, the day is over and done. The mess and the bills are the only things that remain.

And then comes the Sunday after Christmas. Talk about a letdown! How in the world can you top the past few weeks? The children have finished their program, the Advent wreath has been put up until next year, and the remaining poinsettias look worse for the wear. Christmas Eve was shimmering with candles and expectation. There were over 700 in attendance in the three services that were held here Monday night—more than we have ever had! And now today rolls around. While a little bit of a breather is always nice, such a drop-off, whether in excitement, activity, or attendance, is always disturbing. It almost feels like the Sunday after Easter, commonly known as “Low Sunday.” As for the story itself? Well, what do you say after the angels have departed and the shepherds have gone back to their flocks? What images are there left to ponder after the Holy Family has moved out of the stable and that touching image is but a memory? Christmas is over. Here in Nebraska, we don't even have a bowl game to tide us over to the next big thing. Do you see the dilemma that we face today? The Sunday after Christmas just sort of sits there. It seems to be the most unremarkable of days.

Perhaps that is why the almost forgotten story of Simeon is normally told on this day. While he is usually not the subject of the cards or carols we all love at this time of year, he is an important part of the Christmas story just the same. We don't know a lot about him, and what we do know is simply inferred from this one and only story of which he plays a part. Although his age is never mentioned, one gets the impression that he was quite old. Some traditions proclaim that he lived to the ripe old age of 112. He held no office or title that we know of, nor did he do anything to distinguish himself in proper Jewish circles. The only thing that seems to have set this man apart from the others were his obsession and his insight—both of which landed him a place at the tail end of the Christmas narrative. A quick review of what we know will help us flesh out the details.

The only real information that we have about Simeon comes in two phrases that Luke used to describe him: “righteous and devout,” and “looking for the consolation of Israel.” Earlier in his gospel, Luke described Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, as “righteous.” In his gospel, you may remember that Matthew described Joseph, the husband of Mary, as “righteous” as well. Biblical history reminds us that those who are described in that way are simply those who tried their level best to live according to the commandments of God—especially in their relationships with their neighbors. In other words, those who were righteous were those who practiced justice. The word “devout” described those who paid close attention to the rituals of the faith—which probably clues us in as to why Simeon was in the temple that day. And then there were those who, like Simeon, were “looking for the consolation of Israel.” Later in his gospel, Luke would apply the same description to Joseph of Arimathea, the one who requested Jesus' body from Pilate and then laid it in his own tomb. Those who looked for Israel's consolation were those who were praying and waiting for the Messiah to come; who hoped for that time when God would come and make things right despite all the current evidence that made it so difficult to believe that it was ever going to happen.

Now there were probably many others in that day that could have been described in that exact way, but we are given one more piece of information about Simeon that

made him unique. Luke not only wrote that the Holy Spirit rested upon him, but also that “it had been revealed to him that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.” Apparently, Simeon did so much more than just praying and waiting for the Messiah. He was actively looking for the day of his appearing. Somehow he knew that much anticipated day would come in his lifetime. And when it did come, what a day that must have been. Imagine, if you will, Herod’s temple literally bursting with activity. Just like always, hundreds of people would have been jammed into its courts performing every sort of religious duty. Mary and Joseph were also there; coming to perform the religious obligations that a couple of that day would have incurred after a baby was born. They were just two faces in that vast, clamoring crowd, yet old Simeon was drawn to them like a magnet. It must have been with a combination of unimaginable excitement and indescribable awe that he approached that young family. The object of his life-long hope and fulfillment of God’s joyous promise lay cradled in Mary’s arms. We can imagine him reaching out to take hold of the child. Mary may have been initially hesitant to let her son be held by the trembling hands of a complete stranger, but she must have sensed something about this old man that told her she had nothing to fear. Simeon took the infant into his arms, gazed excitedly into his face, and then lifted his eyes toward heaven. He said:

*God, you can now release your servant;  
release me in peace as you promised.  
With my own eyes I’ve seen your salvation;  
it’s now out in the open for everyone to see...*

Before we go on, let’s stop for a moment and think about what we have heard so far. Simeon was able to witness God’s salvation not because of his rank, his training, or his status in life. Simeon was able to witness God’s salvation not because he just so happened to be at the right place at the right time. No, Simeon was able to witness God’s salvation because of his openness to the Holy Spirit. He was able to behold the Messiah because of his desire to be just and fair with his neighbors and because of his devotion to his faith. William Barclay wrote that Simeon might have been one of those known as “the

Quiet in the Land.” Unlike the Zealots who wanted to usher in the kingdom by the sword, “the Quiet in the Land” believed that the Messiah would only come with their “constant prayer and quiet watchfulness.”<sup>1</sup> I would imagine that there are many in our world that desire the same as Simeon. They also want to see that time when the Messiah will once again come into this world and set things right. Luke’s description of Simeon tells us that people like him are not necessarily those confined to a certain historical era. The life of that unremarkable old man reminds us how we have a role in the Messiah’s coming. Are you one of “the Quiet” in this land? Is your relationship with your neighbors and your devotion to your faith anywhere close to that of Simeon? That too is part of the Christmas story, you see. Maybe you should take Mary as your guide and “ponder these things in [your] heart” on this 6<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas.

But let’s get back to this morning’s text. After a moment of rejoicing over the fulfillment of his dreams, Simeon turned to Mary and Joseph with news that was both remarkable and frightening. Filled with the insight of one who is open to God’s Holy Spirit, he began by telling that puzzled couple that in this tiny child the world would find its salvation. With words that have come to be known as the *Nunc Dimittis*, Simeon proclaimed that the child resting in Mary’s arms would be:

*A God-revealing light to the non-Jewish nations,  
and glory for your people Israel.*

It was a wonderful promise, one that—despite all that had happened to this point—this young couple still probably didn’t comprehend. But then the old man’s joyful face turned somber. With a furrowed brow he looked straight at Mary and proclaimed:

*This child marks both the failure and  
the recovery of many in Israel,  
A figure misunderstood and contradicted—  
the pain of a sword-thrust through you—*

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: Luke, Volume 2*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1973, p. 26

*But the rejection will force honesty,  
as God reveals who they really are.*

Those are chilling words for a new mother, a new father, or anyone else for that matter. Simeon announced that God's gift of salvation would not come without difficulty. Joy and gladness would be mixed with sorrow and suffering. The light that this child would bring into the world would be one that shines forth truth, a truth that exposes the darkest of corners of life, a truth that some would not be able to handle, a truth that would cause such a backlash that even Mary would feel it. The truth often does that, you know. When the light shines in the darkness, the darkness often tries to strike back. Simeon's hope, Israel's long awaited Messiah, would be one to mix grace with judgment.

But then, what did they—what did you expect? What is it that people want from this child of Bethlehem? History tells us that the people of God were looking for a Messiah that they would be able to mold and shape to their specifications. They wanted a Messiah that would justify their lifestyle and rubberstamp their beliefs. It's no different today. Simeon's words, however, remind all that hear them that that type of Messiah was not coming. Listen to the entire nativity story and you will discover that the Messiah comes on his terms. There is an edge to the message of Christmas, you see. It is not all Hallmark moments. If and when you ever hear it becoming warm, fuzzy, and unchallenging, then you can probably be safe in assuming that it has been watered down for public consumption or to make its message more socially acceptable—something that it was never meant to be. From the very beginning, Jesus was born to fulfill God's will, a will that seeks to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, a will in which the last, the least, and the lost hold a very special place, and a will that intends to turn the status quo completely on its head. It is interesting how Simeon's words sound so similar to those of Mary. Listen to the words she spoke to Elizabeth, words that we have come to call the "*Magnificat*"

*He bared his arm and showed his strength,  
scattered the bluffing braggarts.*

*He knocked tyrants off their high horses,  
pulled victims out of mud.  
He remembered his chosen child, Israel;  
he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high.*

On this Sunday, when so much of the mess of Christmas may have already been packed up and put away for another year, the story of Simeon reminds us that it can never be the same with the message of Christmas. That child in Mary's arms is the focus of a decision that everyone one of us will have to make, not only at sometime during our lifetime, but also at every moment of our day. The Book of Acts, which was also written by Luke, shows us how Simeon's words played themselves out, how some rejected and some accepted that message that began in Bethlehem. Just as Simeon said, this child became the cause of the failing and the recovery, the falling and the rising, of many in Israel. And his words are just as true today. His words are those that we are forced to confront as well. For as we know, the one who was born in a stable in Bethlehem is also the one who was crucified on a hill in Jerusalem. The one whose incarnation was proclaimed to lonely shepherds is also the one whose resurrection was proclaimed to frightened disciples. And that proclamation, the message that God is present and active in the one named Jesus, is one that every one of us will have to decide whether or not is true. At one time or another, every one of us will be forced to weigh the words that were once spoken by that old man in the temple and decide whether or not they have any meaning for us: *...for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.*

Simeon now fades from the scene. We do not know what happened to him. There have been many fanciful attempts to flesh out the presumably long life of this old man. Some say that he went on to become high priest, while others say that he was the father of Gamaliel, the wise rabbi featured so prominently in the Book of Acts. But all that is pure speculation. We really know nothing of him apart from the few sentences written in Luke's gospel. We do not know when or how he died. All we do know is that his

encounter with the Holy Family in the temple courtyard helped Luke move the story's focus from the glow of the manger to the light of the world. Perhaps we should be about the same. This most unremarkable Sunday after Christmas calls us to shift our focus, to move beyond the sentimentality of Jesus' birth to the proclamation of Jesus' life, to remember that the wooden manger is just the start of a journey that leads to a rock-hewed tomb. This day call us to let an old man be our example, To live lives that are righteous and devout, to look forward to that time when God will make things right, and to be so open to the Holy Spirit that we might see the Messiah wherever and whenever he may appear.

Thanks be to God for the old man Simeon. Thanks be to God for those who follow in his way.