

December 6, 2020

“Simeon”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 2:22-33, 36-38

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Why is it, as people get older, they spend more and more time reading the obituary page? Now of course, you need to make sure that your name isn't on that page. But other than the fact that you might read about someone you know, there's usually little that's interesting or scintillating about most of those obituaries. Oh, sometimes... we might be moved by reading of the person's age, how very, very long or short a life they lived, or by some exceptional achievement they may have accomplished or experience they may have had. Most often though, obituaries are typically uninteresting, the longest ones sometimes being the most wearisome. And yet, by contrast, in today's Scripture we hear St. Luke give us one of the shortest and most complete and beautiful descriptions of a person who was about to die. It reads, “There was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon. He was just and devout and was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.” Just and devout, filled with the Holy Spirit. Imagine someone describing you in that manner. “Just” – your character as seen by mankind. “Devout” – your character as seen by God. The Holy Spirit upon you, filling you and guiding you. I don't know about you, but I would like that to be my obituary!

So who exactly was this Simeon? Many of us may never have heard of him or given him much thought. Although his age is not given, most biblical scholars have concluded that he was old.... very old. And the Holy Spirit had told him two things: 1) that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah, and 2) to go into the Temple courts. Now what St. Luke is doing here with Simeon, is using him to reinforce for us the basic message of the Bible. Which is – the sins of humanity had separated God and humankind. But God had promised that one day the Messiah would come to bring the people back to God. So Simeon, because of his old age, represents ancient Israel, waiting and watching for this Messiah. And the Temple, to the Jews at that time, represented God's dwelling place, it is where God and humanity are finally brought together. And suddenly, that waiting is over. The Messiah arrives as the baby Jesus. The Son of God is brought by his earthly parents into the Temple, with two doves as their required sacrifice, and Simeon recognizes Jesus. Simeon recognizes him as the Messiah. But Simeon also recognizes that this child will ultimately be the real sacrifice, given up for the redemption of the world. You see, Simeon recognizes the plan of salvation that God has put into place, and now he can die in peace.

Like I said, Luke delivers the basic message of the Bible to us in just a few short verses. But let's see what else we might glean from this story. First, because this is Advent, and the Sunday of Peace, I want to read for you again the prayer, or song as many call it, that Simeon lifts up when he takes the baby Jesus in his arms. “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, now you may dismiss your servant in peace. For I have seen your salvation which you have prepared for all of the nations: a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.” What a song of praise! And, what's interesting is that this is just one song of the Nativity story that Luke gives us to ponder. He actually provides us with four beautiful Advent songs in his gospel. First, there is Mary's Magnificat, where she sings with joy as to what has been done for her, to become the mother of God. Then there's Zechariah's song of hope for the redemption of Israel and the promise of a light – Christ – coming to those living in darkness and in the shadow of death. Then, there's the very familiar song of love and praise from the choir of angels singing at Jesus' birth, “Glory to God in the highest,” because, indeed, love came down at Christmas. And, then there's old Simeon's song which I just read, promising our eternal salvation and the ultimate peace it will bring us all. So I'm going to give you your Christian challenge for the week early. It's to read and reflect on the four songs I just mentioned. They're all found in just Chapter 1 and 2 of Luke's Gospel. The verses are listed on your bulletin.

Now before I go on, I want to talk for a moment about older people. I like the fact that Luke uses the aged Simeon to convey such an important message. And the fact he also uses the 84-year-old Anna, describing her as worshipping and praying night and day, and giving thanks to God for the Savior, Christ Jesus, who she also recognizes. In today's culture, a lot of older people are not considered important anymore. We dismiss them too easily. But in the culture of the times, it would have meant a great deal to Mary and Joseph that both Simeon and Anna came up to them in the Temple and blessed them, prophesizing about their child. Being “old” back then, especially the ages of Simeon and Anna, was considered a great blessing, a gift, an honorable achievement. If you were old, you were considered wise, and were treated with great respect. And in our church, John Wesley, we have many older brothers and sisters and I want you to know that this is how I, and everyone, in this church, think and feel about you. That you are a gift, and a blessing to us. Don't ever forget that! I know from calling and, pre-Covid, visiting many of you, that you sometimes indicated you felt unproductive, unable to do anything. Many of you apologized to me for not being able to come to worship as often as you once did, or for not being able to contribute financially the way you used to, or for not being involved in the way you used to be. But my message to you is that John Wesley needs you! In fact, I have an

important job for you. It's a job that is just as important as serving on a ministry team, or volunteering for one of our events, or giving money to the church. You see, I need you to be this church's Simeon and Anna. To be devout and to pray for our church. To be devout and to pray for John Wesley. Last Monday, at our Church Conference, our Finance Ministry team leader, Fred Sievert, described how so many wonderful things have come together over the past five years at this church. Financial gifts, competent staff, dedicated leadership, wonderful volunteers, all so critical in getting us through this pandemic as a strong and vital church. Well, let me say, it could not have been done without the prayers of our people, especially our Simeon's and Anna's. So please, all of you, continue to pray for John Wesley.

Now, let's get back to Simeon. Having lived a long life trusting in the promise of God through the Holy Spirit, and finally seeing God's plan of redemption come to pass, indeed, having held it in his arms, Simeon is ready to die. After looking into the very face of the Messiah, he is not only certain of the world's salvation, but his own salvation, and he sings, "Now you may dismiss your servant in peace." Given the circumstances in which these words were spoken, two things come to mind. The first is that these are words of comfort and promise, assuring all of us of our salvation. For we, too, know Christ! And because of that we too are assured that when we pass from this life, our souls will be taken to that place where "no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him." Where there will, indeed, be that peace that passes all understanding. Think for a minute about the peace and fulfillment and rest conveyed by Simeon's words. The early church fathers recognized their importance and made his prayer their own. It's known as the "Nunc Dimittis." "Nunc Dimittis." "Now you are dismissed." The Nunc Dimittis has been used for years in churches and religious communities throughout Christendom for worship at the end of a day. Quite literally, Simeon's words are quoted daily, in thousands of places throughout the world. Now you are dismissed, in peace and in God's hands at the end of the day, or at the end of a life.

Now my second thought about Simeon is this. The reason he could have that peace and assurance, is because he recognized Christ. Now think about that. He was living in a time when fear, injustice, violence and tensions ruled the day. And yet... yet, in the midst of all that, Simeon found peace because his eyes were open to the Savior. And that, my friends is the only way we will find peace – by recognizing the Savior. Yes, we are living in a world that's gripped in the fear of a pandemic. We are living in a difficult and trying times. Many don't know Christ, and subsequently there exists all sorts of

evils and injustices. But Christ has come. God is with us. And it is only when we recognize God at work in our lives and our world that we can surrender our anxieties and enter into his peace. You see, Simeon may have seen the baby Jesus, but we know the fullness of Christ. We know the Prince of Peace, and his call to, "Love others as I have loved you." And, "Blessed are the peacemakers." And, "My peace I give to you." So on this Advent Sunday of Peace, "do not be troubled or afraid." Now, or ever. Amen.