

“Timeless Light”

Isaiah 62:1-3

Luke 2:25-35

Even though Christmas was just two days ago, our gospel reading takes place forty days after Jesus’s birth. After eight days, he was circumcised and his name was called – Jesus. But part of their custom was that the mother would go through a time of purification after giving birth. It was sort of like their form of maternity leave. She wouldn’t be responsible for all of her ordinary duties and responsibilities. She would pray and have a ritual cleansing. She had that time to just focus on being a mom. Then, after forty days, she would come to the Temple to make an offering – a symbol that she was “re-entering the workplace” and that she was dedicating herself to living a righteous life. Mary and Joseph were quite poor, but they came to worship God and brought little Jesus with them.

At the Temple, they met a man named Simeon. There’s so much we don’t know about him, but there are a few things we can say. His name means “[God] hears.” From his birth, he was marked as a person of faith, with parents eager to share that blessing with him. Scripture calls him “righteous and devout.” He believed in justice – but, more than that, he believed that true justice rose to the standard of God’s justice. Further, he was devout. It’s a funny little word in Greek that can mean handling something cautiously. Say I told you that I had a vase that was worth \$10,000 and asked you to move it across the room for me. I’m guessing that you would pick up that vase so tenderly, so carefully, knowing it had such value. So, using this word to describe someone’s faith is like saying that they believe so passionately in God that they take all care to be as devoted and worshipful and loving as they possibly can be. They see honoring God and serving God as the most important thing that they can do and focus on and share with the

world. It is this man that the Holy Spirit came upon because he was sure that Israel would be restored, renewed, reborn in God's gracious hands.

In the Spirit, he knew that he would not die before he had seen Christ face to face. We don't know when he received this prophecy. We don't know how long he waited to meet the Messiah. We often assume that he was an older man, but he could have been any adult age. He couldn't know exactly who the Messiah would be or exactly what would happen when the Messiah came. But we remember that he was righteous and devout – prepared for God's justice to come and dedicated to following the path of righteousness.

Until one day, forty days after Jesus was born and Mary was feeling more like herself, they came to the Temple and the Spirit guided Simeon to the Temple. Mary and Joseph and Jesus were celebrating this milestone moment when they could move to the next phase of their life together. And Simeon saw Jesus – he really saw Jesus. And it might be that Simeon was a priest in the Temple. Maybe he was the one giving the offering for the holy family, and giving them blessings from God. Maybe that's why he took the precious child in his arms and praised God (and definitely went off script with his blessing). But he could've just been another faithful guy, coming to worship in the Temple, looking for the Promised One who was already in their midst. He knew that God hears; God said that he would see; and, there, he saw!

And once he saw, he could not contain his praise. He lifts up God as the ultimate authority and says, "Yes, my Lord and Master! You are setting me free, you are forgiving me, you are releasing me from this difficult time of waiting and wondering. And now – now I know peace. Here is the one to redeem us – one who can be seen by all, one who you sent to us. He will reveal the light of glory to Israel and even to the whole world! Praise be to God."

What could Mary and Joseph do but stand amazed, awe-struck, wondering at this new blessing? Simeon continued, telling them that people would have a hard time with Jesus – they wouldn't know how to respond; they would be undone and redone, argue and find revelation. Whatever we hide in the dark corners of our hearts – it will be revealed as Jesus lives out his purpose. Some would fear their own sinfulness, others loss of power; Mary, too, will feel pain like a sword that cuts through to her own soul. Even at this young age, Simeon warns them of the suffering that Jesus will bear. And yet, with the falling, there is rising. With the fear of sin, there is the hope of deliverance. With the loss of earthly power, there is the gain of a heavenly home. With the death on the cross, there is a rising again – beyond our knowing.

Simeon saw all of that in that holy moment. He glimpsed salvation come to life and he had to tell everyone. He saw vindication transforming the world just as surely as the rising sun transforms the night sky. Suddenly, he knew that this heavenly gift, this renewed glory and hope were real and possible. It's not like Mary and Joseph didn't already know that Jesus was special, but here God gave them a glimpse of everything that Jesus would mean. They would need to prepare themselves for the gravity of parenting such a child.

Simeon knew that times were hard. He knew how much struggling and suffering and pain there was in the world. But, at the same time, he knew that he would not see death until he saw the Messiah face to face, the hope of the world.

Today is the last Sunday of 2020 and this has got to be one of the worst years of any of our lifetimes – if not *the* worst year. Every day, we shudder to imagine what fresh difficulty and hardship we will face as a nation and as a world. Especially recently, every day we break new records for positive cases and lives lost. How long before we grow numb and sleepwalk through our lives? How long before we feel like the world is crashing in on us and we can do nothing but

rant or yell or cry? Maybe we've yoyo-ed back and forth from numb to feeling like we're losing our minds with occasional pit stops in the elusive land of "I actually feel alright today." As this year has dragged on, we've gotten dragged out and I think sometimes we've started to lose faith in one another.

So many of us have been looking to the New Year as a sign of release from the struggles of 2020. We know that the calendar page turning doesn't mean that everything goes back to normal. But, still, we need that sign, that threshold to cross where we can say – a new day is dawning. We're turning the tide, we have the vaccine, we can pull through it, we can make it in 2021.

How fitting, then, that we are studying the blessing and prophecy of Simeon today! How fitting that we can join his celebration at finding Jesus at long, long last! It seems that his main focus in life was to get to know Jesus, to embrace him, and to share that the world would never be the same. My friends, here we are at the end of a wearying year, and we can join Simeon in saying that we have found Jesus. We welcomed him into our homes and hearts on Christmas and, see, we are being dismissed in peace. Holding him close to our hearts, we are reminded that the light of his salvation ever brings us to a new dawn and a new day.

Yes, we are still hurting. Yes, our holiday festivities were probably quite different from what we would have preferred. Yet, we have seen Christ and shared his love and grace with one another. The road ahead may still be rocky, but we are bound together with a love that conquered sin and evil and death itself. The love of Christ is big enough and powerful enough to carry us through. May we follow Simeon's example, righteous and devout. May we remember all the blessings and miracles you have granted in our lives. May we pray and serve you always, trusting your promises to us that are ever ancient, ever new. Amen.