

Meditations on the Nunc Dimittis: Dismiss Us in Peace

Luke 2:25-35

Luke's Gospel Songs of Advent and Christmas

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Sunday, December 30, 2007

Worship at 9:15 & 11 a.m.; regular Sunday School classes - 9:15

Things are different this Sunday. Last Sunday and Monday were all about anticipation and joy. It was the eve of Christmas. Our children had dreams for Christmas. Would their dreams come true? Christmas was good or bad depending on how that question was answered for them. How awful to get what your aunt thought you needed! But getting what you wanted...now, that's a good day. But however good that day was...for children and their gifts, for us adults and sharing with family and friends...the next day was back to business as usual. The Christmas music on my station was gone and everything was pointing to a New Year. By Thursday, it seemed that the birth of the Savior was swallowed up in the world's evil. We witnessed the horror of a political assassination. And we ask, "What did we celebrate this last week?" Let us pray: Lord God, the world is filled with chaos and the noise of voices that would drown out your voice. By the power of your Holy Spirit, we ask that you speak to us your unchanging Word so that we may hear and be transformed for the sake of Jesus our Lord.

We heard this very same passage Christmas Eve as Gareth asked us to consider what might happen in our lives if, like Simeon, we embrace Jesus and see our salvation. Today, as we consider the same text, we want to see what happens when we do see that salvation.

Jesus has been born in Bethlehem. His family is still probably living there, but a new baby means a lot of new obligations. On this day, about forty days after Jesus was born, Mary and Joseph needed to come to Jerusalem in order to present Jesus at the Temple, dedicating him to God. There had already been other things that just had to be done. After eight days, Jesus went through the ritual of circumcision, marking him as a member of God's chosen family. Today parents brought their children to be marked as Christ's own through the waters of baptism. You see, devout people, in obedience to the command of the Lord, do these things.

So, on this day, Mary and Joseph weren't the Hallmark celebrities they are today. They were just parents like any other parents fulfilling their religious obligations. You can be sure there was joy, but also some tension and tiredness as they had to make the trip into the big city....with a new baby. They are glad to be coming to the Temple. It is the center of life for the Jewish people. It represented God and humanity coming together. Ironic isn't it? The symbol of God and humanity coming together will now host the One in whom God and humanity really and fully reside. But in busy Jerusalem, nobody notices or cares that Jesus is there.

Mary and Joseph, however, are not the only ones there. If you read further in the text...verses 36-38...you will see that Anna is there all the time. She has been there since her husband died and that was eighty-four years ago. She's close to a hundred years old and she has spent most of the century praying and fasting for the salvation of Israel. She will see Jesus in the Temple. She can't miss it and seeing God's salvation will cause her to spend the rest of her life telling others about Jesus.

Simeon is there. Simeon is not a priest. He is not part of the 'ordained' Temple leadership that we know. All we know about him is that he is devout. His name means "God hears," and his life is sustained and guided by the Holy Spirit. He longs for the consolation of Israel. Here is where the Greek helps us a lot. The Holy Spirit is sometimes called the paraclete...the One who comforts, the One who stands up for you and holds you up, the one who comes alongside and who is a present help. It is the Paraclete that guides and upholds Simeon. And the 'consolation' for which Simeon yearns is the paracletis. God, the very thing Simeon desires the most, carries him through his life.

What does this tell us about Simeon? In the words of James Wibberding it means this: "Simeon lived only

for the appearing of Christ, of salvation, of God. His example reminds us to live for God. That's a cliché but it means something profound. To exist, to continue, to breathe, to eat and to sleep just so you can see what God does next..."

We live in a city that gets an adrenaline rush anticipating what is going to happen next, especially in an election year. We are just intensely curious about the unfolding of history...perhaps because we want to manage it. But, would that history unfold any differently if we couldn't wait to see what God is going to do next?

Unlike Anna, it appears that Simeon was not always at the Temple, but he was there on this day. He listened to the word of the Lord through the Holy Spirit and went. He is there and sees Mary and Joseph. He embraces Jesus and then prays a prayer that has echoed down history through the liturgies of evening prayer and funerals: Now, Lord, dismiss your servant in peace, according to your Word, for I have seen your salvation.

Most people rightly understand that this means that now Simeon can die in peace because he has seen the Messiah. He hasn't seen how the Messiah will save, but he has seen the Savior. God had given him his word that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. God kept his promise. And this is the great hope for all of us, as well. When we see our salvation in Jesus we are able to face death without fear.

And this is not just a hope for older people. While I was on study leave this month, I had the opportunity to listen to a song by Casting Crowns, a Christian rock band. A part of this song, Who Am I? says:

I am a flower quickly fading, Here today and gone tomorrow, A wave tossed in the ocean, A vapor in the wind. Still you hear me when I'm calling, Lord, you catch me when I'm falling, And you've told me who I am. I am your, I am yours.

Not because of who I am, But because of what you've done. Not because of what I've done, But because of who you are.

I was intrigued by the song and so went searching for the lyrics. The web page I found included a comments section. It was filled with notes from teenagers who are facing life-threatening illness or who feel that their faith is slipping away or who they are all alone in the world. Their response to the words of this song and this verse in particular indicated that they sense in very real ways their own fragility and mortality. Seeing their salvation in Jesus led them to publicly praise God for saving their lives.

Unfortunately, Simeon's prayer has been trivialized for centuries. It's the "I will die happy if" version of the prayer. Most of us have uttered that phrase...I will die happy if I get that job; I will die happy if she will marry me. In fact, there is a book out there entitled *Die Happy: 499 Things A Guy's Gotta Do While He Still Can*. The blurb for the book says, "Face it. There are some things in life that come with an expiration date." (I am not going to read this book.) Even John Calvin spoke about this twisting of Simeon's prayer in his commentary on this passage. He said, "... there are many who falsely and improperly plead the case of Simeon, and boast that they would willingly die if this or the other thing were granted to them...allowing themselves to entertain rash wishes of their own pleasure..." He goes on to say that Simeon's prayer is not about general contentment. It is about a very specific kind of contentment. It's the kind of commitment that comes from walking in the paths that God has set out for us. When we see God's salvation in God's living Word, we will find our true purpose in life.

So you see, Simeon's prayer is not just about dying in peace. Being 'dismissed' was not just a euphemism for death. It also meant that one was being released from some obligation, such as sentry duty. It is clear that Simeon had been on such duty. He waited and prayed each day, as did Anna, to see God's salvation. And now, just as he took Jesus in his arms, his sentry duty was over.

Sentry duty is not easy and it has clear obligations. Among the eleven General Orders for a soldier in the U. S. Army are these: "I will always keep on the alert, observing everything that takes place within sight or hearing." And, "I will quit my post only when relieved." Simeon kept looking for God's salvation and he was not relieved until Jesus showed up. Simeon gave his entire life over to the work of being a sentry.

This wasn't easy. There must have been times when he would rather do something else. There must have been days when he was discouraged. How long would it take for God's salvation to get here? And the scariest question --How could Simeon tell the true from the false? There were plenty of people running around, claiming to be the Messiah. Indeed the life of a sentry is not easy, so Simeon was released from this stressful job of continually keeping watch. He is released from all the anxieties and frustration that go along with that kind of work. Seeing the salvation of God means being at peace because the waiting and the work are over.

But it is not only the devout who seek salvation. I have mentioned this book in the past, but it is worth mentioning again. Doug Coupland, a Canadian, has written a book, *Life After God*, in which he describes what life is like for the Baby Buster generation, which he describes as the first generation raised without religion. The narrator of the story has also been on sentry duty. He didn't know it, but he was also searching for the salvation of the Lord. His search has at times been depressing, meaningless, hopeless and without joy. He has no authentic relationships. He hates his job. His wife has left him and the things he thought would bring pleasure are just passing blips on his radar screen. Toward the end of the book he makes this confession:

Now, here is my secret. I tell with an openness of heart I doubt I will ever have again. So I pray you're in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God; that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I am no longer capable of giving; to help me be kind, because I no longer seem capable of kindness. I need God to help me love, as I seem to be beyond being able to love.

This is someone who would love to be able to pray Simeon's prayer. He needs to be released from the hopelessness and exhaustion of a life without God. He needs to see the salvation of the Lord so that he can go from death to life.

"And now Lord, dismiss us in peace according to your word." The words of this *Nunc Dimittis* often wash over us with a poetic force, but as Simeon spoke them, they are quite matter of fact. They tell us why we celebrated Christmas. It is painfully clear that the world cannot create or maintain peace. We grieve for a world so lost without this peace, but peace has come.

Seeing the salvation of God gives us a peace that comes from knowing that we can face death without fear; a peace that allows us to live into God's purposes for our lives; a peace that leads us to grateful praise and joy; a peace that means we can rest from searching for God because God has brought us from death to life. Peace is not having our dreams come true. Peace is seeing God's promises come true. Like Simeon, you have been led here today by God's Holy Spirit. Like Simeon, as you embrace Jesus ask the Lord to dismiss you with the peace you need. Jesus was there for Simeon. He's there for you.

Let us pray: In the chaos of our lives, may we look for your salvation in the place where heaven and humanity meet. May we find life and peace in Jesus, our Lord Immanuel, God with us. Amen.