

December 15, 3019
National Presbyterian Church
“Fully Satisfied”
Luke 2:25-40
David A. Renwick

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 for seven years after her marriage, ³⁷then as a widow to
the age of eighty-four.
She never left the temple but worshipped 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.

In our sermons this fall and through the winter we’re looking at the story of Jesus through the lens of one of the four accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry that we have in the Bible – the account of St Luke.

All four gospels paint a picture of Jesus, but with different styles and palettes. And while they cover much of the same ground, there are different nuances, and sometimes different stories. At the end of John's gospel, there are some delightful verses (John 20:31; 21:25), in which he says that, he's been deliberately selective, and that if he were to have included all the stories about Jesus, then all the books in the world could not contain them.

So, for example, Mark and John's gospels skip the whole story of Jesus' birth, and get straight down to business with the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus as adults. Whereas Luke and Matthew choose to go all the way back to Jesus birth. And Luke shares a number of stories about Jesus's birth and childhood (in Luke 2) that none of the others share.

1. One of these is about Jesus' mother Mary, and her song to God that we call the Magnificat, in which she sings about God noticing her, despite the fact that she's a virtual "no one."
2. Another is about the shepherds – the lowliest of people as well – who turn out to be (by the call of God) the first to see the new born baby.
3. Yet another is about Jesus as a 12 year old boy – asking questions of theologians in the Jerusalem temple
4. And then it's only Luke who tells us the story we read today about two older people – Simeon and Anna – who meet Jesus in the temple in Jerusalem (about 5 miles from Bethlehem) not long after he's born, when Mary and Joseph go there with their new born baby to fulfil various ritual matters prescribed by the law of Moses.

SO this is our story for today – and what I want to do is to share **three reasons why Luke chooses to bring these two figures, Simeon and Anna, into broader the picture painted around Jesus' birth.**

1. The first is just that they are older. Simeon says "Lord, let your servant depart (die!) in peace" – as if to say, I've had a good long life, I'm ready to go, I just need to fulfil my bucket list." And Anna, we're told, is 84. And this is important because there's a real temptation for older folk to think that any meaningful experience of God, or service for God, is out of the question because of AGE.

Of course, on the other hand, there's the opposite problem with age: some young people think that they're too young for God to be at work in their lives in a significant way – DON'T BELIEVE IT FOR A MINUTE!

True – God is at work in remarkable ways in younger people. Statistics show that most Christians who have a profound faith come to that faith in their teens or twenties. And in the Bible, the stories of people like Joseph and Samuel and David and Jeremiah and Esther and others, remind us that God often works in children or youth or young adults (Mary herself was probably a teenager when Jesus was born).

On the other hand, others may think that because of age, it's too late for God to be at work in their lives; that you can't teach an old dog new tricks; you're too old for God to do something new or significant with your life. BUT it's just not true. Back to the Bible – remember that God was at work in Abraham and Sarah and Moses in their 80's; and here in our story (as I mentioned), Anna is at least 84, and Simeon seems to be older too – ready to die in peace, but guided every step of the way by God's Holy Spirit to Jesus.

So, first of all, no matter what age you are – young or old – Luke is saying to us: do not rule out the possibility of God doing something new in and through your life.

2. Then second, Simeon and Anna are in the story because of Anna; because Anna is a woman!

One of Luke's main themes throughout the Gospel account of Jesus' ministry is the role of women . We have to remember that the society is patriarchal, and that male dominance was taken for granted.

So Jesus has 12 men as disciples. The twelve are patterned after the twelve tribes of Israel – descendants of the twelve sons of Israel whose other name is Jacob. If Jesus has had women in the inner group, no one would have understood, or accepted the fact. It would have been too much too soon.

But, at the same time, there's no denying that with Jesus, the seeds of something new are planted powerfully in the story by Luke, in a number of ways.

So, for example, along with the other four gospel writers . . .

- It's women who stick with Jesus when the men run away at his arrest. The women are the ones with courage.
- And it's women who become the main witnesses of the resurrection. This is one reason why I believe in the resurrection of Jesus. If the stories were made up, then women would never have been chosen as the primary witnesses. But something happened, and the women saw it first . . . and the men had no option but to stick with this story!
- And in Luke (8.2), remarkably, it's women who provide the support for Jesus' ministry. They are the financiers, not the men!
- And here, with Simeon, this woman Anna, is described as a "prophet" – a role overwhelmingly belonging to men. But Anna is one of them. She is someone who knew God's word, and was chosen by God to proclaim God's Word. And not only that, but, given the fact that Anna had been a widow most of her life, we might well describe her as a "single professional woman who served God with her gifts." And in this she is a perfect complement to Mary.
 - That is, in Mary, God powerfully affirms the traditional role of women as mothers (and the Catholic church in particular emphasizes this image). And this is important, and must never be under-estimated. in the traditional role as mother.
 - But then you have Anna – who for decades "worked outside the home," loving and serving God.

And so there are actually two contrasts being made through Anna. On the one hand, the roles of Mary and Anna complement each other; and on the other hand, the focus on both Mary and Anna, counter-balance the role men.

So, first, Luke has Anna and Simeon in the story because of their age.

And then, second, Luke has Anna in the story because she's a woman

And then third, Luke has Simeon in the story because of what he says about Jesus.

28 Simeon took the infant Jesus in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹ 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;

³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.’

³⁴ Then Simeon blessed Mary and Joseph 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

³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed
—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.’

Gentiles: Simeon speaks about Jesus opening the door for the Gentiles – that’s you and me – to enter God’s family through the coming Messiah (a light for revelation to the Gentiles).

Suffering: And he speaks as well, about the fact that despite the beauty of the moment, something is going to happen to break Mary’s heart – her child is going to suffer in some way (a sword will pierce your soul)

But what I want to focus on is Simeon’s statement that tells us that *in holding Jesus in his arms*, he was now fully satisfied. There was nothing left in life that he needed.

In the King James Version, he says,

*Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word.
For mine eyes have seen **your salvation**.*

Seen “salvation”? Holding salvation in his arms? What’s that all about?

Well at the least, it means that God’s salvation, to Simeon, is not merely an idea, or a concept, or a theological construct, or a hidden code of some kind. No! To Simeon, “salvation” was a person! The person he’s looking at! Salvation is first and foremost about relationship. Salvation is about the gift of being in relationship with whoever can bring us into a “right relationship” with God.

Let’s think about the importance of relationships in general in our lives.

- To put it briefly, isn’t it true that when relationships with significant others in our lives (family, colleagues, friends) are healthy and right then WE are alright?
- But when those relationships are strained, dysfunctional or non existent, then we are out of sorts too?

Or let’s think of the power of relationships in our lives in terms of a movie that is now 22 years old.

I don’t know if you remember the story line of the movie Titanic – how rich girl Rose meets poor-boy, Jack, a stow-away. Jack comes to Rose’s life from out of the blue at a time when she is in need, at a time when she is trapped.

- She is caught in the world of her childhood and she can’t quite grow up.
- She’s about to be married to a person she doesn’t really want to be married to.

She’s caught in a world of luxury in which we might be envious. But she feels that it’s hemming her in.

- She’s controlled by people who are too strong for her, whose voices she cannot, cannot take on.
- She feels trapped in this world, unable to escape

UNTIL Jack comes along out of the blue – almost, as it were, from a different universe, a different world. He comes from a different class. He comes from a different background. And he shows her a different life that she couldn't have imagined: not only emotionally, not only socially but quite literally. He takes her into the bowels of the Titanic as it's sailing towards its doom. He takes her to people she's never met before. He shows her a life, things going on that she couldn't have conceived of . . . And it changes her.

And just as quickly as he comes, of course he goes, he disappears. He doesn't make it. He drowns. She survives but he is gone – but only after he has led her to safety and only after he has helped her to have her eyes opened.

In the movie, towards the end, Rose has been sharing this story with people who are exploring, looking for the Titanic on the Atlantic Ocean floor. And one of these is a person by the name of Luis. And Luis says “We never found anything on Jack. There's no record of him at all.” The team doubts that Jack really exists.

But then Rose replies – much older Rose now: ***“No there wouldn't be would there. And I've never spoken of him until now, not to anyone . . . but now you know there was a man named Jack Dawson and that he saved me -- in every way that a person can be saved.”***

Did you hear that? Here is this relationship that she sees as “saving her”! And this is the truth! On a human level it's relationships that save us, that give ultimate meaning to life; that bring us down to earth when we get cocky, and that lift us from the dust, renewing our strength and giving us comfort when pain and evil are unbearable.

And so too with God.

Some people say that salvation, in a Christian sense, is all about making sure that you go to heaven – not hell -- when you die. And there's some truth in that -- but not the whole truth. Let me put it like this, at its simplest, “Heaven is where God is fully present” and “Hell is where God is absent.” As C.S. Lewis said, hell is where we become more and more alone; where God answers our prayer when we turn to God and say angrily to God: “Leave me alone!” And God does . . . for ever.

But what Simeon understood and shared as he held Jesus in his arms was

- That God, with sacrificial humility, is passionate, will go to any lengths, to live with us; in close relationship with us.
- That God had come to us – to him, Simeon – as a free gift, and was fully present in this helpless baby, that he held in his arms.
- That in this baby God was offering himself to us. A relationship with God that begins now, and moves on, past the gates of death, into eternity. Heaven. Now, and forever.
- Whoever we are . . . young, old, male female, from any tongue or tribe or nation.

Presenting us with a decision: to fully embrace the baby, as Simeon and Anna did. Or not. The most important decision you can make this Christmas. Or any time. It's never too late. No matter who you are.

28 Simeon took the infant Jesus in his arms and praised God, saying,
29 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
30 for my eyes have seen your salvation,

Lord: open our eyes and our arms to you.

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THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800