

The Perspective of Simeon and Anna

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

December 31, 2023

Readings

Luke 2:22-40 (NKJV)

²² Now when the days of [Mary's] purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every male who opens the womb shall be called holy to the LORD"), ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, "A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

²⁵ And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶ And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ²⁷ So he came by the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents brought in the Child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the law, ²⁸ he took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said:

²⁹ "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace,
According to Your word;

³⁰ For my eyes have seen Your salvation

³¹ Which You have prepared before the face of all peoples,

³² A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles,
And the glory of Your people Israel."

³³ And Joseph and His mother marveled at those things which were spoken of Him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, "Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising again of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against ³⁵ (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the reasonings of many hearts may be revealed."

³⁶ Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; ³⁷ and this woman was a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. ³⁸ And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

³⁹ So when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth. ⁴⁰ And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him.

Psalm 85:7-13 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)

- 7 Show us Your mercy, O Jehovah,
And give us Your salvation.
- 8 I will hear what God Jehovah will speak,
For He will speak peace
To His people and to His merciful ones;
And they shall not turn back to stupidity.
- 9 Surely His salvation is near to those who fear Him,
That glory may abide in our land.
- 10 Mercy and truth have met together;
Justice and peace have kissed.
- 11 Truth shall grow from the earth,
And justice shall look down from the heavens.
- 12 Jehovah also shall give what is good;
And our land shall give her produce.
- 13 Justice shall go before Him,
And shall make His footsteps our pathway.

Apocalypse Revealed 356

[By] Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, in their order, is signified truth in the understanding, or faith; truth in the will, or charity; and truth in act, or good work; in like manner as by Peter, James, and John. That Simeon and his tribe might therefore represent truth in the will, which is both charity and obedience, he was named from hearing, and to hear signifies both to understand truth and to will or obey it....

Arcana Coelestia 3862

The regeneration of a person... starts with the truth of faith, meant by 'Reuben', progresses from this towards the willing of truth, meant by 'Simeon', and from this to charity, meant by 'Levi', and so on to the Lord, who is meant in the highest sense by 'Judah'. The progression of spiritual conception and birth, or regeneration, is from what is external to what is internal... that is,... from the truth of faith to the good of love.

Introduction

- Here we are just a few days after Christmas and just before the new year.
- Now that the excitement and fun of Christmas is past, maybe the stress about school or work are starting to come back.
 - Thinking about having to get back into the routine of school and work; thinking about all the things that you'll need to get done.
 - Or maybe you're at a phase of life where you're *not* very busy and so instead, after the fun and excitement of the holidays, you're faced with the loneliness and boredom of another whole year.
- Whatever mood you're in, you might find it valuable to reflect on the stories of Simeon and Anna and to think about how they saw the world and to maybe try to look at things in your life from their perspective.
 - We'll work our way through the story and see what we can pick up along the way.

Meeting Simeon and Anna

- Let's talk first about how Mary and Joseph met Simeon and Anna.
- It seems significant that they only met them because they were doing the things that they were supposed to.
 - They circumcised Jesus on the eighth day after his birth, according to the Jewish laws and they named Him Jesus, as the angel had told them to (Luke 2:21).
 - And then, also following the Jewish laws, after the days of Mary's purification after giving birth were completed, they took Jesus to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord and offer a sacrifice (Luke 2:22-24).
- Mary and Joseph end up having these positive and strengthening experiences of meeting Simeon and Anna because they were trying to do what they were supposed to do and because they were making the sacrifices that they were supposed to make.
 - If you're feeling overwhelmed and stressed, sometimes the best thing to do is something simple that you're supposed to do.
 - It might be something as simple as looking after your body by getting better sleep or looking after your soul by reading the Word or going to church.
 - One of the best ways to shift our perspective is to talk to other people who look at things in a different way than we do.
 - Church is a place where we can do that with other people who are trying to follow the Lord.
 - It might be someone older and wiser than you or it might be someone younger and more innocent than you that you need to talk to.

The Perspective of Simeon

- The first older and wiser person that Mary and Joseph met when they went to the temple was a man named Simeon.
- And what perspective do they get from Simeon?
 - Simeon's immediate response was gratitude and joy.
 - He knew that he was seeing and holding the Person who would grow up to save the world.
 - Having seen that, he felt that then he could die happily: he said, "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation...." (Luke 2:29,30).
- Can you imagine having feelings of gratitude and joy about life in general or about the year in front of you?
 - What would it take for you to have that perspective?
- Simeon and Anna were the only two people in the temple that day (apart from Mary and Joseph) who recognized how important the baby Jesus was.
 - What made them able to see things in that way – to see the underlying reality of the situation?
 - The name Simeon means hearing.
 - The first Simeon mentioned in the Bible, who lived over a thousand years before the Simeon in this story, he was given the name Simeon because his mother felt heard by God (Genesis 29:33).
 - Simeon was a good man – he was "just and devout."
 - As we heard in the lessons, Simeon means willing and obeying the truth.
 - That's a significant step beyond just knowing something that is theoretically true.
 - It's knowing the truth and wanting to live according to it – looking for opportunities to put it into practice.
 - Earlier in the account in Luke there was another old man in the temple, Zacharias.
 - He was also a good man: he's described as being "righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless" (Luke 1:6).
 - But his name is from the word for remembering and he seems to represent an earlier stage in our spiritual development in which we remember the truth but are not ready to believe and act on it in the same way.
 - Like Zacharias was not ready to believe the incredible message from the angel Gabriel at first.
 - Simeon represents an intriguing middle step between knowing something and acting on it.
 - It's the step of that knowledge making its way into our will.
 - It might be valuable to intentionally work on trying to move certain ideas from our heads towards our hearts.
 - For example, we can know the idea that the Lord is in charge of everything – we can see that intellectually – but can we *hear* that too?

- Can we get to a place where something within us really hears that truth and says, "I hear you! Amen!"
- Listen to this description of how important this movement is and the stages of it:
 - *Arcana Coelestia* 3870
 - If the truth that makes up faith is to come alive, it has to be introduced into the will to receive life there. Truth does not receive life from our knowing about it but from our wanting to act on it. The new will the Lord creates in us provides a channel for life from him to flow into us. The first stirrings of life take the form of obedience, obedience being the rudiments of a will. The second kind of life takes the form of a desire for acting on truth – an advanced form of will that exists when we find pleasure and blessing in doing the truth.
 - This passage helps us see that the place to start in moving our faith into our will is with obedience – doing what we're told.
 - We don't have to want to or have to find it enjoyable: the first step is to obey.
- If we want to have the perspective of Simeon we will need be looking for opportunities to hear and obey our God.
 - Try thinking about the year ahead of you from this perspective: think about all of the days and weeks and months ahead of you and the tasks and the hard things and the stress but also think, "Will there be opportunities in the midst of all of that to serve the Lord?" Yes.
 - Will there be opportunities to try to help other people? Yup.
 - When we're caught up in stress and worry about the future it can be useful to seek the kingdom of God, to focus on trying to serve the Lord, and trust that the Lord will sort out the rest – "all these things will be added to you" (Luke 12:31).
 - It's hard to do but it can be very powerful to shift our perspective from thinking about how terrible and hard it's all going to be to thinking about how we can use the time and opportunities we're given to serve the Lord and other people.

"Waiting for the Consolation of Israel"

- When we're trying to have a more positive outlook on life it can feel sometimes as if the only way to do that would be to try to ignore a lot of hard things.
 - But it's possible to acknowledge the hard things and still have gratitude and hope.
 - We can see that in Simeon.
- We don't know much at all about Simeon's life but you do get the sense that he was aware of the hard things in life.
 - It says that he was "waiting for the Consolation of Israel" (Luke 2:25).
 - There's no need to wait for consolation if everything is fine.
 - It seems like he was someone who would have been aware of the prophecies – from Isaiah and other prophets – about the coming of the Messiah and the peace and restoration that His coming would bring.
 - So that was probably the consolation that he was waiting for.

- And it's clear from what he says a bit later in the story that he was not just concerned for himself; he was concerned for his whole nation, and even the Gentiles, and the whole world.
 - He was longing for a time when there would be consolation for all people.
- We too can look out at the troubled world and also long for consolation and restoration.
- Simeon didn't just long for consolation; he was also able to recognize the Lord's salvation when he saw it, even if to all outward appearances all that he was looking at was a little baby.
- It also seems that Simeon was aware of the work and pain that would be necessary for the Lord to bring about His salvation.
 - Sometimes when we're feeling pretty hopeless about the future we can try to find some hope in imagining some unlikely scenario in which things all magically work out the way we want them too.
 - But we often don't believe those stories anyway and so they don't really bring us genuine hope.
 - But Simeon was able to find hope in the Lord, even knowing and acknowledging how hard it was going to be.
 - He said to Mary, "Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising again of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the reasonings of many hearts may be revealed" (Luke 2:34,35).
- What Simeon says here can be taken as a description of what the Lord was about to do in the world and how people would respond to Him; it's also a description of what goes on inside each of us.
 - The fall and rising again of many means the massive shake-up that needed to happen in the spiritual worlds and natural worlds when the Lord came.
 - It's the same shake-up that Mary speaks about in the verses that we often call "the Magnificat":
 - ⁵² He has put down the mighty from their thrones,
And exalted the lowly.
 - ⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things,
And the rich He has sent away empty. (Luke 1:52,53)
 - "A sign which will be spoken against" means that the Lord would be fought against in the work that He was doing – in His work at His coming and also in His work in each of us.
 - Because of course there will be resistance.
 - The mighty who are on thrones do not want to be put down.
 - And Simeon knew that, in order to accomplish that big shake-up, the Lord would need to go through something dreadfully painful – that's why he said to Mary that a sword would pierce through her own soul also.
- And yet Simeon was grateful and hopeful.

- He knew that the pain would be worth it.
- When He was grown up the Lord taught that going through painful things is part of being a follower of the Lord.
 - In order to get to the place where we love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our strength we need to be willing to lay down our souls for the Lord.
 - Jesus said, "For whoever wills to save his soul shall lose it; but whoever shall lose his soul for My sake, he shall save it. For what shall it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, but lose himself, or be deprived of his soul?" (Luke 9:24,25).
 - We need the reasonings of our hearts to be revealed to us – even if it takes a sword going through our soul – we need to know how hell is messing with our priorities and our thinking.
 - We need the Lord to cut through the justifications and rationalizations and excuses so that our selfish lives can be laid down and we can rise again with the Lord's help.
- Sometimes going through the pain and carrying on doesn't seem worth it but the next person that Mary and Joseph met at the temple was someone who had had a sword pierce through her own soul and yet she still carried on.

The Perspective of Anna

- The next person they met was an old prophetess named Anna.
 - Her husband had died at a young age and she had been a widow for a very long time.
- But, despite her loss and the difficulty of being a widow in those times, Anna seemed to have a good life – a life in which she was connected with the Lord her God.
 - It says that she "served God with fastings and prayers night and day" (Luke 2:37).
 - She was one of those people who is connected to spiritual things going on that she could be aware of the significance of Jesus having been born.
 - So when Anna saw the baby Jesus she "gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38).
- We also might be looking for redemption.
 - As you look back on 2023 and look forward to 2024 you might be noticing some of your personal failing or failings in your relationships.
 - And you might be looking for some kind of redemption, some chance to do things again, to get things right this time.
 - What might Anna the prophetess say to you?

- Have you known anyone like Anna?
 - Have you known people who have experienced tragedy in their lives and yet have come out of it still believing in the Lord and still willing to care and love?
 - Maybe it's a grandparent of yours or an aunt or uncle or parent.
 - Or maybe a beloved teacher or minister or another member of the church community.
 - If you can, think about a particular old person that you've loved who has been through a lot in their life but still managed to keep going and keep trying.
 - And then think about what that person's perspective would be on your life.
 - What would they notice in your life?
 - What would they consider important?
 - What would they notice about you?
 - What would they be able to see that you can't see on your own?

Conclusion

- When Joseph and Mary heard the things that Simeon had to say it says that they "marveled at those things which were spoken of Him" (Luke 2:33).
 - Of course they did – those were some amazing things that he said.
 - And you might remember that Luke often says that Mary pondered the things that had happened in her heart.
- In a similar way, it will take us time to marvel at and ponder the perspective of Simeon and Anna.
 - It's useful to ponder that some people can see all the hard things in the world and long for things to be better and still find space for gratitude, peace and hope in spite of it all.
- We are used to thinking about our lives in the ways that we normally do.
 - It's going to take work to see things from a different perspective and to hold on to that perspective.
 - We can keep trying to do the things that we're supposed to do and trust that good will come from that.
 - We can work to keep our ears open and be looking for opportunities to hear and obey the Lord and keep our attention on that instead of stressing out.
 - We can know that some amount of pain is in front of us but we can know that the Lord will use it for the fall and rising again of many things within us that need to fall and that need to rise again.
 - And we can know that, if we're trying to listen to the Lord, we will hear – not just Simeon and Anna's perspective – but the Lord's perspective on our lives and *He* will speak peace to us (Psalm 85:8).
- *Amen.*

If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org.