

SLIDE 1

Songs of Christmas – Simeon
Luke 2:22-38
December 17,2023 West Valley Presbyterian Church

This is now the third week of Advent. So far we've looked at – and sung- Mary's song, and reflected on the change that Jesus brings. We've looked at – and sung- Zechariah's song, and reflected on the way that Jesus guides our feet into the path of peace. Chronologically, the third of Luke's four songs is the Angels' song; but we're going to save that one for Christmas Eve. (Which is next Sunday.) So today, we're going to look at -and sing – Simeon's song.

Simeon's song comes about 40 days after Jesus' birth. Mary, Joseph and Jesus come to the temple in Jerusalem, for two reasons: Mary's purification after giving birth to a son; and the redemption of a first-born son by sacrificing an animal – a lamb and a bird if the family can afford it; two birds if not. Simeon the singer and Anna the evangelist are in the Temple when the Holy Family arrive; and they each, in their own ways, rejoice and praise God for what he has done. Hear now the Word of God as it comes to us from Luke, Chapter 2, vv 22-38.

SLIDE 2 – 12

²²When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³(as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"^(a)), ²⁴and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons."^(b)

²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

²⁹"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss^(a) your servant in peace.

³⁰For my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹ which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:

³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel."

³³The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, ³⁵so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

³⁶There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷and then was a widow until she was eighty-four.⁴¹ She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. ³⁸Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Here ends the reading of God's Holy Word. Join me in saying, Thanks be to God.

This passage tells us a bit about Jesus' family, which we don't otherwise know very much about. It also tells us about the different ways that faith is expressed when people meet Jesus.

So, first, Jesus' birth family. The Bible doesn't tell us very much about it, since it's mostly focused on what Jesus did as an adult. Christians for 2000 years have come up with various stories about what Jesus' childhood might have been like; some of them are pretty wild, so we're not going there this morning. What this passage in the Bible tells us is, #1, that Mary and Joseph are very devout Jews who observe God's commandments even if it's difficult for them. And #2, like the vast majority of Jews who lived in Judea and Galilee at the time, they were poor.

How do we know that? Leviticus 12 tells us that a woman who gives birth to a son is considered ceremonially unclean for 7 days, because she is still bleeding. The son is circumcised on the 8th day, and that was usually done at home as we saw with John the Baptist. The mother is to wait an additional 33 days -presumably she's recovered from childbirth by then - before she is purified by a sacrifice and can go back to her regular work. The son is to be dedicated to the Lord, which means that his life has to be redeemed by the blood of a lamb, which refers back to the Passover in Exodus 12-13. Got all that? So after about 40 days, the mother is supposed to bring a lamb and a bird, to be sacrificed at the Temple. That would be difficult to do if the family didn't live in Jerusalem. Which Mary and Joseph did not. So we know from this passage that they were very devout – they would faithfully observe God's commandments even if it was hard for them to do so.

Leviticus 12 also has a provision for those who can't afford a lamb. In that case, she can bring two birds. Which is what Mary and Joseph brought. Meaning that they, like nearly everyone else, were poor. To give birth to, and raise, His Son, God chose devout Jews who were poor. Good to keep in mind if you're dealing with financial issues. More money doesn't necessarily mean more blessing.

And how did Simeon react when he met this ordinary-looking couple who weren't attracting attention from anyone else? He comes right up to parents who don't know him, who have never seen him before in their lives, and he takes hold of their son- without even asking- and starts loudly praising God with ecstatic poetry. I'm surprised that Mary and Joseph even let some stranger take hold of their baby! I wouldn't have allowed that, would you? But then, the Holy Spirit is clearly active here, and everyone is responding to the Holy Spirit's work within them.

We are told that Simeon was righteous and devout; he was full of faith; and the Holy Spirit was upon him. He had a vivid prayer life, which allowed the Holy Spirit to let him know things like

“You won’t die until you have seen the Lord’s Messiah.” That prayer life also allowed the Holy Spirit to prompt him to act. We’re told that he goes to the temple courts at a particular point in time because he is moved by the Spirit. And what he sees there leads him to sing for joy! Inspired by the Spirit! His song is all about what God is doing, right then and there. His faith enables him to see God’s salvation at work. His faith allows him to see what Jesus will be: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of his people Israel. It’s his faith that allows him to tell Mary about her son’s future, and about her own.

And the faith that makes such a song possible also gives Simeon joy and peace. And he’s not the only one! For two thousand years Christians have sung and spoken the words to his song; we also have also found joy and peace in these words. When the time comes, we hope and pray that we too would have the faith to say, “Lord, You may now dismiss your servant in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation.”

Simeon was not the only prophet in the temple on that day. We are also told that the prophet Anna was in the temple on the day that Mary, Joseph and Jesus arrived. But the Holy Spirit didn’t need to tell her to go there. She was already there! Luke tells us that she was in the temple courts all the time – worshiping night and day, fasting and praying. She also has a vivid prayer life, directed by the Holy Spirit.

But she expresses that prophetic sense differently than Simeon does. Rather than speaking a song, however beautifully, what she does is give thanks to God, and then speak directly about Jesus to the people around her. She preaches, telling them that the redemption of Jerusalem was on its way through the baby who had just been redeemed according to the Law. Anna is more of an evangelist, and Simeon is more of a worship leader; but both are inspired by the Holy Spirit. And both had enough faith to make such inspiration possible, and recognize Jesus for who he is.

We too have faith. Right? At least some faith. Well, at least faith enough to ask questions - or we wouldn’t be here this morning. But wouldn’t it be wonderful to have faith as solid as Simeon and Anna, faith that brings joy and peace, and a certainty that God is at work in the world and we can trust him to bring everything to a glorious conclusion? How can we grow in that kind of faith, so that solid joy and peace can be ours as well?

I’m glad you asked! The first thing we do to grow in faith is to approach God through Scripture, every day. That’s what Mary and Joseph and Simeon and Anna all did. They didn’t own Bibles; but there were scrolls in the synagogues and in the temple which were read every week. They heard God’s word in worship; and they also memorized Scripture so they could recite it to themselves and to one another whenever they needed it. They knew their Scripture and they could quote it.

We too need to hear God’s word every day, whether read or spoken, whether first thing in the morning or last thing at night or both. There are varieties of Bible translations enough to suit everyone. And if you don’t want to haul a book around with you, you don’t have to. There are plenty of Bible apps for your phones. And these Bible apps often have reading programs, such as

One Year Through the Bible, where enough text pops up on your phone every morning that you will read through the whole Bible in a year if you keep it up. That's usually how the Holy Spirit speaks to us – through the Bible. If we don't hear or read the Bible, we don't have a foundation for our faith. And if our faith has no foundation, it doesn't last very long.

And the second thing we do to grow in faith is to approach God in prayer, every day, at least once a day and ideally multiple times a day. Prayer doesn't have to be fancy or churchy. Prayer can be as simple as, "Thank you, Lord", or, "Lord, help!" Prayer is direct communication with God, through the Holy Spirit. Prayer allows the Holy Spirit to work within us, and give us words to say to God and to other people. The Holy Spirit worked within the souls of Simeon and Anna and Joseph, and both soul and body of Mary. They were all of them filled with acceptance, trust, peace, and joy.

The more time we spend with God in prayer, the more we allow the Holy Spirit to work within us. And the more the Holy Spirit works within us, the more transformed we are. And the more transformed we are, the more we also are filled with acceptance, trust, peace, and joy.

You have heard God's word to you this morning. And now, the Holy Spirit is waiting to work within you. We are here. God is here. Let's open our souls to Him, and allow him to work within us, and within our church, in whatever way he will. May Jesus be our light of revelation as we pray.

Almighty God, your Son Jesus Christ was presented in the temple and acclaimed the glory of Israel and the light of the nations. Grant that we would grow to be more like Simeon and Anna – aware of your Holy Spirit at work within us. // May we too be transformed by your word and your presence. // For it is in Jesus' name that we pray. Amen.

And now we are all going to sing Simeon's song together, rejoicing that we too have seen our salvation. May we too find joy and peace in these words.