

**NOW**  
**Luke 2:21-38**

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**Amarillo, Texas**  
**December 27, 2020**

Simeon was steeped in all the traditions of Israel and, yet, still willing – even seeking – a new word from God.

Besides what we read here, we don't know anything about Simeon. And while no one else in Israel really knew the time or season when God would send His Messiah, the Holy One of Israel, there was one old man who knew. At least he could ascertain with some accuracy a probable time for the birth of the baby. I don't know when God promised it. I don't know how He told him. But at some point, in some way, Simeon had been promised by Yahweh Himself that Simeon would not die until he had seen the Lord's Salvation.

Was he often standing on the top steps of the temple, scanning the faces of babies who were being brought by their parents for dedication, wondering, "That one? Maybe this one? No, how about this one, Lord? Is this the one?"

On one day, a holy day – a day like no other day – the Holy Spirit literally drove Simeon to the temple. "That's him. That's him, Simeon. That's the one. The special one. The one you've been waiting for. My greatest gift."

I picture him as an elderly gentleman who sort of springs himself on the young couple coming to the temple for the dedication. He reaches out and grabs the baby – people always reach out and grab a new baby, even when the mom and dad aren't completely comfortable. Simeon's old face was as lined as a road map of Jerusalem. His face crinkles – there is a wide grin as he takes the Holy Child into his hands.

We all know the wonder of holding a new baby. But this wasn't an ordinary baby. This is the one for whom Simeon had been waiting his whole life. Scripture says that when, at last, he held that baby, Simeon threw back his head and began to sing acapella. Some think he'd prepared the song years before, so he'd have it ready – on the top of his mind and the tip of his tongue – when he finally, at last, held the Holy Child.

But no. I don't think that for a minute. I think it was a spontaneous, Spirit-inspired exclamation in song. History has given a name for Simeon's song, the *Nunc dimittis* – "now dismiss" (the first words in Latin). Maybe when he threw his head back to sing, the little baby reached up and grabbed the fringe of his beard, like little babies will do.

Simeon and Anna were straining to hear a new word from God.

Tim Hansel tells a story about a Native American man visiting his close friends in Manhattan. They were walking along a busy avenue at Christmastime, when, suddenly, the Native American stopped and said, “Whoa! Did you hear that?” His friend said, “Hear what?”

The Native American replied, “I hear a cricket.” The New Yorker said, “Wait a minute! Here we are walking down a busy street in Manhattan, with horns blaring and taxis squealing all around us. You can’t possibly hear a cricket!”

Meanwhile, the Native American walked to the intersection, waiting for the green light, and crossed the street. On the opposite street corner stood a planter with a tree in it. He bent down, flipped over a leaf, and said, “Aha! Come here, little fella.” His friend was utterly dumbfounded.

The Native American said, “Oh, now. Your ears are no different from my ears. It all depends on what you’re listening for.” With that, the Native American reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of change – nickels, dimes, and quarters. He dropped the change on the sidewalk. Every head within a city block turned and looked. “You see. It depends on what you’re listening for.”

Amid all the cacophony of our Christmas confusion, it is very hard to hear the whisper of the Holy Spirit’s voice who says to you, like He said to Simeon, “This is the one. The Holy Child.” Listen carefully. You’ll hear His voice. “There He is. My Son is there among you. Treasure His presence. Behold My salvation.”

Let’s look at Luke 2:21-27.

And when eight days were completed before His circumcision, His name was then called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.

And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord.

(as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”),

and to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the Law of the Lord, “A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.”

And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him.

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.

And he came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for Him the custom of the Law....

## **I. The Spirit reveals the Son as Savior.**

Actress and dancer, Bebe Neuwirth, best known for her role as Frazier’s eerie wife, Lilith, on *Cheers*, says that when she was born, the doctor who delivered her announced, “It’s a girl,” then, after a pause, declared, “She’s a dancer.” (quoted in an article in *Biography Magazine*) Neuwirth

didn't know – maybe it was her long legs that led to the label, but who knows. Maybe the doctor had a premonition based on something else. Can't be sure. But she was a dancer.

The story unfolds forty days after the birth date of Jesus, an after-Christmas story. Jesus had been circumcised and given the name that the angel, himself, had assigned. So they travel to the temple – five miles from Bethlehem to Jerusalem – and in the words of Nehemiah 10:35-36 which read, “We obligate ourselves to bring to the house of God the firstborn of our sons,” they take Jesus up to Jerusalem. Now the text reads “took Him up,” and although Bethlehem is slightly higher than Jerusalem, the reality is one always goes *up* to Jerusalem to worship, at least metaphorically.

When Luke tells us in verse 24 that they offered a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons, he is informing us that this carpenter and his teenage bride are poor. In Leviticus 12:8, the normal sacrifice involved a lamb and a bird. But the implication is too potent to miss: Mary and Joseph are too poor to be able to afford the gift of a lamb. So they take the “poor provision” in the law and offer two birds instead. Probably a pretty good sign that the Magi had not yet arrived from the east bearing gifts of great value. Those gifts sustained the holy family during their flight to Egypt as they ran from Herod's sword.

There is never a place for Simeon and Anna in a nativity set. In our nativity set in the Welcome Center, we have biblical characters and even some imaginary additions, conceived in the minds of artisans. But there is no Simeon. No Anna. There are kings – all three of them. They came way after Simeon and Anna. Why don't we have Simeon here – among the very first to hold the baby Jesus? What about Anna, who gave the good news to others? Left out of the nativity set and seldom a source for sermons. But not today. Today is Simeon's and Anna's day, the just-after-Christmas characters.

Earlier in this gospel, we have the account of John the Baptist's circumcision and his naming, followed by prophetic statements praising God and indicating John's future destiny for the Lord. So here, with Jesus' naming and consecration, we have a praise to God from Simeon and the foretelling of the destiny of this chosen child.

Simeon is described as a righteous man. Not a word used lightly in scripture. Simeon might have had a common name, but he was an uncommon man because he was righteous. Righteous, a word used to describe Zacharias and Elizabeth (Luke 1:6). And later in this gospel, Joseph of Arimathea – the one who took the body of our Lord and buried it in his own tomb – is called righteous (23:50). And Luke in his other volume, the book of Acts, calls Cornelius a righteous man (Acts 10:22).

Simeon was listening for a new word from God. He lived in the expectancy of a God who gives a Messiah. He had been waiting.

Look again at Luke 23:50. “And behold, a man named Joseph, who was a member of the Council, a good and righteous man (he had not consented to their plan and action)” – that means he didn't condone their crucifixion of Jesus – “a man from Arimathea, a city of the Jews, who was waiting for the kingdom of God.”

Two righteous men in Luke's gospel – Simeon and Joseph of Arimathea. Both called righteous, and both shown as the men who wait on the Lord. Wait on His salvation. Wait on His Savior. You can read the New Testament through hundreds of times, and, yet, you discover a new insight with each reading. I had never noticed that the way the word “righteous” is used for both Simeon and Joseph of Arimathea, and they are also the ones who wait on the Lord.

The shepherds knew who Jesus was, because they had a sign. “Behold we bring you great news of good joy which shall be for all people everywhere, for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you,” – they had a sign. “You’ll find the babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” He’ll be the kid in hand-me-downs in Bethlehem.

And the Magi knew because they followed the star. Another sign, a marker of the presence of the Holy Child.

But for Simeon and Anna, it was the insight of the Holy Spirit who descended upon them.

## **II. One word can change everything.**

Look at the beginning of verse 29. Here is Simeon's song.

“Now Lord, Thou dost let Thy bond-servant depart  
In peace, according to Thy word;  
For my eyes have seen Thy salvation,  
Which Thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples,  
A light of revelation to the Gentiles,  
And the glory of Thy people Israel.”

One word – now – changes everything.

“Now” is the turning point in every disciple's life. Simeon calls himself a *doulos*, a slave, being released by his master. It had been his one purpose, his daily duty, his driving force. Like a watchman on the wall, he awaited the arrival of the Messiah which had been promised in his own lifetime. Your translation may have “now” in the middle of the sentence – the NIV does. That's really unfortunate. In the Greek, the first word is “now.”

“Now Lord, dismiss your servant in peace” is another way of saying, “Lord, I'm ready to die.” Why? Because his eyes had seen the Lord's salvation. And the salvation from this Jewish Messiah, this Holy One of Israel, isn't for the Jews alone. Notice, even in his song – his acapella song – as the old man throws his head back and sings, he says, “all peoples.” “All peoples” echoes Isaiah 52:10. To the Gentiles, He's a light – another way of saying salvation. In fact, John, the gospel writer, often sees Jesus as the light of the world. And to Israel, He is glory.

The Gentiles needed revelation, that is, they needed light. The Israelites already had the revelation of God's prophets. Now they only needed the manifestation, the presence of the glory of God as already promised.

Mary and Joseph marveled at the things that had been said about their son. In Luke's gospel, when we have someone astonished, it is a marker for the presence and the working of God. Look at Luke 1:63. We're told that the crowd was astonished when Zacharias, unable to speak for his lack of faithfulness, writes on the tablet, "You shall call my son John." The people were astonished.

Or again in 2:18 when the shepherds declare about the angelic choir and the babe in swaddling cloths, we read, "And all who heard it wondered at the things that were told them by the shepherds."

Astonished. Amazed. Wondering. The result of the intervention of God.

### **III. Upon the birth of the Bethlehem baby, you will either rise or fall**

Verses 34-38

And Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, "Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed – and a sword will pierce even your own soul – to the end that thoughts from many hearts will be revealed."

And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with a husband seven years after her marriage, and then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. And she never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers.

And at that very moment she came up and began giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

His presence brings the rise or fall for each one of us. Or put another way, in verse 35 – "the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed."

The last phrase should be understood in a negative sense, as it is every time that Luke uses it, a total of five. "When Jesus comes, people will really know who you are." For some, the coming of Jesus is good news of great joy. But to those who reject Him, He will be a stumbling stone.

For the humble and the poor, it's a positive word of salvation. For the haughty and rich, it's negative. It's judgment. Always, the coming of Jesus is a two-edged sword. "Mary, your own soul will be pierced." Simeon, the prophet, looks forward to the time when Mary, herself, stands at the foot of the cross of her sacrificed son. Can you imagine Mary at the foot of the cross? Mary didn't know resurrection – not then, at least. That was three days later. At that moment, her soul is pierced.

### **IV. When you know the baby is here, you will not keep it a secret.**

There is a fourth thing I want you to see in the story of Simeon and Anna. This one comes with Anna – the old woman of 84 (or 105 – married at age 14, widowed at age 21, plus 84 equals 105), who just stayed around the temple after she was widowed, always fasting and praying. There are

a lot of older ladies like that, who spend their time praying for others. It's a powerful ministry. When she saw Jesus, she, too, knew. She just started giving thanks to God.

She spoke to everyone who was looking for the good word of redemption.

There you have it. Nobody is going to carve out Simeon and Anna and put them in the nativity. Go home and look – see if these characters are in your crèche. If they are, it's an unusual one. Yes, everybody can tell the kings by their crowns and the shepherds by their sheep. But who would notice a wrinkled old man and an aged woman who had longed – more than any wise men or any shepherds – for the redemption of Israel.

William Willimon tells of receiving a phone call one day when he was Dean of the Chapel at Duke University from a very irate father. The caller exploded on the other end of the line, telling Will furiously, "I hold you personally responsible for this! Yes, I do." He was angry because his graduate school-bound daughter had decided to (in his words) "throw it all way and go and do mission work in Haiti with the Presbyterian Church." The father screamed, "Isn't that absurd! She has a B.S. degree from Duke University, and she is going to dig ditches in Haiti! I hold you responsible for this," he reiterated. Willimon said, "Why me?" The father said, "You ingratiated yourself and filled her mind with all this religion stuff."

Dean Willimon asked the father, "Well, sir, weren't you the one who had her baptized?"

"Well, well, well, yes I did."

"And didn't you take her to Sunday School when she was a little girl?"

"Yes, we took her to Sunday School."

"And didn't you allow your daughter to go on those youth ski trips to Colorado when she was in high school?"

"Yes...what does that have to do with anything?"

"Sir, you're the reason she's throwing it all away. You're the one who introduced her to Jesus, not me."

"But," protested the father, "all we wanted was a Presbyterian."

Will Willimon, who has an instinct for the jugular, replied, "Well, sorry, sir, you messed up. You've gone and made a disciple!"

Being a disciple is a big decision. And with the birth of this Bethlehem baby, the thoughts of many will be revealed. Either you're His or you're not. Either He causes your rise or your fall. Either it's good news of great joy, or He threatens you, like he threatened Herod. He unsettles you, like He unsettled the Pharisees.

The word is “now.” Now that the baby is, at last, born, we, too, are ready to die.