



Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

SERMON – 4TH ADVENT

LUKE 2:22-38

DECEMBER 17, 2022

“THE SONG OF SIMEON...PERMISSION TO LEAVE AND TO WAIT”

If I were to ask you to give me words you'd associate with “faith” – the list might include “trust”, “conviction”, “assurance”, “reliance”, maybe “obedience”, “reverence” “devotion”, “gratitude”, and “hope”. Our lesson today from Luke is sometimes called “the Presentation of our Lord”, a portion of which is called “*The Song of Simeon.*”

The story is about faith – expectant, long suffering faith. Luke says Simeon was a righteous and devout man. That means he was devoted to the customs of his Jewish tradition – but more than that he relied on God, revered God, obeyed God, and lived gratefully – which may be the best expression of faith of all. Simeon took the child Jesus in his arms and blessed him – a powerful Jewish symbol of the gift children were considered to be. Cultures that understand that are themselves blessed.

In the songs of Luke chapters 1 and 2 - the Song of Zechariah, Mary, the angels and now Simeon, the singers all rejoice over what God does for others as much as themselves. To that list of words we associate with faith, we ought to add “selfless.” If the Bible has any consistent theme, it is that God desires all to see his salvation, and that our wellbeing is inextricably linked to that of others. In verse 29, Simeon says “*Lord, let your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared for ALL people.*” How difficult yet how essential it is to learn to rejoice in the faith and wellbeing of others – people from whom we distinguish and denominate ourselves often on the most superficial of levels or smallest of issues, when those very same believers will spend eternity with us.

There is another characteristic of faith in this story I left off my earlier list. Luke 2:25 says Simeon had been “*waiting for the consolation of Israel.*” The Jewish people were, and you could say still are nothing, if not people who have learned to “wait.” The term “consolation” meant Israel’s wait and hope for Messiah, an anointed one who would save Israel from its enemies, even, according to the Prophet Isaiah, by turning the hearts of those enemies to Israel’s God.

We Christians understand Jesus to have done precisely that – console us by saving us - that is what his very names means – ‘Yeshua...God saves’. But, like our Jewish brethren, we must “wait.” God has in fact saved you from your sins through the blood of His Son. But the hearts of all people have not received that message of salvation. So, now we Christians wait – trustingly, obediently wait. But we hate waiting generally - never mind the annoying wait at stoplights or in post office lines or for our IRS refund to show up.

There are hard waits – like for the turning or returning of our kids to the Lord, for a loved one to take their last drink, for what the next cat scan will reveal about our health, for the relinquishment of our grief, and we don't like those waits. Simeon's song is called the "Nunc Dimittis" which in Latin means "now dismiss". It is a verse that should be in the heart of every Christian because one day that is what we will do – be dismissed from this life.

But we often use it in our liturgy as a song after the Holy Communion. In that setting it serves a different function – no longer a prayer in anticipation of death, but a song to help us continue to faithfully live while we wait for the Lord's coming. Not mournful waiting - longsuffering perhaps, but confident – anticipatory waiting. Waiting for the Lord to come and resolve the world's confusion and end its pain. That coming is certain and will be decisive.

Writer Lucy Shaw, who taught at Regent College in Vancouver wrote, *"Anticipation lifts the heart. Desire is created to be fulfilled – perhaps not all at once, more likely in slow stages."* Her colleague at Regent, the late Eugene Peterson, wrote *"waiting does not diminish us anymore that waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged by waiting. We don't see it as enlarging us, but the longer the wait the larger we become, and the more intense and joyful our expectancy."*

Psalm 130:5 says, *"I wait for the Lord, my souls waits, and in his word I hope."* It goes on to compare our wait to that of a watchman who waits for the morning, when night is over, light appears, sight returns, danger dissipates, the intensity of watching relieved. That is the wait faith does. And as long as it's (almost) Christmas, even if we're not kids anymore, we ought to remember how the wait for that happy day was almost better than the day itself. I am not suggesting that the Lord's return will disappoint us – no way no how. But I am suggesting our wait can be, despite current distress or disillusionments, a good, even joyous wait.

If we wait like Simeon did – and why shouldn't we, we ought to know that there is a gift behind a gift, the gift of waiting. And if it is upon the Lord we wait, what could be better? You look at a gift under the tree, and assuming you didn't put it there, and you have even a modicum of childhood imagination left in you, you look at it with wonder...as in I wonder what it could be. Your imagination soars if you can't tell...and even you think you can and it looks the size and shape of what you asked for and always wanted, there it sits, a box of possibility and pleasure!

Anticipation is the essence of Christmas, New York Times writer Greg Easterbrook once wrote, and I would add the essence of Christianity. The whole point of faith just might be the wonder and yes, the exertion of waiting. What precedes receiving life's terrestrial gifts is often better than what follows – but not so with Jesus. He is supremely good, and in his servant Simeon he is proclaimed to us in the most wonderful way – the best is yet to come...so let me at it! Up to now we have not seen the fullness of his grace, but we will. In the meantime, we practice grace toward one another if we be wise. You see what may be elusive but not impossible – kindness, charity, goodwill to all, because that is what God is – and that is what faith does.

Into a world that so desperately needs what we have...Lord now dismiss your servants. AMEN