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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
12/28/2008, The First Sunday of Christmas  
Luke 2:22-40

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>25</sup>Now 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.(Luke 2:25, RSV)

Once upon a time, when the Spirit was at low ebb in ancient Israel, the Lord nearly despaired of finding a good man in Jerusalem. And so, the Lord determined to chastise the land through the military might of the great Babylonian Empire. But he would gladly have relented, if only he could find one good person in the town. And so, through his prophet Jeremiah, the Lord speaks of his yearning to find some righteousness on earth. He said this:

Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, look around and take note!  
Search its squares and see if you can find one person who acts justly and seeks truth--so that I may pardon Jerusalem.(Jeremiah 5:1, KJV)

But pardon Jerusalem: this the Lord was unable to do at that time. And that is a sad commentary on a city, that there seemed to be no righteous and devout person to serve as the salt of the earth to save the town from being entirely impious.

But in these good days we celebrate now — those good days of the first Christmas season — there was to be found such a good man in Jerusalem. His name was Simeon. If Jeremiah had run to and fro through the streets and squares of Jerusalem, he would have found this good man. You might have thought his name would be that of the high priest, or that of a leading Pharisee, or one of the great scholars of the Hebrew scriptures. But, no, Simeon is undistinguished when it comes to the ordinary markings of rank and prestige. He is an anonymous Israelite. I picture him being like Carol's grandfather, Norman Zembower: an elderly man, with the strong hands of a pipe fitter, with a tender heart, much loved by his church and the small local community, but unknown on any larger scale. So, Simeon seems to have been: an anonymous saint, as earth judges these things, but known very well indeed by heaven.

Later, when Jesus had grown up and become a man, he preached about those like Simeon. He expressed affection for the lowly ones and for those who are often overlooked in this world:

But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first.(Matthew 19:30, KJV)

He seemed especially to love those who were on the periphery of things: the lepers, the tax collectors, the halt, the blind, the sinners. His love was so extravagant, that he sees those who are often unseen in this world.

And so it was that the Holy Spirit, who shares the ways of the Father and of the Son, had taken special delight in this old man Simeon. And to this old man, with what I

imagine to be his strong pipe fitter hands, the Holy Spirit had entrusted a special revelation:

<sup>26</sup>And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

Again, had this special revelation been entrusted to the high priest, to a leading Pharisee, to a learned Bible scholar? No, it was simply entrusted to this unknown, but righteous man, Simeon.

And what a promise he had received? He had been promised that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

Therefore the old man had within his own body a kind of calendar of Christ's appearing. Who knows how many years had passed since he first received his revelation? He did not know exactly when the Christ child would appear, but he could judge by his own natural decline that the time was drawing near. Day by day, he made his way to the Temple. The steps became harder, the distance seemed longer, and one day he most likely had to start using a cane to help him along. His eyes began to dim, his hearing weakened, perhaps he occasionally felt palpitations in his heart. He could know, as many an elderly man or woman has known, that his end was drawing near. But for Simeon, the drawing near of the end also meant the drawing near of his consolation. Indeed, it meant the drawing near of all Israel's and all the Church's consolation.

And then that great day came, when he held the Christ Child in his old hands. There is a lovely line in one of our Christmas hymns about "the hopes and fears of all the years." I mean the first verse of "O Little Town of Bethlehem":

O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.  
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light;  
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

That's what happened with old Simeon. Right in his aged hands, he held the answer to the hopes and fears of all the years. In his hands, he held Consolation, for him, for Israel, for you and for me. He held this world's Savior, in the wee form of an infant. I imagined it thrilled the old man, so that for a moment at least he stood a little straighter and his arms felt stronger and his face glowed with joy.

It is a sweet thing to be able to look forward to consolation, as Simeon was able to do. In a recent Monday evening Bible Class, we lingered with Psalm 30 — a Psalm that grows evermore dear to us.

It seems that the Psalmist had become overconfident, trusting too much in his prosperity, letting his heart stray some from the Lord. He confesses his vanity with these words:

<sup>6</sup>And in my prosperity I said, I shall never be moved.

<sup>7</sup>LORD, by thy favour thou hast made my mountain to stand strong:(Psalm 30:6-7a)

You might have known such a season of strength at some time in your life. I hope so. Indeed, I hope you are enjoying such a season even now. Yet, the Psalmist is conscious of sin in his prosperity. And so it is that the Lord knocks him down a peg. Thereafter, the Psalmist completes his verse about his mountain standing strong with these words:

<sup>7</sup>LORD, by thy favour thou hast made my mountain to stand strong: thou didst hide thy face, and I was troubled.

Again, you might have known such a season of trouble at some time in your life. I hope that all is well with your soul nowadays, but if not, be pleased to know that you are standing where mighty saints of old have also stood: for a while, the Lord hid his face from them, and they were troubled.

But the Psalmist did the right thing: he cried unto the Lord. He made supplication unto the Lord. And his prayer includes a powerful short petition that you and I would do well to echo in the course of a tumultuous life:

<sup>10</sup>Hear, O LORD, and have mercy upon me: LORD, be thou my helper.

For if we have the Lord as our helper, then all will be well in the end.

And the pinnacle of the Psalm is reached with words of consolation akin to the words Simeon had treasured. This is what life had taught the Psalmist:

<sup>5</sup>For his anger endureth but a moment; in his favour is life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.

This is the promise I want you to take to heart in an uncertain world. The night does not last forever. One day, the dawn will come. Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.

For you, my brothers and sisters, are Simeon! The Christ Child he held in his hands was born not simply for him, but also for you. And the Consolation he had hoped for, at last comforted him and at last will comfort you.

There is something about these days that could rock many a soul. I mean the economy and all its uncertainties and the way you could be laid off through no fault of your own. No fault! I mean the fading of the World War II generation, and now the fading of us Baby Boomers. The rise of Middle Eastern terrorism, the proliferation of nuclear weapons: such things might be troubling you. Or you might be conscious of sin. You might be conscious that you have fallen, such that shame and sorrow now fill your heart and your wonder whether you will ever be happy again. Will I ever be happy again?

But you see, you are Simeon. The Holy Spirit moves in your heart too, for you are Baptized or welcome to be Baptized. Though for a while, your heart might be sad and the Lord might have hidden his face from you, nonetheless, weeping shall only endure for the night, and joy shall come in the morning.

I am no psychologist speaking about the ebb and flow of your emotions. Nor am I a soothsayer predicting good times in the future. I am simply a pastor who believes that the extravagant love of our Maker has drawn near to us in the Christ Child, and that this Christ Child has also been born for you, for me.

And so, to Simeon's cause of joy be the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.