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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
2/2/2014, The Presentation of Our Lord
Luke 2:22-40

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

²⁸[Simeon] took him up in his arms and blessed God ... (Luke 2:28, RSV)

My! Look at Simeon! Imagine the old man. He's got the whole world in his hands. In this iddy biddy baby, he's got the whole, wide world in his hands. And we, my friends, are soon to do the same in the Blessed Sacrament.

THREE RESPONSES TO JESUS

My dear old pastor from long ago, Pastor Raymond Shaheen, once pointed out that there are three possible responses to Jesus, and all three are illustrated by the Christmas stories — three possible responses to the birth of the Christ Child: indifference, hostility, or joy. The innkeeper in the sacred story represents the first. He was unmoved by the holy Family, but sent them onwards till they came to a barn, where the newborn child was laid in a manger. King Herod the Great is the picture of the second response, hostility — hostility so profound he was willing to order the Massacre of the Innocents. But now we come to the third possible response: we come to old Simeon, who teaches us joy in the presence of this Child.

SIMEON

I bet we could notice a change in the posture of the old man that day¹. I imagine him setting out in the morning, shuffling with a grandfatherly gait, leaning upon his cane, a bit unsteady on his feet. His eyesight is dim, for he is an old man, yet he uses his eyes to look for something: he looks for “the consolation of Israel.”

And then, see him when his old eyes rest upon the Christ Child. Suddenly he stands more erect, suddenly there is new light in his eyes, suddenly he has a kind of vigor that assures Mary that it will okay to entrust her baby over to this old man, for he is not likely to drop her child. Simeon is suddenly more lively, for he has been waiting and longing for something, and now his old eyes behold the blessed Child he has sought.

¹ In one of his sermons, Charles Spurgeon uses this image of the change in Simeon's appearance as he beholds the Christ Child.

A PROMISE

Simeon has been given a promise by the Lord. Notice the sequence of the words I have just spoken: "Simeon has been given a promise by the Lord." It strikes a chord in our hearts doesn't it? For we too have been given divine promises. Do not give up on those promises. That is the theme of this sermon.

Simeon's promise was that he would see the Lord's Christ before he died:

²⁶And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.
(Luke 2:26, RSV)

Our text does not say how long ago Simeon had been given this promise. Perhaps it was a recent promise. But if there had been much time to it, then he would have been cast into the situation of Abraham of old, who had to wait and wait many a year before the divine promise made to him and Sarah came true. And if this were so, if the old man had waited a long while for the fulfillment of the promise, who could blame him for wondering whether the promise would ever come true. He was elderly. There was not much time left for him. Perhaps he had dreamt the promise. Maybe he should quietly give up on the promise. No one else would know.

Perhaps another man would have given up. Here we come to the rub of the story. Maybe you or I are tempted to give up on the promises made to us. We will return to that later in this sermon.

In any case, the Bible has words of encouragement for those to whom divine promises have been made: Do not become weary or discouraged or give up your hope. The Lord never forgets his word, nor fails to fulfill it:

⁴From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides thee, who works for those who *wait* for him. (Isaiah 64:4, RSV)

³For still the vision awaits its time; it hastens to the end -- it will not lie. If it seem slow, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. (Habakkuk 2:3, RSV)

THE JOY OF THE OLD MAN

So, Simeon waits and hopes. He remains in the mode of holy expectation, and so when the Christ Child comes, Simeon is ready for the moment. He sees Mary and Joseph and the Babe, and he responds with joy. He is not like the innkeeper, who is indifferent. Certainly he is not like Herod the Great who becomes murderous. Rather, he responds to this Child with joy. He takes him in his arm, as many of us have been privileged to take infants in our arms at their baptisms, and he blesses God. He is glad to have lived to see *this* day!

Perhaps long ago, when Simeon was a young man, some young woman who had captured his heart had smiled and said yes to his question, “Will you marry me?” She had said “yes,” and then his heart had been happy. Now, he sees the Christ Child, and his heart is happy again. And his heart is happy again for a similar reason: He knows of love again. He knows of God’s love for Israel, and through Israel for the whole world. He rejoices like King David who dances before the Lord:

¹⁴And David danced before the LORD with all his might; and David was girded with a linen ephod. ¹⁵So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet. (2 Samuel 6:14-15, KJV)

Or, he is like those cows Carol showed me on YouTube the other day – leaping up in the air, they are so happy to be out of the barn, alive and free again in the city.² In his joy, the old man becomes a poet and sings his canticle of peace to the Lord.

For with his own eyes he has seen the decisive step in the salvation of the world. He has seen the Christ Child. He knows that it will not be easy, that there will be opposition to this Child, and, indeed, that a sword shall pierce the heart of Mary. He knows that the path ahead will not be easy. But for this moment, he is profoundly happy, for he has seen the “consolation of Israel,” and he has seen the consolation of the Church.

CONSOLATION

Simeon’s years have unwound in their natural way, so that now it is reasonable for him to ponder this approaching death. But in finding the Christ Child, Simeon did indeed find holy consolation. Now he need no longer be overly dismayed by death or any of this world’s troubles. Bring it on! Before this moment, sin, death, and the devil loomed, like a terribly dark cloud on the horizon. For any rational person, death is awful apart from Christ. Death means the end of our hopes and plans. Death means leaving our loved ones to fend for themselves, if there be no God to defend them. Death is a horror to be evaded as long as possible. But now, things have changed for Simeon. Now Simeon can go forward, even into death, knowing that things are going to work out okay. Indeed, they are going to work out to be the very Kingdom of God. Before there was the misery of death and the failing of all that was important to us. Now things are much better, for Simeon has seen the Christ Child. With his own eyes he has seen consolation, and so he is able to sing his *Nunc Dimittis*:

² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kUZ1YLhIAg8>

²⁹“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; ³⁰for mine eyes have seen thy salvation ³¹which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel.”(Luke 2:29-32, RSV)

There *is* holy consolation available in this world. Many a grey-haired saint of the church could identify with Simeon and understand his consolation, for they themselves have known such consolation themselves. Better a poor person's cottage, if that poor person has faith, than the wealth of a rich sinner – envied and resented by others, always on guard to protect and extend his fortune, fearful of losing what he has, fearful of death, fearful of hell. Give me the consolations of faith in the Christ child.

I think that it is one of the great privileges of parish ministry that I am permitted to know something of the hard lives of our parishioners who nonetheless bear their hardships with grace because they are able to find comfort in their faith. Back home, they might live with a necessary simplicity bordering on poverty, but it has not ruined their lives nor spoiled their spirits, so that when they come to church and it comes time to sing “Beautiful Savior,” a tear comes gently to their eye, because Jesus is indeed their Beautiful Savior. Or the hymn “In the Morning When I Rise” might be new to them, but when they reach the chorus, they sing along with great earnestness:

Give me Jesus
Give me Jesus
You can have all this world
Give me Jesus.

Neglected by their neighbors, forgotten by relatives, battered by illness, buffeted by poverty, lonely for a husband or wife now in the nearer presence of the Lord, few resources at hand, few on the horizon, burdened by loads that could well break the spirit of a young and strong person, they nonetheless remain sweet-spirited. They remain generous with the little they have. They say their table grace with sincerity, grateful for the food they have. They say their morning prayers with a sense of wonder that God has been so good to them as to have kept them safely through the night and given them a new day. Like Simeon of old, they know the consolation of Israel, they know the consolation of the Church, for they know, follow, and entrust themselves to the very one old Simeon held in his arms.

WAITING FOR THE PROMISES

For you and me, let's try to take stock again of the promises that have been given to us and to not give up on them. We are baptized, and thereby made inheritors of promises that mean all the world. Every good thing has been

promised us, from adoption into the holy family to resurrection of the body and life everlasting.

And consider this question: Can it be that the God who has promised us so much *in the end* – could it be that he should neglect us at any point along the way? Is it likely that his eye is going to stray at any moment from us, so that he loses track of us? No, his love for us will not permit such inattentiveness. Why, have you not heard: Even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. And remember the birds of the air and the lilies of the field:

But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you-- you of little faith? (Matthew 6:30, NRSV)

You, my friends, might be waiting even now for Christ and his help. Perhaps, for a while, you have lost the joy you once had in your faith. Perhaps you have been laboring on in a tough season and you would be so very glad to experience a season of spiritual refreshment again. Or perhaps you have never yet known the consolation of Israel. Or perhaps you fear that you have become unworthy of consolation—that divine comfort is proper for saints and martyrs, while you are just a plain, ordinary man or woman.

If so, remember that dear saying in Isaiah about even the young men who faint and grow weary:

³⁰Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; ³¹but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40:30-31, RSV)

Simeon waited and one day he received the consolation promised him. He waited until one day, he was happy again. Let us go and serve the Lord, as the liturgy says, but in all our going and in all our serving, let us not forget to wait as Simeon did—wait for the consolation that the Christ Child can give and surely will give, even the peace that passes all understanding through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.