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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The First Sunday of Christmas, December 31, 2023
Luke 2:22-40
Old Man Simeon

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

When it comes my time to die, I hope I can die with the grace and the faith of old man Simeon. I think of that old man as my friend and a good model for me. When it comes to my work as an ordained clergyman, if my mind and body are up to it, I hope to die with my boots on. Probably not here at Immanuel. This is too important a congregation to have a scruffy old pastor like me in charge for too many more years. But maybe there will be a small country congregation somewhere in the land that would have me. In any case, I hope to die with my boots on. If I were to have a heart attack and topple over in the pulpit, that would be excellent. And yet... and yet, I doubt that I will die with the grace and faith of Simeon. He could say,

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace... (Luke 2:29, RSV)

Whereas I am more likely to say, "I can't die now. Why, I haven't finished my sermon!" There will probably be a dozen things I have not finished, and they will tug on me some, trying to tie me back to this earthly life. But not so Simeon. His mind and his heart and his imagination are overwhelmed by what he has seen. He has seen the Savior! The Savior is just a wee infant now, but he is the Savior nonetheless, and Simeon knows it. And in knowing it, he is enfolded in peace. He is content to die. Nothing in this world holds him back because he knows now that this world is going to be okay. It is going to be okay because unto us has been born a Savior, even Jesus Christ the Lord.

This is what the Christmas angels had sung about. A multitude of the heavenly host had split the nighttime sky and sung their Gloria to our old earth:

¹⁴Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace...peace,
good will toward men [and women, boys and girls.] (Luke 2:14, KJV)

"... and on earth *peace*..." Old Simeon knew something of that peace. It was a peace compared to which all other matters declined in importance. Simeon knew a godly peace. He knew a peace that rested on no uncertain foundation, but rather rested on the Savior, even Jesus Christ our Lord.

So, on this First Sunday of Christmas I want to lift up Simeon's kind of peace. There are all sorts of things that can cheer us up and give us some peace here on earth. There are various matters that can cause us to breathe a sigh of relief, and I am grateful for all such matters. Yet, they are not as good as Jesus. Let me speak of three of them. I am thinking of wealth, health, and a good reputation. Again, I do not mean to put these things down. I just want to say that Jesus is even better than them.

So, first, money. I am not one who can ever speaking of money in a dismissive way. I know that money is important and can really help people along. Looking back at my childhood, I would say that we were rather poor. I recall no anxiety in my family about money, and yet having some more money would have helped, and even as a child, I knew that. As a grownup, I have looked at so many good people in our city, and I have wished they had some more money. And year by year, I lead a stewardship campaign here at Immanuel, but do not think that this is a habit for me or simply a casual duty. I take very seriously the tithes and offerings you give to our church, and I am very grateful for them and do not take them for granted.

So, I do not mean now to put down money. And yet money is not as good as Jesus.

It so happens that Carol and I love English detective television series — especially Miss Marple, Poirot, Inspector Morse, Adam Dalgliesh, and Christopher Foyle in *Foyle's War*. We watch them over and over again. When one series is done, we start on another one, again. One thing I have noticed about these BBC stories is that they are often set in English manor houses. There is tremendous wealth on display — wealth in land and gardens and architecture and the lovely clothes the people wear. But for all that wealth, the people are not always happy. In fact, there is often such misery among the people that someone ends up getting murdered, and then you need the great detective to solve it. Well, the lesson is pretty easy. Money does not equal peace. It is possible to have lots of money and yet to be poor in peace.

But Simeon had peace. He had peace built upon the Savior. I do not know whether he had lots of money, but he did have Jesus, and that was good enough for him. He asked no more of life than this. Having seen the Christ Child, he is able to say, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace."

Next, let's consider health. I had a medical procedure two months ago, and to my surprise, I have had a hard time recovering from it. I have had lots of pain and fatigue. I even took off a Sunday a while ago. I remember thinking, "All I want for Christmas is my two front teeth," or some form of that — some form of health again. Well, I have turned a corner. I feel much better now, and I look forward to regaining my health. Health is a good thing. Still, I can foresee regaining my health, but I cannot foresee regaining my youth. Health is great, but it is not everything. Oh! How I wish and pray for people who live with illness and pain every day. Maybe this is what the Lord wanted me to

understand better: that pain and illness are terrible burdens for many people, and it would be wonderful if they could be healed. And yet, it is possible to be healed but still have to struggle in life. And in the end, what good is health if it is not combined with piety and virtue? In our recent midweek sermons on Matthew, we read the story of Jesus healing a man with a withered hand (Matthew 12). My grandmother had a withered arm and hand, and so I have always loved this Gospel story of Jesus healing the man with the withered hand. But what if that man uses his restored hand to commit robbery? What if he uses that restored hand to wield a sword and to strike down some neighbor who annoys him? That would be no good! It is good to have health, but it is even better to walk closely with Jesus. Health is good, but Jesus is better.

Old man Simeon: I do not know whether he had his health. But he did have Jesus, and that was good enough for him. He was overwhelmed with peace. He was content to die now because he knew that he and our world would be okay. Unto us is born a Savior, even Jesus Christ our Lord.

Finally, let me speak of a good name. All of these things matter to me: money, health, and a good name. The Eighth Commandment is meant to protect something precious to each of us: our good name. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor. In a recent midweek reading from Matthew, Jesus cautioned us that on Judgment Day, we will be held accountable for every careless word we speak (Matthew 12). So, no slander for us! No tearing down the reputation of others. If we have a good name, we want to keep it.

Simeon had a good name. The Bible says something quite lovely of him:

²⁵Now 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)

So, that is good. Having a good name is a great thing on earth.

But even a good name is a fairly fickle kind of thing. Alas, it is possible to have a good name for most of our life, but in the last days of our life, to do something quite wicked and to ruin that good name. And going the other way round — the happy way around — it is possible to have a bad name for much of life, but then repent as an elderly person and to live the remaining years well, so that folks begin to say, “Well, he was a rascal for most of his life. She was a rascal for most of her life. But as an old person, he became good. She became good.”

And even if there is not enough time left to begin to earn a good reputation, still our God is capable to washing every sin away, so that we can go through eternity holding our heads up:

Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. (Isaiah 1:18, RSV)

Old man Simeon: he had a good reputation in the eyes of the Holy Spirit. The Lord knew him to be a man who was righteous and just. But besides that good name, his old eyes had beheld something that gave him a peace that surpasses other things — even money, health, and a good name. For the man had beheld baby Jesus, and that was good enough for him. He was enveloped in peace. He was content to die now because he knew that he and our world would be okay. For unto us is born a Savior, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.