

## Now You Can Depart In Peace

Luke 2:22-40

### Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

January 1, 2017 – First Sunday After Christmas



In the name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. This morning's Gospel describes a rather amazing encounter – an encounter between the infant Jesus and two living saints, Simeon and Anna. This happened as Jesus' parents brought our Lord Christ to the Temple to do for Him according to the Law. Now Luke describes Simeon as a man who trusted in and lived his life according to God's promise that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. Can you imagine God coming to you with a promise that you wouldn't die until Christ's Second Coming – but then neglecting to tell you when that would happen? For Simeon, time surely must have crept by as he faithfully worshiped and served in the Temple – always waiting, always watching, always wondering: “Will today be the day?”

Consider the excitement, then, Simeon must have felt when he first saw Mary and Joseph holding the newborn Messiah in their arms – now only 40 days old – and when he took the Infant into his arms, hoisted Him high into the air and sang: “Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word. For mine eyes have seen Thy salvation Which Thou hast prepared in the face of all peoples. A Light to lighten the Gentiles, and the Glory of Thy people Israel.” Simeon was confident, bold, and very much alive in the knowledge that *now* the Lord would at last take him from this valley of sorrow to Himself in heaven. He spoke the same way a servant might speak to a master who had promised him his freedom. “Master, release Your servant now in peace, just as You promised.” Holding God to His Word, Simeon trusted that this tiny Baby was the One God promised. Trusting in His Word, Simeon began to live in the “now” of Christ. Though he didn't yet know how this Baby could be the Savior, still he was confident as he sang: “Mine eyes have seen Thy Salvation.”

But what did Simeon's eyes see? Actually, they saw nothing more than what the shepherds saw in the manger on the night of Jesus' birth – or what the wise men would see a short time later – just a

Baby Boy who looked like every other baby boy. There was no halo hovering over His head, no chorus of angels singing at His side – just a squirming Infant wrapped in an ordinary blanket whose poor parents had come to do all the Law required. But the Spirit of God said to Simeon: “This One is different. He is the One you've been waiting for.” And Simeon trusted God's Word. With the tiny Baby cradled in his arms, Simeon could now depart in peace and die without fear because he had finally seen God's promised Salvation.

To anyone who might have been standing nearby, Simeon's words concerning this Baby might well have sounded like the rantings of an old man gone stark, raving mad. Even Mary and Joseph – though they had also been visited by an angel and personally witnessed the birth of this Child for whom there was no human means of conception – even they were amazed at Simeon's words. Who would have thought that such infinitely wonderful things could be said about such a tiny Baby as this? After all, the saviors of our own imagination are usually big and strong. We like our lights bright, bold, even blinding – and our glory has to glitter and gleam like gold and precious gemstones. Still, here was this Child who was so small, helpless and poor – while the enemies surrounding us are so overbearing and formidable – the cancers, the viruses, the violence, the terror, the sin, the evil, the guilt, and the death. It's David versus Goliath all over again. How – we wonder – how can so little a Child be strong enough?

Well, Simeon is our preacher this morning, and you would do well, I think, to listen carefully to his words. “Don't believe your eyes!” he tells us. “Trust God's Word. Look to this Child Mary wrapped in a blanket and brought to the Temple. Receive Him with the empty arms of faith. Hold Him as your own, for He has come to be your Light and Salvation – the very Glory of God's Israel come down to you from heaven above. It doesn't matter who you are or what you've done. It doesn't

matter whether you're good, bad, rich, poor, young, old, married, or single. This Child has come to save *you* – so that *you* might depart in peace.”

The Church has traditionally sung Simeon's song on two different occasions. You've seen the title of this song printed out in the Hymnal as the “Nunc Dimittis” – taken from its first two words in Latin: “Now depart.” This song was first used as the traditional hymn during Compline – the Prayer at the Close of the Day. And indeed, just before you go to sleep at night, should you not pray, “Lord, now let Your servant depart in peace?” For sleep, in many ways, is a picture of death – just as rising in the morning is a picture of the resurrection.

You know the prayer: “If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. And this I ask for Jesus' sake.” Are you not confessing in that prayer that you know God's only begotten Son will care for you? Are you not saying with Simeon: “The Lord is my Light and my Salvation. Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the Stronghold of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid?” Later, this song was introduced into the Liturgy of the Lord's Supper. What a perfect place to sing this song after hearing the Words of Christ: “This is My body given for you. This is My blood shed for you” – that moment in time when Christ is more present *for you* in the Supper than even when His little body was cradled in Simeon's arms.

As Simeon held our newborn Savior in his arms, you can sense that even at the tender young age of 40 days, the Cross had already cast its shadow over this Child who was set for the falling and rising of many in Israel. Countless millions over the years would stumble over Him in unbelief and fall to their own condemnation – while millions more would look to Him in faith and rise to eternal life. He would be a Sign spoken against – despised and rejected – a curse on men's lips. The sword that would pierce His side would also pierce His mother's heart on that day when He gave His life for life the world – for none who bear Christ's name are immune from suffering and sorrow – not Mary – not the Church – not me, nor you, nor anyone else. Because the cross marks the life of this Child, it also marks the life of all who follow Him. So if you learn only one thing from Simeon, let it be this: In those places where Christ looks most helpless and weak, there is where He is most

Savior, most Light, most Glory, and most Son of God for us – whether it be in the manger, in the arms of Simeon, on the cross, or in the Supper.

But lest we forget, there was also one other person present at the Temple that day, a widow named Anna, who, after her husband's death, devoted herself to a life of prayer, fasting, and watching for the coming Redemption of Israel. Luke tells us that she was from the tribe of Asher – one of the wealthiest of the tribes of Israel. Asher's religious history reflected the kind of spiritual sleepiness and indifference that often comes with a life of prosperity and wealth – for no prophet or judge had ever before come forth from that tribe. But now in these last days we find Anna, a prophetess who spoke the Word of God with prophetic power. Even the numbers of her life were a prophetic witness to God's grace: married for a perfect seven years, and now 84 years old – seven times twelve. In the seventh twelve, or the twelfth seven of her life, she was given to see the Salvation of God – the Glory of Israel.

Anna's life too, was now complete. Everything she'd ever hoped, prayed, fasted and waited for had all at once been found in this little Child born of Mary. With Simeon she gave thanks to God and spoke about Him to all who were looking for God's promised Redemption. “There He is!” she cried, “The One in Simeon's arms – the One we've all been waiting for!” So here – in a manner of speaking – we have a beautiful picture of the Church: Simeon, Anna, Mary, Joseph – and in the middle of it all, a tiny 40 day old Baby – the very Son of God in human flesh. It was a little congregation, to be sure, but everyone is represented – the young, the old, the married, the single, and the widowed – people who would otherwise have nothing in common, are gathered by the Spirit of God around Jesus hidden in humility – even as it happens in our own day every time we gather for the Divine Service. People, the likes of you and me, who daily live our lives in the shadow of death and danger, can, by the grace of this Child in Simeon's arms, now die in the Light of Life. And in our dying we can also sing with Anna and Simeon: “Lord, now let Your servant depart in peace, according to Your Word – for my eyes have seen Your salvation, and the glory of Your people, Israel.” May it always be so for Jesus' sake. Amen.