

"Holding Promise"

Luke 2:22-40

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Life goes on, of course. Someone comes in with a trash bag to clean up gift opening storm debris. The kitchen drain clogs Christmas night; a plumber arrives with bags under his eyes big enough to hold his pipe wrench because life doesn't stop after Christmas.

This week I heard it called "the Christmas hangover." No, not *that* kind of hangover, but what comes after the crush of preparation, when the anticipated day has arrived, the last present is opened and people think, "Okay, that's it. What should we do now?"

What I did this week was to catch up on paperwork, empty a couple more boxes in my study, pay end of the month bills, prepare a bulletin, write a sermon—all of it normal stuff, only the days after Christmas normal feels kind of strange. Perhaps the shepherds felt the same returning to fields with ears still ringing with angel songs to find sheep were still sheep, wages were still low, and life was just life. "To you has been born this day a Savior!" P.S. Count the sheep when you get back.

Life went on, of course. The little Lord Jesus, what crying he made when hungry, tired, wet. It's one of the shocks of early parenthood, that despite this cataclysm in diapers you still have to make meals, do laundry, pay bills, get your act together enough to make it out of the house for things like Sunday worship....

Mary and Joseph got their stuff together enough to bring their six-week-old son to the Temple. They were keeping God's instruction, and maybe it felt good to do this thing so normal to faithful Jews. They were stepping into a current of generations stretching all the way back to Moses when Israel received instruction that first born children shall be presented to the Lord, designated as holy, and that their mothers shall come before God with purification sacrifice.

I wonder if they felt as Christian parents do bringing their firstborn to church for baptism? Was Jesus dressed in special clothes? Was Joseph saying, "I'm not going to cry!" Was there child-proud pomp in their step as they crossed the Temple courts, or was there a thud in their chests at presenting to the Lord this child whose birth announcement wasn't a 3x5 glossy sent through the mail but a blinding chorus of heavenly host? The new parents' pockets were lighter, perhaps uncomfortably so. "When the time of purification is complete," said the Levitical law, "...the mother must bring a one-year-old lamb as an entirely burned offering.... ..But if the mother cannot afford a sheep, she can bring two turtledoves or two pigeons." Mary, Luke says, had birds.

People came to the Temple for lots of reasons. To offer thanks, beg mercy, join in debate about what faithfulness to God entailed. I imagine the Temple was a place great for people-watching, and it so happened, by the direction of the Holy Spirit, that at least one Temple-goer that day was there expressly for prayerful watching.

From Luke's description of Simeon, we get the sense that people watching wasn't a pastime, but a ministry. "He was righteous and devout," says Luke; an upright man who dealt earnestly with God. But what really marked Simeon, was that he was *looking* for something.

You know how it is to look for something that you know is out there—it's just a matter of time before you find it—but for the life of you, you can't put your finger on where it is? I once had this relationship with a garage door remote and it nearly drove me mad.

Well, Simeon was looking for *consolation*. It's not hard to figure out how to look for the garage door remote. Looking for consolation isn't as clear. And Simeon wasn't just waiting for consolation for himself. He awaited the comforting of his people. His people-watching eyes saw Rome occupying Israel's land. He looked into the lives of folk for whom struggle was not occasional but had become the way of life. "The Holy Spirit rested on him," says Luke, which I take to mean that when Simeon saw people, he saw vats for holding mercy with plenty of space for filling.

But that day in the Temple, Simeon wasn't just waiting for something, but for *someone*. God's Spirit had told him, "Simeon, before you die you will have the privilege of seeing the Lord's Messiah," the anointed one who would console Israel and rule God's people with peace.

Luke doesn't say how long Simeon had been at this search. Do you think he'd been pacing Jerusalem for years, glancing at couples with babes in arms and scanning the streets for that one who dripped with God's blessing? The Spirit unwraps this gift of a word that Messiah was on the way, and then comes a long stretch of watching and hoping while going through motions of eating, sleeping, praying, contending with the stiffness of old age setting in, living the normal stuff of life with the ache of promise that one will be born, maybe already *is born*, who will be the seed of peace for the people.

For all its gift promise can be hard to live with. Talk to someone who has a past they oh, so wish they could undo. They've heard, even claimed, the promise of full forgiveness in Jesus, yet the consequences of life gone by are still there. Talk to a worshipper after a Christmas candlelight service who has tasted a slice of the coming completeness when all creation will be at peace, yet who knows singing Silent Night won't make the turmoil at home disappear. Promised consolation can hang over us both as solace and as tease.

Mary and Joseph made their way across the Temple courts. Maybe they'd stopped to talk with another couple with a newborn in their arms, and when they turned to leave there was an elderly man standing in front of them. Did they give a they give a nervous, "Hi sir," but receive no word in reply? I envision Simeon as speechless, his eyes riveted to the baby.

Perhaps Joseph and Mary exchanged a glance and looked back at the man who, without a word, leaned toward Mary and took Jesus in his arms, which I would thought odd, even scary, this unknown man taking my child from me. But Luke has already shown these are God-sensitive people; Mary must have perceived God was upon this man who cradled Jesus in arms, lifted his eyes to the heavens and spoke:

Now, my Master, let your servant go in peace,
according to your word;
my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples.
A light for revelation to the Gentiles
and the glory for your people Israel.

What kind of word is this? I can go now, God; let me go in peace. Did Mary and Joseph wondered if Simeon was going to die right there on the spot! He spoke with God like there was nothing left to see, no work left to do. This was it, his service was over. This baby was God's promise fulfilled. Simeon was holding God's salvation.

He placed a hand of blessing upon Mary and Joseph, and then he speaks to the child's mom. He said the child would cause some to rise and others to fall. That he would bring to light those thoughts people would rather have stashed away. He looked at Mary and said her soul would receive a sword thrust because of the child.

These aren't words you speak to mothers over their babies. These are cosmic words. These are God-sized words. These are words that reach to the heart's not just of Mary and Joseph and Jesus, but to the very heart of the world—the hopes and fears of all the years, and of all the people who fill them. Here in this quiet encounter tucked within the massive expanse of Temple, Simeon's whispers thunder with the ages-long purpose of God.

Simeon's whispered at a cemetery in Twinsburg about 10 days back where family and friends tucked in close as the old man spoke from my worship book. The ground was so soft and wet we couldn't stand right at the grave, but the coffin was still in view as my lips moved with Simeon's in these verses that have become part of the church's funeral liturgy. "Now let your servant go in peace, for these eyes of mine have seen your salvation, which you have prepared for in the sight of all people."

No one yells God's promise at graveside. People don't shout over babies. Neither does a lot of life feel as though salvation is shouting loud and clear. Many days, faith is holding a promise that whispers we have seen salvation in this child of Mary, this brilliant pin of light in the darkness.

In a small square of Temple ground, unbeknownst to all else there, the full force grace and truth and love of God was being cradled in an old man's arms. He was right in the middle of God's salvation taking hold on earth. Not that anyone walking by would have seen it that way. Not that many of our days feel as though God's salvation among us is as blatant as a lake effect snowstorm. But we too hold this Christ, and so we'd be right to think that lives that sometimes seem on the periphery of God's work are actually right in the middle of of all God is doing in the world.

As we take hold of Christ just as Simeon held the infant Lord in his arms, we will not just be personally blessed. But somehow, by God's design, even in our seemingly small life spaces, we will be part of how God is redeeming all things. We too have a role in how God's saving takes hold in the world. It strikes me as significant that the first thing Simeon does after praising God for the Christ is to train his eyes downward and bless someone. I have to think that after he'd wished God's grace upon the parents and had given Jesus back he left the Temple and kept on blessing.

In just a moment, we'll receive the elements we call body and blood, and in a spiritual yet very real way our hearts will cradle the risen Christ. Communion can feel a quiet, an almost anonymous moment. Just one church in one town whispering, "our eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared for all people." Yet it's a moment telling us, nonetheless, that this church and each of us, is right in the middle of God's promises in Christ getting worked out on earth.

It's the Sunday after Christmas, and life is just going on. But look who we carry with us as we he into this new year—the hope of the world, God's love in flesh, God's mercy and life and peace. God grant that we may hold him and put him in the arms of others in this and every year. Amen.