

Christmas 1B December 27 2020
Luke 2:22-40
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Simeon took him [Jesus] in his arms and praised God, saying,

*“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”* Let's pray:

I want to tell you a little bit about Simeon, some things you may not know, some things that might surprise you.

Ancient historians tell us that the Egyptian pharaoh Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285-247 B.C.) wished to include texts of Holy Scripture in the famous Library at Alexandria. He invited Hebrew scholars from Jerusalem, and the Sanhedrin sent their wise men. Simeon was one of the seventy scholars who went to Alexandria to translate the Holy Scriptures from Hebrew into Greek. The completed work was called “The Septuagint” [LXX], and is the version of the Old Testament used by the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Tradition says that while translating Isaiah 7:14 [LXX: “Behold, הַעֲלֵמָה (Hebrew *ha'alMah*); παρθένου (Greek *parthenu*) (a virgin) shall conceive...”], Simeon hesitated and was going to correct it to γυνή (woman), when an angel appeared to him and held back his hand saying, “You shall see these words fulfilled. You shall not die until you behold Christ the Lord born of a pure and spotless virgin.” In today's Gospel, St Luke writes, “It had been revealed to him [Simeon] by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah” [2:26].

Simeon had been waiting, anticipating, and preparing a long time for the fulfillment of that promise. Not just years or even decades, but centuries. Considering the years during which the Septuagint was laboured over, sacred tradition holds that Simeon was more than 270 years old when he held Jesus in his arms. It's no surprise then that Christian iconography shows Simeon to be old and hunched over, as though the years of waiting weigh heavily upon him. (In fact, ancient tradition says that Simeon died at the age of 360). But there's more. Tradition also says that Simeon was blind.

How can this be? Two hundred and seventy years old? Blind? What could a 270-year-old blind man possibly see? That doesn't make any sense at all. Blind men don't see. So, do we deny the tradition and declare it to be untrue, just wrong? Do we discount Simeon's own words, "My eyes have seen your salvation?"

That's the tension in this story and it says something about our understanding and experience of God, life, and the world. For a lot of people, the world is limited to the physical, the tangible, and the sensory. Many believe that reality and truth are defined by what is known, what makes sense, and what is understood. This is primarily determined by our five senses, sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell. Seeing and blindness just don't go together. They're opposites. It just doesn't make any sense. So, Simeon either has sight or he is blind. Which is it?

What if it's both at the same time? What if Simeon is blind and he does see? At some point we have to admit none of this makes sense. To admit that we don't understand is the beginning of learning to see in a new way; to see through the eyes of the heart; to see through the eyes of faith. Faith creates an opening to a larger world. As long as we try to make sense of this and resolve the tension between seeing and blindness, we'll miss the beauty, deeper meaning, and invitation of this story. We'll live oblivious to the presentation that is taking place every moment of our lives.

The tension between Simeon's seeing and his blindness is not an issue to be resolved, it's our entry into another realm. It's the doorway into the temple of our life and another way of being, another way of seeing, another way of knowing.

Seeing is more than sight. That day in the temple Simeon saw more than what physical eyes could perceive. Physical sight would see Jesus, a forty-day old baby. But that's not what Simeon says he saw. He says, "My eyes have seen your salvation." Which is it? Is it a baby or is it salvation? The only possible answer is, "Yes."

It's not just "yes" for Simeon. It's also "yes" for you and me. This isn't simply an event in history. The presentation of our Lord in the temple is happening all the time. The invisible is seen, the intangible is touched, the unspoken is heard, the uneaten is tasted, and the odorless is fragrant. All five senses gloriously titillated by faith.

There are times in each of our lives when we come to the temple and we catch a glimpse of what Simeon saw. Think about a time when you thought to yourself or maybe even said aloud, "I never want this moment to end." Recall a day when you were so absorbed with other people or your work that you lost all track of time and it was as if you were living outside of time. Remember a day when you thought, "I just can't do this. It's too much. I can't go on," but somehow you did and you have no idea how.

In those moments you experienced a presence greater than the people who were there. You heard more than the words spoken in conversation. You felt more than what you could touch. You saw more than what was in front of you. You knew there was more going on than the events of that moment.

Regardless of the circumstances you somehow experienced that all was well. Everything was just right, perfect, and complete. Nothing was lacking. Your life was more than you had ever previously known it to be. Those are the moments of presentation. Those are the moments when we see salvation and are now free to go in peace according to His holy Word, Jesus. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.