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Luke 2:21-40
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The True Joy of Christmas

I love Christmastime. This has been true ever since I was kid. Not just exchanging presents, but the whole bit of it. I love the decorations. Finding the perfect Christmas tree. Putting it up. Making Christmas cookies. Gathering with family and friends. Christmas carols. The traditions. For one twelfth of the year, all of it brings me so much joy. The downside is that once Christmas is over, I can get somewhat depressed. Especially if my joy is wrapped up in the material aspects of the holiday and not celebrating the one who's birth it represents. Jesus.

The older I get, the more I realize how I need to hold to our traditions more loosely. As our children get older and our family dynamic changes, it becomes more difficult to carry out the traditions. I'm sure a lot of us can relate to that this morning.

One constant over the years for me has been our Christmas Eve service. I love gathering with our church family to remember the real reason for the season. I love sharing the Good News of Jesus' birth with the hope that he brings. That is always a highlight for me.

Today, we gather to reflect on the profound joy that Christmas brings. As the world celebrates with lights, gifts, and festivities, we are called to turn our hearts to the true essence of this season: the arrival of our Savior, Jesus Christ. The passage from Luke 2:21-40 offers us a glimpse into this joy, which is rooted not in fleeting pleasures, but in eternal hope and salvation which lasts.

21 When the eighth day came, it was time to circumcise the child, and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

22 When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord **23** (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), **24** and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. **26** It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. **27** Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what was customary under the law, **28** Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

29 “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word,
30 for my eyes have seen your salvation,
31 which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
32 a light for revelation to the gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

33 And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. **34** Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed **35** so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul, too.”

36 There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, **37** then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. **38** At that moment she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

39 When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. **40** The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favor of God was upon him.

Let us pray for illumination.

As we talk about the joy of Christmas, I want to focus on four key themes in our text today as reflected by the lives of Simeon and Anna. The Joy of Fulfilled Promises, the Joy of Recognizing the Messiah, The Joy of a Redeemed Future, and finally, the Joy that Transforms us.

When Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple, they fulfilled the requirements of the Law of Moses. On the eighth day, they brought their baby boy for circumcision and naming. And Joseph named his son Jesus, just as he was commanded by the Angel Gabriel.

Then thirty two days later, they brought Jesus to the temple to consecrate him to the Lord and to perform their required purification offerings. The Law of Moses in Leviticus required a couple to offer a lamb and a pigeon as a sacrifice for Mary’s purification. Or if the couple could not afford the lamb, then a pair of doves or two young pigeons. This act reminds us that the birth of Jesus was not an isolated event but the fulfillment of God’s promises to His people. From the earliest prophecies in Genesis to the words of Isaiah and Micah, the Messiah was foretold.

The joy of Christmas is that God keeps His promises. Jesus is the proof of His faithfulness. Just as Simeon and Anna would soon recognize in the temple, we too can rejoice that God has acted decisively in human history to bring salvation to all.

Take Simeon for example. He was righteous and devout. The Greek word *dikaios* or righteous is the same one we heard throughout Advent to describe Zechariah and Joseph. It means to be in right relationship with God and humans. In other words when it came to Simeon, Zechariah, and Joseph, it was known that they would always do what was right.

Luke also describes Simeon as devout. It comes from the Greek word *eulabes* which means “God fearing.” When we describe someone as devout, we usually think of someone who comes to worship week in and week out, for richer or poorer, in sickness or in health, in both good times and bad, throughout all of their days. Not just when it is convenient for them.

Devout worshipers come with an anticipation and expectation that they are going to encounter the Lord somehow through hearing the Word of God preached and receiving the sacraments.

There are a couple of things that we notice about Simeon that set the stage for him having a life changing encounter with God that day in the temple.

He knew his scriptures which meant that he knew the promises of God and the signs to look for when those promises came true. Simeon’s Song points to two of those promises from the Prophet Isaiah, “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”¹ “And the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all mankind together will see it.”²

Luke also tells us that Simeon was waiting for the consolation of Israel. The Greek word for consolation is *paraklesis*. It comes from the Greek root of *parakaleo* which means to call out. To comfort. To exhort. To provide solace.

Again the Simeon remembered the words of the Prophet Isaiah, “Comfort, comfort, my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service had been completed, that her sin has been paid for.”³

Israel certainly needed comforting. For 400 some years, Israel had been ransacked, destroyed, and held ransom by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Greeks, and now the Romans. And NOT a word at all from God through out it. Just silence. Most people no doubt had given up hope that salvation would come.

Not Simeon. He held fast to that hope as if his life depended on it.

Another thing that Simeon’ shows us is that he had an active relationship with the Holy Spirit. Notice how Luke says, “the Holy Spirit was upon him...that it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit...he was moved by the Holy Spirit.” Three times in just three verses, the Holy Spirit is mentioned and this is BEFORE

¹ Isaiah 9:2

² Isaiah 40:5

³ Isaiah 40:1-2a

release of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. I think it says something about the closeness of his relationship with God. Not as a passive God, but a friend who walks closely beside us in life.

The Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would see the Christ before his death.

What joy Simeon must have felt in that moment! His entire life was one of anticipation, and now his heart overflowed with peace and satisfaction.

My friends, that same joy is available to us today. The same Savior Simeon recognized is alive and present in our lives. We are called to recognize Jesus as the light of the world, the one who illuminates our path to God and fills our hearts with His peace.

Next we come to the prophetess Anna. She was a woman of remarkable faith and devotion, who also recognized Jesus as the Redeemer. A couple of things we see about Anna, she was known to speak for the Lord. Notice that she was not a priest, or professional clergy, but a lay person whose life reflected such a closeness with God so that when she spoke, her words could be trusted.

We also see that Anna was older and had experienced a life of suffering and loss. Luke reports that just seven years into her marriage, her husband died and she remained a widow for the rest of her life. While she could have been bitter towards God that her life had not turned out the way she had hoped, now at 84 years old, she still remained hopeful and open to the idea that somehow God would bless her.

Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer in one of his Christmas sermons wrote, “The celebration of Advent is possible only to those who are troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect and look forward to something greater to come.”⁴ Anna certainly embodied this.

Like Simeon, Anna too was devout. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Now I am not advocating that we camp out here 24 hours a day and 7 days a week, but I do think it points to a life posture of worship and prayer...the same way that Jesus lived. I think it also shows us a very important ministry that God has in store for each of us when at some point we are no longer able to come to church as we did when we were younger.

We can pray. To our homebound folks watching us today, know that you have a very important ministry of worship and prayer. And like a reservoir in heaven, God unleashes those prayers at just the right time to accomplish what God purposes.

We also see how Anna was thankful. She gave thanks to God for seeing Jesus and spoke of Him to all who were waiting for redemption.

⁴ From Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Christmas Sermons.

Anna's response reminds us that the joy of Christmas is not confined to the past event of Jesus' birth but extends into the future. The child she saw in the temple would grow to bring redemption through His death and resurrection. This joy gives us hope, no matter our circumstances. Like Anna, we can respond with gratitude and proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to those around us.

Some of us this morning are waiting for something like Simeon and Anna. Perhaps it's the hope of a New Year. A new leader. A new relationship or change in our relationship. A new job. Perhaps we are waiting for something to get better. May we know that unless we are like Simeon and Anna, those new things might escape us entirely unless we stay steeped in our scriptures, we live in right relationships with God and others, we are under control of the Holy Spirit, and we persevere through our waiting. Then and only then will our hearts be ready to receive the good things that God has in store for us.

My friends, in the hustle and bustle of the season, it is easy to lose sight of this deeper joy. Gifts, holiday traditions, and festive gatherings are wonderful, but they pale in comparison to the gift of Jesus himself. The joy of Christmas is not a temporary emotion; it is a transformative experience that lasts with us all year long. When we embrace Jesus as our Savior, our lives are forever changed. It's a joy that moves us to worship like Simeon and Anna, to live in peace, and to share the light of Christ with a world in need.

This Christmas, may we reflect on the joy of Simeon and Anna, who saw in the infant Jesus the fulfillment of God's promises and the hope of the world. Let us rejoice in the unshakable truth that Christ has come, and He is with us. As we leave this place today, may our hearts be filled with the true joy of Christmas: the joy of fulfilled promises, the joy of recognizing Jesus as our Savior, the joy of a redeemed future, and the joy that transforms our lives.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for the gift of Your Son, Jesus Christ, who is the source of our true joy. May we, like Simeon and Anna, recognize Him as our Savior and proclaim His light to the world. Fill our hearts with gratitude and hope, and help us to live in the joy of Your promises fulfilled. Amen.