

Presented in the Temple

Luke 2:22-40

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, 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.

Many of you know that I am from a large family. My parents gave birth to twelve (12) children and were blessed to raise eleven (11) of us to maturity. We knew we were part of an immediate family with parents and siblings. We were also taught we were a part of the Wilson, Harston and Wallace clan. Part of what was important to my parents was raising us in the church. So, after a month of life,

Mama and the new baby came to church, joining Daddy and the older children. As important as being a part of an earthly family, it was just as important that we were part of God's family. This gave us a sense of belonging to a greater community. No matter what our accomplishments in life, there were people who invested in us and wanted us to be successful for the betterment of the entire family, our community and the Church of Jesus Christ.

One of the customs in our small church was on your birthday, you gave a monetary gift to the Sunday School. The minimum expected was a penny for each year of your life. Others of the congregation would then add to your contribution in celebration of your birthday. I remember some complaining that the gift should go to the birthday person, but it was a way of teaching us to be generous and thankful. This custom may have been a reflection of Jesus being presented in the temple.

Mary and Joseph dutifully take Jesus to fulfill the letter of Jewish law. Following Torah, they circumcise the baby Jesus on the eighth day, and according to Gabriel's instructions, they give the child his name (1:31). Both parents are attuned to divine revelation, whether it comes through an angel or the Torah. So, we see a family bringing their newborn child to the temple to make—a sacrifice. Owing to their poverty, Mary and Joseph offer two turtledoves because they cannot afford a lamb (Lev. 12:8). In our comfortable world, parents and newborn usually *receive* gifts instead of making them. What if we sacrificed something of immense value to mark a birth, to consecrate a child to God?

This purpose of the sacrifice in Luke 2 was "For their purification." But there was no need for this child to be purified. No need for Mary to be purified either. Karl Barth rather wonderfully wrote that, when Jesus was baptized, he needed to be washed of sin—not *his* sin, but *our* sin: "No one who came to the Jordan was as laden and afflicted as He." No one ever came to the temple for purification as laden

with sin—not his, or his mother's, but ours—as Jesus. Jesus came to bare the sins of "every male" and female.

Because of his purifying mission, Jesus is, as Oscar Hijuelos phrased it, "the most wanted child in the history of the world." How lovely, how tender, the way aged Simeon, the frailties of his years draped over him, cradles the infant Jesus in his arms. Imagine holding in your arms this most wanted child, the hope of the ages, the yearning of your entire life.

But Jesus was just a baby—and this is God's shrewdest device. As Luther put it, God became small for us in Christ; he showed us his heart, so our hearts might be won. Infants wield a kind of power. Muscular men with calloused hands become gentle as pillows when handed a baby; forceful people with gruff voices adopt a falsetto and coo to an infant. God came down, not to thrash evildoers or crush the Romans, but as an infant, to elicit love, to nurture tenderness.

Simeon has waited all his life for this child. Simeon is the trustworthy bearer of God's prophetic word. He is a Spirit-filled prophet on a mission for God. Now he can die in peace or be "released from his vigil." Simeon has been, like Habakkuk before him, standing at his post, keeping watch and waiting for the Lord. This waiting and the dying in peace are moving for us who glance away from death anxiously, who die in considerable consternation. "Those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength" ([Isa. 40:31](#)). "For God alone my soul waits in silence" ([Ps. 62:1](#)). We do not like to wait. We want to move, fill the time, stay in control, rush to the next titillation—and in our inability to be still and know that God is God, we miss God.

God is not a possession you nab and cling to now. God is like a lover at some distance. You are filled with longing—and the longing is sweet, delightful in anticipation, rippling with eagerness. Simeon waited, not for minutes or months but decades. Gregory of Nyssa understood this peculiar yearning and satisfaction:

"constantly going on in the quest and never ceasing in ascent, seeing that every fulfillment... continually generates a further desire." This discovery, "far from making the soul despair, is actually an experience of God's fuller presence."

Because of this child, Simeon can die calmly, confidently. He can be as hospitable to his impending death as he has been to the child Mary and Joseph brought to the temple, embracing it, blessing God for it.

Then we see Anna, an octogenarian, having led a relatively uneventful life. Her gaze was focused on only one vista, God's salvation. God's blessing was not a continual smorgasbord of titanic experiences and shiny baubles. God's blessing was just one thing, and it was eighty years coming. "Purity of heart is to will one thing" (Søren Kierkegaard); "There is need of only one thing" ([Luke 10:42](#)), to be near Jesus, to see salvation dawn.

Just a child—but hardly safe and harmless. "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many." This child provokes a crisis, a decision, for Simeon, for Anna, for all people of every generation. How we respond to this one person decides everything. The stakes are not trivial. It is not that, if we go with Jesus, our lives are 17 percent better, our happiness 14 percent higher, our marriages 16 percent healthier. It's all or nothing. You fall. Or you rise.

Notice the order. In the world, it's rise and fall. The rise and fall of the Third Reich, the rise and fall of the business tycoon, the rise and fall of a movie star. But with Jesus it's *fall and rise*. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" ([John 12:24](#)). Anna fasts "night and day," not "day and night." Jesus did not fly directly up into heaven once danger flared. He suffered and died, and *then* was raised to glory. We suffer and die—and not just at the end of life. "I have been crucified with Christ" ([Gal. 2:19](#)); I bear the death of Christ now. I deny myself. I am persecuted because I am

in sync with Christ and out of sync with the world. We fall, and from that lowest point, we rise. We may just fall, but if we rise, we fall and then rise.

Perhaps Mary shuddered at Simeon's words. Mysteriously he spoke of a sword piercing her soul. It is moving to think of Mary, feeling Jesus kick in her womb, hearing his first cry, nursing him, watching his first steps. She witnessed the thirty years telescoped into a single verse: "The child grew and became strong." He left home and marshaled a following. But wicked men turned against her son, who was pure, good, all love. Mary had to watch as Simeon's prophecy was fulfilled. Her heart broke as she saw the lifeblood she had given him drain out of his beautiful body. The fall. But then the rise. Who, among all who witnessed Jesus risen from the dead, was more joyful to see him alive than his own mother? **James C.**

Howell

About 30 years ago I attended an installation of a pastor at a Flint church. An elder preacher spoke words of blessings on my sons George and Isaac. When I asked him about this, he said he always blessed children and asked God to make them workers in the church. I remember for me, it was Mr. and Mrs. Littlejohn, Mr. and Mrs. Oliver, Professor and Mrs. Wells, Mrs. Henry, Mr. and Mrs. Tolbert, Mrs. Butler, Mr. and Mrs. Bland, Mr. and Mrs. Brown, Mr. and Mrs. Jesse, Rev. Strong, and our pastor, Rev. Fletcher, and so many others who nurtured me and my family...loving us and teaching us into becoming what God would have us be.

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