

Homily for Christmas 1, 2020

Luke 2:25-35

'Simeon'

Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer

*

INTRODUCTION (150)

'Simeon took him in his arms and praised God...'

There's an image in the middle of this text which I find very powerful,

And it's one which perhaps some of us can especially connect with over these days of visiting family.

It's the image of an old man holding a baby in his arms,

In particular,
Faithful Simeon holding the baby Jesus in his arms.

I don't quite know what it is,
But when I see an old man,
Perhaps a grandfather, or even great-grandfather,
Holding a little baby,

There is just something so special about it.

Maybe some of you were lucky enough to witness a scene like this over Christmas.

*

I want us to consider the figure of Simeon today,

And as we do we'll see three things of particular significance and relevance for us

A long life,
A peaceful song,
And an ominous blessing.

*

A LONG LIFE (525)

So first is Simeon's *long life*.

Now to be fair,
The text doesn't actually say Simeon was an old man.

It's sort of an educated guess the Church puts together from the other details,
Like the fact that it does say Anna was in her 80s and Simeon is paired with her,

And the fact that Simeon was one who being righteous and devout was **waiting** for
the consolidation of Israel,

And in this waiting was promised that he would not see death before he had seen the
Lord's Messiah.

So from all this we get the picture of faithful Simeon as an older man.

And so whenever this reading comes up I think it's a good opportunity to be reminded
of the honour given to old age in the Scriptures,

The book of Leviticus calls God's people to '*rise in the presence of the aged...*',

And the Psalms speak of the righteous still producing fruit in old age...

Our culture is one obsessed with youth,

Whereas the Scriptural worldview is one where the elderly are important,
Are honoured.

And this morning I especially want to draw your attention to one aspect of this,

Which is to notice that Simeon's life was prolonged,
In order for God to bless him.

It says this quite explicitly.

He received this promise that he would not taste death,
Until he had seen the Lord's Messiah.

The reason I think this is worth emphasizing is that so many times I've sat with elderly Christians,

Who are perplexed by their prolonged life,
From a spiritual perspective.

They ask,
Why does God still have me here?

They often feel tired,
They can't be particularly active in service of others like they used to.

Several elderly Christians I know have been praying for God to take them home,
Which I think is okay.

Now one common answer people often offer in these circumstances,

Is to say that God still has some purpose for you,

And no doubt there's truth in that.

I've encouraged people in their old age especially to pray for their family and church
and our world,

Following the example of Anna in the Temple.

But it seems to me in Simeon we have a different way of looking at this question,

Which can give us a different answer to those who wonder why God has prolonged
their life.

Because Simeon's life is prolonged mainly,
Not so he can do something,
But so that God can do something for him.

His life is prolonged,
In order for God to bless him.

Now in his case it was very specific of course,
That he would see with his eyes and hold in his arms the Messiah, the Christ,

But it could apply to elderly Christians today in any number of ways.

In the book of Joshua there's a scene where the inheritance of the land is being
distributed,
And Caleb says that 'the Lord has kept me alive these forty five years...',

And then Joshua blesses him,
And gives him his inheritance.

Again,
Caleb's life was prolonged,
For the Lord to bless him.

So first,
There's his long life.

*

A PEACEFUL SONG (500)

Second,
There's Simeon's peaceful song,

Let me quote from the version we know better,

*'Lord now let your servant depart in peace,
According to your word.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
Which you have prepared in the presence of all people,
A light to reveal you to the nations,
And the glory of your people Israel.'*

Simeon's song is a song of peace,

Because he knows that in this child Jesus,
God's light has come into the darkness of this world.

Simeon's song is a song of peace,

Because he knows,
That here is the one who would bring salvation, rescue, deliverance to those
oppressed by sin and evil and death.

Simeon's song is a song of peace,
Because God's word to him has come to pass,

This promise that he would see the Lord's Messiah has come true,

God is faithful,

And so Simeon can depart in peace.

*

In the history and life of Church,
The song of Simeon has been used in different ways.

The first way is that it's been used as one of the traditional prayers in the late evening,

And there's an ancient spiritual practice here,

That we remember our own mortality each night,

And haven't we been reminded of our mortality after the events of this year?

The idea is that we treat each night's sleep as a little rehearsal for death,

Sleep is where we are vulnerable,

Where we, in a sense, relinquish control of our lives for these night hours,
We commend ourselves in God's hands.

Now, modern people might think that all sounds a bit morbid,

But the Scriptures teach us,
And in fact ancient people generally understood this,

That because we all die,

The path of living wisely day by day is to recognize this and live in light of it.

So Christians have used the Song of Simeon in the evening,

Because we can go to sleep as if we were going to our death,
At peace in Christ Jesus and the salvation he brings.

*

But in our own Lutheran tradition the Song of Simeon has been used in another very interesting way.

We pray this prayer in our liturgy after Holy Communion don't we?

Why do we this?

Well,
We understand that as Simeon took the Christ-child in his arms,
Saw God's salvation,
and so could depart this life in peace,

We,
having come to receive the body and blood of our Lord Jesus,
we too have received Christ in our hands,
we have seen God's salvation at work in us,
we can depart this service in peace,

but even more than that,
we can be prepared to depart this world in peace.

*

And that's why finally,

The Church has used this peaceful song at the deathbed itself.
And so when my own grandfather lay dying here in Adelaide at Calvary hospital,

My father visited him and prayed with him the Song of Simeon.

And another faithful old man,
departed in peace.

*

OMINOUS BLESSING (430)

So there's Simeon's long life,
His peaceful song,

And finally his ominous blessing,
His troubling blessing.

Just let me read these last few verses to you again.

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.'

Now these are the words of Simeon that aren't so well known.

This is you could say,
The other side of Christmas.

And in short,
You could say that here is the shadow of the cross,
Cast right back into Jesus' infancy.

This child will bring light,
He will be the saviour,

But he will also face opposition,

He will be the cause not just for people rising,
But people falling.

He'll be that cornerstone,
Which is rejected and becomes a stumbling block.

And Mary,
The way this boy's life is heading will be for you like a sword which pierces your own
soul.

And so while we began with the peaceful image of an old man cradling a little baby,

We're left with another image,

With the image of a mother in agony and turmoil,

Ultimately,
The image of Mary at the foot of the cross.

Simeon reminds us that Jesus Christ is the one through whom God brings salvation
from sin and death,
He is the one through whom God's light shines into the darkness of this world.

But Simeon also reminds us that receiving this salvation in Christ is not automatic.

It depends on your reaction to Jesus.

As Mary has sung in her song,

*'...he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones...
...and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things...'*

For those who in their pride resist and oppose and reject Christ Jesus and the salvation
he comes to bring,
For those who rely on their own power,

He is a cause for falling.

But for those who in their lowliness,
confess their need for him,
who hunger for his righteousness,

he is a cause for rising.

Christmas is all about God coming down to us in pure grace in Christ Jesus,

And he does this for the world,
For all people,

But the one who comes calls us to believe in him,
And to follow him.

*

CONCLUSION

So friends,

As some of you are privileged to visit with extended family over this period,

Perhaps you'll get to witness one of those special moments of an old man cradling a little baby in his arms.

Let it remind you of faithful Simeon,

Who 'took Jesus in his arms and praised God...'

There was his long life,
His peaceful song,
And his ominous blessing.

In the name of Jesus, Amen.