

## **“An Old Man’s Song”**

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Luke 2:22-38: <sup>22</sup> *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* <sup>23</sup> *(as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”),* <sup>24</sup> *and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”*

<sup>25</sup> *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.* <sup>26</sup> *It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.* <sup>27</sup> *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,* <sup>28</sup> *Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,*

<sup>29</sup> *“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,  
according to your word;*

<sup>30</sup> *for my eyes have seen your salvation,*

<sup>31</sup> *which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,*

<sup>32</sup> *a light for revelation to the Gentiles  
and for glory to your people Israel.”*

<sup>33</sup> *And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.* <sup>34</sup> *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 <sup>35</sup> so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”*

<sup>36</sup> *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, <sup>37</sup> 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. <sup>38</sup> 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.*

Here on this Sunday after Christmas, we consider one of the few stories of Jesus’ childhood: his presentation in the Temple. Our text today speaks of old man named Simeon who was waiting and expecting...Simeon to whom the Holy Spirit had confirmed that he would see the Lord’s Messiah.

Simeon was waiting and expecting. And perhaps, you think that if you and I could get a little Holy Spirit, perhaps we could be “waiting and expecting” too.

I don’t know how the Holy Spirit spoke to Simeon—the text does not tell us. Consider some of the ways the Spirit speaks in the Bible: Did the Spirit speak in a dream as it did to Joseph? Did the Spirit speak through seeing a boiling pot as it did prophet Jeremiah? Did the Spirit speak through the speech of donkey as did to Balaam, who was a sort of pagan religious guru? Did the Spirit speak on the mountaintop in lightning, thunder, and earthquakes as with Moses on Mount Sinai? Or was the Spirit on a whisper of silence as with the prophet Elijah?

There is no one single way the Spirit speaks...the real question is “Are we ready to listen?” God can speak in the lighting of a candle...in the words of carol...in the face of friend...in Christmas card that reminds of past relationships. God speaks in so many ways to those who are waiting and expecting. Simeon knows that he will not die until he sees the Lord’s Messiah...sees the one whom God sends for our deliverance.

So how is Simeon attuned to what the Spirit is saying. How does he know what he knows? Simeon is described as being righteous and devout. Righteous—he did the right things. Devout—he stuck to it...made it habit...kept on “keeping on.” That keeps him in tune with the Spirit.

It is like the story of the old, experienced sales person training a new salesperson. The experienced salesperson gives this advice: “To be successful, you have to jump at every opportunity.” “Great advice, says the new salesperson, “but how do you know what is an opportunity.” “You don’t,” said the experienced hand, “you just never stop jumping.”

Righteous and devout...never stop jumping...that’s Simeon. Do you long for the Spirit to speak to you? Here’s the bad news: it takes regular waiting and expecting. Ahh, but here is the good news: it takes regular waiting and expecting. Simeon was waiting and he expected to see God’s consolation...the comfort that God intends for him and for his people. And what does he see? A couple of poor, country hicks named Mary and Joseph in the Temple. We know they are country... their hometown Nazareth was a backwards little town in the first-century. We know that they are poor because they cannot afford to give the appropriate sacrifice of a lamb...that was what the Torah or Law called for...the sacrifice of a lamb. But there was a poor person’s option...two doves rather than a lamb. If you expect God to do stupendous tricks and expensive glitz, you are waiting in the wrong line. Simeon saw a child. He had seen many children before now. He saw a child of a poor couple and he had seen many poor people in his day. Then he saw what he expected to see.

So, an old man who was righteous and devout...waiting and expecting. And he sees and then he sings. Actually, the text says he “praised God,” but it seems like he sang. It is sort of like what happens in a Broadway musical. When the plot reaches a dramatic height, there’s a song. Waiting and expecting, Simeon’s story reaches dramatic height. He sang: Let me depart in peace because I have seen what God is doing.

These praise words he spoke, “Lord, now let your servant depart in peace...” quickly became a favorite hymn in the church. Simeon’s words are one of the first hymns of the church. His words have been set to music over and over again. We have traced versions of this hymn back over 1700 years. It would be no exaggeration to suggest that there are probably a thousand settings of Simeon’s words. Our own hymnbook has three settings. His words beg to be sung.

The title of Simeon’s song is *Nunc dimittis*, Latin for the first words he speaks—“Let me be depart” or “Let me be dismissed.” This tradition of using the first two words to name a song is normal in the early church continues today in the Roman Catholic Church. The Lord’s Prayer is the “Our Father.” The rosary prayer is the “Hail Mary” (first two words in that prayer). We even have it in our service: the *Gloria Patria*, which is translated “Glory be to the Father.” The *Nunc Dimittis* is Simeon’s great gift to the church.

Simeon represents the pattern of faithfulness that works for us...if we wait and expect...if we are devout and faithful...we will see. And when we see, we are swept up into a song that is bigger than any of us. Years ago, my father took me to a revival service in the church of one his employees—an employee who was a lay preacher in a primitive Baptist church. It was an experience for a young

boy raised in a traditional, decently and in order, Presbyterian church! An older woman stood up in the service and said she had experienced God's love in her life and she felt like singing. She said she did not have much of voice but she just wanted to sing. Well, she certainly told the truth...she could not sing! But it did not matter...her song was the expression of one who had waited and expected, who was devout and righteous. Even as a young boy, I knew I was in the presence of the holy; though if you had looked in from the outside, you would wonder, "Why is that crazy old woman trying to sing!"

That's how Simeon sings...the one who waited and expected. Now Simeon is still firmly planted in this world and in this life. Although he breaks out in song, he also tells the truth. He counsels Mary with a spoken word about the baby Jesus: "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too." Simeon says there is heartbreak ahead...even for Mary who is pondering all these things in her heart.

The adult Jesus would say much the same...that he brings division to the world between those who will accept him and those who will not...that there is a cost to discipleship...that trials and sufferings for our faith and in our life are to be expected...that we even are called to take up our cross and follow him. But even as Jesus said these things, he ate and drank with friends...he spoke of his presence being like a wedding party...he turned that water into wine at wedding in Cana...he shook his finger at the scribes and Pharisees that did not want to dance (that's the story that gives us that folk hymn, *The Lord of the Dance*...even Presbyterians begin move bit when that hymn is sung...not yet dancing but feeling the holy invitation to dance).

Here is the pattern of faithfulness...we know that it is hard...we know there will be failures...we know that there will be disappointments. And we need to speak those words clearly and without hesitation. Choosing to align yourself with this Jesus means a "sword will pierce your heart" but there is still a song to be sung again and again.

There's a scene from the novel and then later, the mini-series, *The Thornbirds*, that get's close to this combination of song and hurt.

Ralph de Bricassart, a priest is telling the Australian legend of the thorn bird to young girl named Meggie. Father Ralph says: "There's a story... a legend, about a bird that sings just once in its life. From the moment it leaves its nest, it searches for a thorn tree... and never rests until it's found one. And then it sings... more sweetly than any other creature on the face of the earth. And singing, it impales itself on the longest, sharpest thorn. But, as it dies, it rises above its own agony, to out sing the lark and the nightingale. The thorn bird pays its life for just one song, but the whole world stills to listen, and God in his heaven smiles."

Young Meggie asks: "What does it mean, Father?"

Ralph de Bricassart: "That the best... is bought only at the cost of great pain."

The old man Simeon sings but speaks the truth about life. I hope we keep telling the truth and do not ignore the suffering among us, but we pray never quit singing.

There is an old saying, variously characterized as an old Irish proverb, a saying of Mark Twain, William Purkey, or Bono of U2, and is also part of lyrics of a Kathy Mattea country music song:

Sing like nobody's listening,  
Live like it's Heaven on Earth,  
Work like you don't need money,  
Love like you've never been hurt,  
And dance like no ones watching.

Here is my rough paraphrase:

Sing even though you heart will break.  
Live like it's heaven even when it seems like hell.  
Work even when people say it doesn't matter.  
Love even though you have been hurt.  
And dance...dance simply because the Jesus is the Lord of the Dance.