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 Text: Luke 2:25-39, Isa 42:5-9

The Story in Song: Song of Simeon

Introduction to Scripture

Careful readers of the book of Luke and its companion volume, the book of Acts, will note the importance of the Temple. The Temple, of course, represents the heart of Judaism and, for Luke, the continuity of the church with Israel. Luke begins his narrative in chapter 1 in the Temple with the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. They are devout, elderly, and childless. And to them, a special son, John, is born. In chapter 2 we are back in the temple again with two other devout, elderly Jews, Simeon and Anna, when Mary and Joseph come to present their special child Jesus. You'll note how fond Luke is of pairing male and female disciples—Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, Simeon and Anna, followed by many others.

Listen now for God's word: *Luke 2:25-39*.

Sermon

This is the last in our sermon series, "The Story in Song," based on songs of the Advent and Christmas season. Today's song may not be as familiar to us as others, though there are three versions of it in our hymnal, one of which we'll sing in a few minutes. It is certainly the oldest song in the sermon series. It's the Song of Simeon, (or Canticle of Simeon), i.e. the poetic verse you just heard on the lips of Simeon in the book of Luke. While I guess it's not a Christmas song, it is part of what we call the infancy narratives of Jesus. The lyrics go like this:

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.

It's only chapter 2 in the book of Luke, and already it's the third time a character has burst into song. I wonder if Luke thought he was writing a musical! The first number is *The Magnificat*, sung by Mary at the Annunciation; the second is *The Benedictus*, sung by Zechariah after the birth of John the Baptist, and now, our song for the day is *The Nunc Dimittis*, sung by Simeon. Those Latin song titles, by the way, come from the first word or two of each one in the Vulgate translation of the Bible.

The Story in Song: well, let's revisit the story. Simeon was old, though Luke doesn't actually say so, he implies it. Luke is very clear, however, that Simeon was a person of great faith. He was righteous and devout. The Holy Spirit rested upon him. God had promised

Simeon that in his lifetime, he would see the Messiah. Whether Simeon had gotten that message in a vision in the night, or in a feeling in his gut, we'll never know. But he knew it, believed it, and therefore was on the lookout. Simeon was paying attention, and when we pay attention we get tuned into where God is at work, being faithful to God's promises and, sometimes, doing a new thing.

I imagine that this day started out for Simeon much like other days, with a walk to the temple to say his prayers. Mumbling in his beard, out of the corner of his eye he spied a young couple approaching with a six-week-old baby and pair of pigeons for their sacrifice since a lamb was clearly beyond their means. The mother had a sweet face and the father, a proud one—both of them too young and too poor to be starting a family. Simeon focused his dim, old eyes on the child. Nothing out of the ordinary: pink cheeks, bald head. And then somehow, he knew. This was the Lord's anointed, the Messiah, the Christ. This helpless infant, swaddled in a diaper, gurgling in his spittle, born of peasants—this was to be God's answer to the world's misery.

His heart skipping a beat, Simeon moved as fast as his old legs could carry him. He caught up with the young couple while still in the outer courtyard. They had come to perform the rituals specified by the law. To their great surprise the old man asked if he could hold their baby. Exchanging glances, they ventured it would be ok, Mary making sure the baby's head was properly supported. So, Simeon gently cradled the one for whom he had waited long years, the fulfillment of God's redemptive work. Watery eyes, cracking voice, the old fellow uttered words of praise to God which Christians have been singing for centuries, words that requested a peaceful departure since at last he had seen God's Messiah, the fulfillment of God's promise to Israel, the promise of salvation, and not just salvation for Israel but for all people.

We could say that The Song of Simeon is Luke's Epiphany, Luke's announcement that Jesus came not just for the Jews but for everyone. I know we tend to combine Matthew's and Luke's birth narratives of Jesus, but recall that Matthew's Epiphany is told in the story of the wisemen, Gentiles who come from outside Israel and worship at the feet of Jesus. There are no wisemen in Luke. Instead we have this prophetic pronouncement by the elderly Simeon that this child is not only the glory of Israel, but a light for revelation to the Gentiles. This idea is not original with Simeon. It echoes the prophet Isaiah who said Israel's mission was to be a light to the Gentiles. And even before Isaiah, there was God's promise to Abraham and Sarah, that through them all the families of the earth were to be blessed. So, this child's birth portended something great not only for the Jews but for the whole world.

Mary and Joseph were amazed by what Simeon said about their child. Simeon then blessed these young parents. As he handed the child back to his mother, he spoke more. Looking into her brown eyes, he struck a dark chord in what had been a lilting song mentioning peace, salvation, and light. Israel's consolation and the salvation of Gentiles would not be without great cost. Mary and her son will both pay a very great price.

The truth of Simeon's prophetic witness was confirmed by Anna, another devout Jew of advanced age. She was a prophetess from a pedigreed family, sort of like being an elder from a fourth-generation family of First Presbyterians. She had been married (probably at a young age) but after a mere seven years was widowed. She was now 84. Having the gift of prophecy and living in the temple area, continually in prayer and fasting, she, too comes to the scene precisely when and the baby Jesus is being presented. She, too, recognized that Jesus was no ordinary child. She thanked God and spoke about the child to all who were waiting for God to set

Jerusalem free. Jerusalem, and with it the temple, represent the whole of Israel's hope. To Jerusalem Jesus would return as an adult. He would weep over the city which did not recognize the time of its messianic visitation, as Luke would later write. ⁱ

These two aged saints are Israel in miniature and Israel at its best: devout, obedient, constant in prayer, guided by the Holy Spirit, at home in the temple, longing and hoping for the fulfillment of God's promises.ⁱⁱ They are also examples of faithful discipleship for us. Simeon and Anna are rooted in the past—steeped in the words of the prophets and practitioners of the traditions of their religion. But they are also forward-looking folks whose righteous habits have trained them to look around and look ahead, to recognize the movement of God in their midst, and to see that coming generations would experience God in new ways.

As we are perched on the crest of a new year, this story and song ask us questions. In what ways are we paying attention to what God is up to? How can we be more mindful of the Spirit's work in our life and in the life of the world? In January we gear up with plans for physical exercise. Are there spiritual exercises and practices we can integrate into our life to help our awareness? Daily devotions? Meal time prayers? Meditative walking, jogging, or yoga? Perhaps a more conscientious observation of the sabbath, one day in seven when you really do cease working and unplug literally and metaphorically?

We are followers of the Child Simeon identified as the light to the Gentiles. The Gentiles were the "other," "the outsiders," those folks who were different from the Jews. Luke includes a just a couple of Gentiles who *saw the light* in his gospel—namely, the Roman soldier whose slave was healed and another centurion at the foot of the cross who declared Jesus' innocence. But in his second volume, the book of Acts, Luke shines the floodlight of Jesus on the Gentiles. Before long, the Gentiles (the outsiders) outnumber the insiders. In our own context, where we might be called the insiders, this story and song ask us what "outsiders" we are called to embrace with the light of God's love? What "others" might we need to recognize as part of God's redemptive project?

Lastly, as we look to Simeon and Anna for inspiration for our own discipleship, we ask ourselves, In what ways are we rooted in tradition yet open to newness? Over the holidays Jack and I re-watched "Grumpy Old Men." In this movie, a vivacious woman moves into the neighborhood where two stick-in-the-mud curmudgeons live. At first the men are stand-offish, but once they open themselves to a relationship with the woman, their worlds blossom with newfound joy, adventure, and love. This congregation is nearly 200 years old, and I dare say is set in its ways, in some respects. Yet we are about to call a new pastor. And, believe me, he (or she) will have some new ideas! Will we be open to them? Someone once quipped that the Seven Last Words from the Cross were: *We never did it that way before*. Will we be wed to our familiar patterns or ready to glorify God in some fresh ways? "Reformed and Always Being Reformed": let's not forget our Presbyterian motto.

So, taking our cues from Simeon and Anna and from their story and song, as we begin 2019, let's pay attention to the movement of the Spirit, share the light of Christ with "others," and be open to the new things God is up to. Amen.

i. Luke 19:41-44.

ii. Craddock, *Ibid.*, p. 40.