

SIMEON AND MARY Luke 2:22-40

I invite you to step back with me to two thousand years ago. Imagine that you were there on the day that Mary and Joseph brought baby Jesus to the temple.

The temple steps were a busy place for buyers and sellers of sacrifices. Beggars camped out on the steps, crying out, "Alms, alms, alms for the poor!" The students and scholars scurried back and forth, some coming to learn, some coming to teach. Then there were the people who came to make sacrifices. The sellers crying out they had the purest lambs and doves, the baaing of the lambs, the cooing and startled cries of the doves. The buyers looking at the animals and trying to quiet the children and babies they held onto, soft murmurs and noises of comfort. Can you feel the chaos, can you hear the noise, can you sense it?

See the aged man moving slowly up the temple steps, pausing occasionally to rest. He has felt moved by the spirit to go into the temple courts. This wasn't Simeon's normal time to come to the temple, but he felt moved to be there, beckoned if you will. He felt that he had to be at the temple that day. Simeon was no stranger to the temple, to the coming and goings of the people, the rituals of the courtyard. When suddenly a couple with a small baby catches his eye. They are like so many other couples there that day that have come to purify the mother and consecrate a child to God after the birth.

In Mosaic Law the woman was unclean for 40 days after childbirth, after which she made a burnt offering and a sin offering for her cleansing. If you were rich you could sacrifice lambs, but if you were poor you sacrificed pigeons or doves.

Simeon feels drawn to this couple; he feels the Lord's spirit drawing him near. The small family approaches him to do for them what the custom of the law required. Simeon takes the small child in his arms. He must have been amazed at what he held and what he was feeling at that time. For he knew, knew to his very marrow, that this baby that he held was the Messiah, he had no doubts whatsoever about this at all. The Holy Spirit had told Simeon that he would not die till he saw the Messiah, the one promised by the prophets, with his own eyes.

As he holds this precious child, he prays this prayer:

Sovereign Lord,

As you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace

For my eyes have seen your salvation

Which you have prepared in the sight of all people

A light for the revelation to the Gentiles

And for the glory to your people Israel.

What an awesome prayer. Simeon knew what he saw; he knew that he had felt the Spirit call him that day. He knew he could now die knowing that the promise had been fulfilled. His eyes have seen the salvation, and he had held that salvation in his arms.

The old saying “seeing is believing” comes to mind. But not only did he see but also he knew. He knew because he was open to the Holy Spirit. Simeon must have felt incomprehensible joy at the knowledge that the promised Messiah was here.

But as much rejoicing as Simeon felt he also had a message to give to Mary, the child’s mother. I can imagine that Simeon’s eyes were tearful in the love he had for the Messiah, this child he held. But I also imagine that they were tinged with sadness as he said to Mary, ”this child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Simeon said a beautiful prayer to God and then gave a strange blessing. What must Mary and Joseph have thought? They knew they had a special child. They knew he was like no other, but he was just a child, a mere baby. He cried when he was hungry, he cried to be fed and changed. But this mere child would change the world. Did they fully understand the heartache to come? Did they know the hostility he would endure? The persecution? The hatred by some...the love of so many. Did Mary know that she would have to watch her firstborn die upon a cross...mocked and belittled by soldiers?

Our first desire as parents is to protect our children. Kiss away their hurts, soothe them when they are ill, protect them from harm. The hardest sorrow in life is to lose a child to death. Mary knew as her child grew, what he was, what he was destined to become. Did she always remember? When Jesus was out playing with his friends, doing his chores, as he helped Joseph in the workshop; did she forget that this child doing ordinary everyday things had an extraordinary birth and future?

From a manger to a cross, Mary holds our attention as the young mother. But she was more; she was the mother who lost her 12-year-old son and when they found him, he was teaching the teachers. What an awakening that must have been; a true reality check.

When my son Michael was little, he got lost in a department store. He had been with me and Maggie and as we became engrossed in looking at something in the store, he wandered off in search of something less boring. I looked up and could not find him, and then I began the frantic search. I looked and looked and then hit panic mode. We finally found him hiding among the clothes that were hanging on a rack. He wasn’t lost, he knew where he was, he was just playing hide and seek. Well, we weren’t playing, we were panicking. I wonder how Mary must have felt. Jesus wasn’t lost. He knew exactly where he was, she was the one who didn’t know or understand.

Then when Jesus was in his 30’s, and attending a wedding in Cana with his family, he turned water into wine. All that Mary said to her son was, we are out of wine. She knows, he knows. And he says to her that it is not time. But she knew. In her heart she knew it was the time.

When Jesus was betrayed and it was found that he was to be crucified; did Mary recall Simeon’s words, “and a sword will pierce your own soul, too.” To see your child so cruelly punished, tortured, and hung upon the cross; oh how her heart must have been breaking. She must have felt the sword piercing her heart. As a parent you want to take

away your child's pain and suffering. And Mary, Mary knew she could not. From the wood of the manger to the wood of the cross, Christ had a destiny to be fulfilled. I cannot imagine her pain and her grief. Did those words from Simeon echo in her mind and heart again, "And a sword will pierce your own soul, too."

But this is not a sad story. Jesus was born in a lowly manger, died upon a cross and then he rose again after 3 days. That is when the real tears had to flow, when the realizations came to life. This child that she had given birth to, that she had raised and had kissed him better, that she had hugged and wiped away tears, that she had watched to grow to adulthood and to fulfil a destiny, a destiny she did not fully understand, had risen from the dead. He had risen, not to go home to her in Nazareth, but to go home to his Father in Heaven.

Simeon listened and was open to the words of the Holy Spirit and to the promises of the future. He was able to see what he so much desired, the baby, the Messiah. Mary gave her heart for this child, she gave birth to him and then let him go to be the world's hope. At Christmas time we celebrate his birth, at Easter his death and resurrection. But it's neither one season nor the other that makes the year complete. It's the knowledge of his birth, death, and resurrection that makes us complete. That gives us hope.

Our world needs hope. We have been through a tough 2 years with the coronavirus pandemic. Many people have lost someone they knew. Many people have been impacted with their health, either physically, mentally or emotionally. I would suggest that our spiritual health has also been impacted. Now Russia and Ukraine stand on the threshold of war. Here in the UK the cost of living is rapidly rising, and many families are struggling to make ends meet. But God is with us in all this.

Simeon and Mary had a common bond. They were both open to the Holy Spirit and God's guidance. They were able to listen so that they were able to see and feel the presence of Christ. George W. Truett said, "Christ was born in the 1st Century, yet he belongs to all centuries, he was born a Jew, yet he belongs to all races. He was born in Bethlehem, yet he belongs to all countries." Jesus belongs to all countries, all people, and he comes to us.

As we look forward to a new year, what are your plans? What are your hopes and dreams? Can you, will you, open your hearts to Jesus? Is there a voice speaking to you now telling you that Jesus is there waiting for you? Open your eyes and open your hearts to Jesus. As Simeon blessed him, as Mary cared for him, he is waiting to bless and care for us. Come to him as a child with eyes and heart open wide. Come to him to be blessed and to be loved. Amen.

May God bless you richly this week. *Frank*