

Anna and Simeon

Luke 2:21-38

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

We are entering into a season when we will do a deep-dive into the Gospel of Luke. We'll read from Luke every Sunday from now through Easter. Some of you remember we did this with Matthew two years ago. It's really powerful. I hope many of you will join me for weekly Bible study. Beginning in the new year, there will be two meetings Monday every week. A daytime bible study at lunchtime on Zoom and a Monday evening on Zoom from 7:30-8PM. You're going to become good friends with "Luke."

The beginning of Luke's gospel is rooted in Advent and Christmas. We meet Mary, witness her encounter with the angel Gabriel, hear her "Magnificat," and then witness the birth of Jesus. Today's story from chapter 2 of Luke follows right after the shepherds go back to their fields, leaving Mary and Joseph with a new infant.

²¹When the eighth day came, it was time to circumcise the child, and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

²²When 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 ... ²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law..., "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; he was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷Guided 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, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹ "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word,

³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

³²a light for revelation to the gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel."

³³And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴Then 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 ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul, too."

³⁶There 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. ³⁸At 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.

First, let's try to understand all that is going on here. Then, we can see what this encounter between the infant Jesus, and these older adults, Simeon and Anna, might mean.

The context here is that Mary and Joseph go to Jerusalem. to “dedicate” their firstborn male child to God, a Jewish practice with roots in the Passover in Egypt. Mary and Joseph are faithful. Luke wants you to see that Jesus is being raised in a good Jewish home.

- The religious—or non-religious—context of a child’s home frames their worldview.

There this new family of 3 is in the Temple, and all of a sudden, we meet this man Simeon. He’s one of Luke’s many marvelous characters. Luke paints a picture of a old man who is pious and devout. Not only that. Luke says, “The Holy Spirit is on Simeon.” The Spirit is literally *on him*. Imagine what that means. (A side note here is that as we’re reading Luke any time you see the Holy Spirit, pay attention. Luke shows the Spirit all around, moving in and through and even sitting on all kinds of people. I think the Holy Spirit confusing—who is She? What is Her agenda? Luke is super helpful. The Spirit is a real character in Luke’s story; She brings people together in beautiful ways. Here’s old Simeon, hanging out in the Temple because the Spirit brought him there.

There’s something else to note about Simeon: He is “looking forward to the consolation of Israel.” What does that mean, “consolation?” The Greek word for consolation is “paraclesis.” It often means “encouragement.” The He’s looking forward to the encouragement of Israel. This is not mean that Simeon needs cheering up. What he’s longing for is encouragement that reaches you at the heart level. He wants some assurance that it’s all going to be OK. Simeon is old. As he awaits his own death, he wants the assurance that all if it is going to be OK.

It’s an ache, a longing, that Simeon brings to the Temple. He sees this beleaguered young family. Simeon walks straight up to them, and asks to hold the child. Can you see this scene in your mind? This old man, staring into the eyes of this child? What happens in this encounter?

- Those of you who are grandparents, what does it mean to you to stare into the eyes of your grandchildren?

Simeon talks. Is it to God? To the child he holds?

²⁹ “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace...,

³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹ which you have prepared in the [sight] of all peoples,

³² a light of revelation to the gentiles

and glory to your people Israel.”

A few moments later in the Temple court, the family encounters Anna, the prophetess, the only woman in the New Testament given that status. She’s also a marvelously detailed character. She’s in her 80s. She’s a widow. If, like Mary, she was married at 14 or so, and her husband died after only 7 years, has she been a widow for 63 years? She seems to live like a nun in a cloister. Praying, fasting, doing works of mercy. Let’s be honest. Older women hold the church together. I’m not flattering you. It’s true. The deep piety, the love, the instinctive small acts of service. It is faith at its deepest and most genuine. Anna

approaches the family. She looks at the child's face and she, too, sees the movement of God in his body.

Anna starts walking around the Temple, gently holding people's arms and telling them about the child. Where Simeon hungered for the "encouragement of Israel," Anna says this child will bring the "freedom of Jerusalem." She sees in this child political and economic justice, liberation from oppression.

Here's this extraordinary scene—even more detailed and just as moving as the birth in the manger. Mary and Joseph, tired, faithful, take their infant to the Temple. There, they encounter two other deeply spiritual souls, Simeon and Anna, who see in the child the movement of God that they experience as consolation and liberation.

We could stop there, and it would be enough. We could hold this image of the intergenerational church together—the youngest and the oldest, teaching and learning from each other. We could say that the promise that Anna and Simeon see in Jesus is present in every child. Every child needs parents who are faithful to the rituals of the tradition, who ground their kids in old practices, no matter how tired they are. And every child needs older adults who are not their parents to draw them into the adventurous, beautiful life of God.

But Luke, the master storyteller that he is, isn't satisfied with only the warm fuzzies. After Simeon offers his blessing to the weary parents, he turns and says something only to Mary:

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.

Not something that's necessarily recommended as advice to new mothers. Simeon says that Jesus will be the source of comfort to some, but discomfort—literally, "falling"—to others. Mary can't be too surprised. Mary has already sung about her child pulling the mighty down from their thrones and lifting up the lowly. She already believes her child will start a political and economic revolution. Simeon validates what Mary already knows.

But Simeon adds a deeply interior psychological and spiritual dimension. This child will be a sign. A sign is something mysterious. It must be "read." It must be "interpreted." It doesn't explain itself. It draws you in. It forces you to engage it, to decipher it. In this process of drawing you in, this "sign" will "reveal" your own thoughts.

Isn't that true? Isn't that what Jesus does? Reveal your thoughts? When you look at Jesus, he's enigmatic. He doesn't yield his secrets easily. You look at Jesus and find that it's not Jesus you see, but yourself?

Finally, Simeon says to Mary, “a sword will pierce your own soul also.” Here she is, weeks into motherhood. This old codger says, “parenting this child will be like a sword piercing your heart?” What do you think Simeon means?

- Does he see into Jesus’ future...? Does he know that the one who comes to console and free God’s people will feel all of the wrath of Rome? Does he know that Mary will watch her own child die?
- Perhaps. Perhaps, Simeon is saying what is true for every parent. Your connection with your child is so deep, the love is so strong, that every struggle and every wound your child experiences feels like it’s happening in your own body?

Simeon’s cautionary words to Mary are as important as his blessing. The whole point of life is love. God makes us in love and for love. But everyone we love is mortal. The objects of our love—our children, our spouses, our friends—each is transient. To live faithfully, to live with God, means that the sword will pierce your own heart, too.
