

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 27, 2015**

SIMEON'S CHRISTMAS

Luke 2:25-35

I hope you had an enjoyable and blessed Christmas Day, and maybe even found a surprise or two under your Christmas tree. For Mary Sue and me, it was a treat to have our whole family together.

Historically, the celebration of Christ's birth has continued for 12 days, as the song "The Twelve Days of Christmas" suggests, extending from Christmas day (which is day one) to Epiphany (day 12), which commemorates the coming of the magi from the east with their gifts to worship Jesus, the newborn King. Thus, today is the third day of Christmas. Even though Christmas day itself is past, I hope it will continue to be Christmas in your hearts. I hope the Christmas spirit, by which I mean the spirit of Jesus Himself, will be evident in your life throughout the 12 days of Christmas and beyond. Let's not put away the spirit of the Savior who came to us at Christmas when we take down the tree and put all of our decorations away.

Today I want to talk with you about Simeon's Christmas. Simeon was a common name in Israel. One of the 12 tribes of Israel, named for the 12 sons of Jacob, was the tribe of Simeon. Everything we know about the Simeon in Luke 2 is what Luke tells us. And he doesn't tell us much. He doesn't say anything about Simeon's vocation, for example. He doesn't tell us what kind of work he did. Nor does Luke tell us where Simeon was from or which of the 12 tribes of Israel he belonged to. He tells us in verse 25 that Simeon was in Jerusalem, but we don't know if he lived there or was just visiting. In addition, we don't know anything about Simeon's family. Was he married? Did he have children? Or grandchildren? Nor do we know if Simeon was wealthy or poor. We don't know anything about his status or position in society. Since he declares that he is now ready to die in peace, it is assumed that he is an old man. But Luke does not give us any indication of his age.

What we do know about Simeon is what it says in verses 25 and 26: First, that he was "righteous and devout" – which is to say that he was a good man who was serious about living in a right relationship with God and others, and that he was faithful in fulfilling the religious requirements of his Jewish faith; second, that he was "waiting for the consolation of Israel"; third, that "the Holy Spirit was upon Him" in a special way; and fourth, that the Holy Spirit had revealed to him that "he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ" with his own eyes.

The "consolation of Israel" for which Simeon waited in faith was the coming of the promised Messiah. The Greek word for "consolation" is *paraklesis*, which can also be translated "comfort," brings to mind the prophetic promise of Isaiah 40, which begins:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,

and proclaim to her
that her service has been completed,
that her sin has been paid for,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.
(Isaiah 40:1-2)

Simeon was part of a faithful remnant in Israel who were waiting and praying in fervent hope and expectation for the arrival of the promised Messiah to rescue and redeem God's people. As John Piper says, the coming of "the consolation of Israel" would signal the good news that:

1. God's anger is past – in other words, God is not angry with you;
2. God has a tender and fatherly affection for us in our human weakness and frailty; and
3. Our sins – all of them – are pardoned and thrown "into the depths of the sea" (Micah 7:19).

But that is not all. Simeon understood that the coming of the Messiah would have implications not just for the Jewish people but for Gentiles also. He understood that the arms of our Heavenly Father are open to both Jews and non-Jews alike, and that God offers universal amnesty to all who will come to Him in faith and embrace the Savior He has provided for us. (Adapted from John Piper sermon, "Preparing to Receive Christ," December 21, 1986, www.desiringgod.org.)

It was not a coincidence that Simeon was in the temple courts when Joseph and Mary came with baby Jesus to carry out the rites prescribed in the Jewish law. In accordance with the law, Jesus had been circumcised when He was eight days old (Luke 2:21). The remaining ceremonies – the redemption of the firstborn and the purification of the mother – took place 40 days after the birth of a son. So, Simeon's Christmas – his encounter with Jesus, Mary, and Joseph – did not occur on the night Jesus was born. It took place when Jesus was 40 days old.

Did Simeon go to the temple every day? We don't know. What we do know is that the Holy Spirit was upon him in a special way (2:25) and that, on this particular day, he was "moved by the (Holy) Spirit" to go to the temple courts (2:27). When he saw baby Jesus with Mary and Joseph, Simeon knew that his prayers had been answered. The Messiah (the Christ) had come at last.

It is interesting, I think, that Simeon did not judge Jesus or Mary and Joseph by the outward appearance of things. Just as there had been no pomp and circumstance on the night Jesus was born (except for the anthem sung by the choir of angels), there was nothing in the appearance or actions of Mary and Joseph to draw attention either to themselves or to Jesus. But the Holy Spirit spoke to Simeon, and Simeon took God at His word.

Julia and Dan Markham gave a wonderful children's message on Christmas Eve about how we often judge Christmas presents by how they are wrapped. The more fancy the wrapping,

the more valuable the gift. Or so we think. But it is not always the case. The Markhams reminded the children about how, in 1 Samuel 16, when God sent His prophet Samuel to the house of a man named Jesse to anoint one of Jesse's sons as the new king of Israel, Samuel assumed that he could tell which of Jesse's sons God had chosen. But he was wrong. It turns out that God had chosen not the oldest or strongest or handsomest of Jesse's sons, or the one with the most impressive resume of accomplishments. Instead, God had chosen the youngest – David – who was just a shepherd boy taking care of his father's flock. Samuel learned a valuable lesson that day: "The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

Simeon, it seems, had no pre-conceived notions as he awaited the revelation of the promised Savior. He didn't argue with God when the Holy Spirit said: "Here He is! This is the one you have been looking for." So, we can envision Simeon walking over to Mary and Joseph, introducing himself, and asking if he could hold their baby for a moment. Then, taking him in his arms, Simeon broke out in a song of praise to God (2:29-32).

Many people know Simeon's song by the words with which it begins in Latin – *Nunc Dimittis*, which is Latin for "Now dismiss." Now that he has seen God's salvation with his own eyes – that is, that he has seen the baby through whom God would bring salvation to the world, to Jewish sinners and Gentile sinners alike – Simeon is ready to die happy, contented, and at peace. Because God had now done what He said He would do. And He *will* do what He says He will do.

James Boice speaks of Simeon as a sentinel whose mission was to point out the Messiah when He came. The role of a sentinel or watchman is illustrated in a scene from the classical Greek drama *Agamemnon*, in which a sentinel is perched on a hill, watching for the fire that will signal the destruction of Troy. When Troy fell, a fire was to be lit that could be seen by a sentinel stationed on a hill some distance away. This sentinel was to light another fire that would be seen by another sentinel still farther away who would light another fire, and on and on, fire after fire, until the message finally comes all the way around the Aegean Sea to the palace of Agamemnon in the lower part of Greece.

As the play begins, the sentinel is on duty. He is standing at his lookout on his hill. The fire has not yet come, and the sentinel is bemoaning the captivity he feels because of his assignment. He says that the fall of Troy and the imprisonment of its people will mean freedom for him. While he is speaking, the fire appears, and he is set free. (James Montgomery Boice, *The Christ of Christmas*, 100)

Simeon expresses much the same kind of sentiment. He remains a captive in this world until the promised Messiah appears. But when he recognizes Jesus as the one for whom he was waiting, he is set free. God's promise fulfilled, Simeon is ready to die in peace.

In verses 29-32, Simeon sings a song of praise to the Lord, declaring that he has now seen God's salvation with his own eyes. The word for salvation, *soterion*, means "one fitted to save." Jesus was (and is) uniquely fitted to save because, as Boice notes (Boice, *The Christ of Christmas*, 101-102):

1. He was truly God;
2. He was truly human;
3. He was completely without sin;
4. He was motivated by the immensity of His love for us.

What we see in Simeon's song is that God's plan of salvation is not just for the Jews. It is not just for Israel. It *is* for the Jews. It *is* for Israel. But praise God it is not for them alone. It is for Gentiles as well. It is for Jews and non-Jews alike – “a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to (His) people Israel” (2:32).

Simeon's song, coming 40 days after Jesus was born, confirms that Christmas is cause for great celebration. It is, as the angel said, “good news of great joy that will be for all the people” (2:10). But Simeon saw that the Christmas story of God becoming a real human being in order to rescue and redeem us from the mess we have made of life in this world was not all “sweetness and light” (Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to St. Luke*, 89). In verses 34 and 35, Simeon tells Mary that there will be trouble and pain and heartache ahead. Many will fall and many will rise because of this child, he says. Because of Jesus. Many will stumble over Him. They will oppose Him and reject Him. Others will embrace Him, will believe in Him and follow Him, and experience the peace and joy and freedom of forgiveness that He gives. Not without suffering, though.

Salvation will be accomplished, but its price will be high. It will cost Jesus His life. It will cost Mary her son. She will feel the pain of His suffering and death, as if a sword were piercing her own soul.

Yet, as we know, that is why Jesus came. We celebrate the birth of Jesus at Christmas because we know the reason for His coming. That He came to die.

And we see that there is a dividing line that stretches across all of history from the beginning of time until now, a dividing line that will continue until time is no more. The dividing line is Jesus Himself. Whether you rise or fall when your life on earth comes to an end, or when Jesus returns and the end of time comes, depends on what you do with Jesus. There is no neutral ground. You are either for Him and with Him, or you are against Him. You either reject Him and the gift of His saving grace, or you embrace Him and His grace by faith. You either say “Yes” to Jesus as your Savior and Lord, or you say “No” and go your own way.

Jesus is the ultimate dividing line. It matters which side of the line you are on. If you're tempted to go over to the dark side or to stay on the dark side, don't. It isn't worth it. It won't satisfy. It is not what you were made for. You were made for a relationship with God. You were made to glorify Him and to enjoy Him forever, not to live for yourself.

Simeon, for his part, welcomed the Savior with tremendous joy and gladness. His celebration of Christmas, though it took place 40 days after Jesus' birth, and his witness concerning Jesus will be remembered until the end of time.

Praise God for Christmas. Praise Him for the Christ of Christmas. Let His light shine in you. Through you. To give light to those who do not yet know Him.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.