

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 11, 2016**

**SIMEON'S SONG**

**Luke 2:21-35**

The season of Advent, especially for children but not only for children, is a time of great anticipation. Most often, it is the anticipation of some gift(s) we hope to receive – maybe even *know* we're going to receive, but the waiting just drives us crazy.

Unfortunately, this focus on what we want for Christmas reinforces the heresy (to put it in theological terms) that Christmas is all about us. And, of course, 'tis the season for TV commercials that play into the desires of our hearts for more, newer, better things.

For example, take the new series of commercials for the Lexus "December to Remember" promotion with the tag line: "If you're going to wish, wish big." In these commercials, an adult – usually one or both parents – coaxes a child to ask Santa for a new Lexus for Christmas. The request is made in a letter to Santa, via Skype, or in a visit to Santa at the mall. In one commercial, Mom and Dad write a letter to Santa and try to make it look like their young son's handwriting. On Christmas morning, what happens? A brand new Lexus with a big red bow magically appears in the driveway, and the child(ren) say: "You got your wish!"

The most arresting, though, for me, is the Mercedes-Benz commercial in which, in a reversal of roles, a mom and dad excitedly rouse their sleeping children on Christmas morning because they can't wait a moment longer to see what they got for Christmas. The parents hurry downstairs in their PJs, open the door, run outside, and begin to jump up and down while shouting with glee because there, in their driveway, is a brand new Mercedes-Benz. Holding a mug of cocoa, the daughter calmly says to her younger brother: "It's the look on their faces that makes it all worthwhile." It is very well done.

I don't know about you, but I do not anticipate receiving the gift of a Lexus, Mercedes-Benz, or any other kind of vehicle for Christmas.

At its heart, though, in a spiritual sense, Advent *is* a season of anticipation. Simeon, I think, may be "the patron saint" of anticipation. Before we get to Simeon, though, let's take a look at the context of these verses in Luke 2. The events in this passage take place after the birth of Jesus.

What we see in verses 21-24 is that Mary and Joseph faithfully carried out the ritual requirements of the Jewish law. They did so by having Jesus circumcised when He was eight days old (2:21), in accordance with the covenant the Lord had made with Abraham centuries earlier (Genesis 17:12).

In addition, they gave Him the name Jesus, in keeping with the word of the angel who appeared to Mary and Joseph, respectively, on separate occasions (Luke 1:31; Matthew 1:21).

The name Jesus is significant, of course, because it means “The Lord saves” and bears witness to the purpose of His coming, which was to “save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). His name, you see, was inseparable from His mission. And vice versa.

Next, when Jesus was 40 days old, Mary and Joseph took Him from Bethlehem up to the Temple in Jerusalem to carry out the rituals prescribed in the Jewish law, specifically:

- The rite of purification (for Mary *and* Joseph); and
- The consecration and redemption of the first-born son, as decreed by the Lord in Exodus 13 (see verses 2 and 12).

Both of these rituals required offerings to be made. As Warren Wiersbe (*Be Compassionate*, 27) points out, Mary and Joseph had to pay five shekels to redeem the Redeemer who would one day redeem us with His blood (1 Peter 1:18-19). Also, Mary and Joseph were too poor to bring a lamb as the sacrifice for the ritual of purification, so they brought instead “a pair of doves or two young pigeons,” as the law allowed (Luke 2:24; cf. Leviticus 12:8). But, as John the Baptist testified, Jesus was Himself the true “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

The thing to notice about Mary and Joseph is that they took the law of God seriously and carried out its requirements because they took their relationship with God seriously. Their attentiveness to the law reflected their devotion to God.

Their faithful fulfillment of what the law required is the context in which we meet Simeon, who providentially encounters Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus as they are carrying out these religious rituals in the temple. I say “providentially” because their meeting was not an accident. It was not a mere coincidence or a matter of luck. This encounter in the temple was divinely orchestrated. It was a divine appointment, arranged by God to serve His purposes. Just as encounters, meetings, conversations, events, and milestones in your life and mine are sovereignly, lovingly, providentially arranged by God to accomplish His good purposes in our lives. In and through us.

Do you know this to be true? Are you aware of it in your life? Perhaps we need to ask God to make us increasingly aware of His providential arrangement of the details in our lives each day, so that we may see His wise and gracious hand in the “happenings” of this life.

Now, let’s talk about Simeon. All we know about him is what Luke tells us in these verses. It is the only appearance this Simeon makes in the Bible. Luke says that he was “righteous and devout” (2:25). In other words, he was a good and godly man. He took his moral and religious duties seriously, because, like Mary and Joseph, he took his relationship with God seriously. One Bible scholar (Darrell Bock) describes him as “a pious old man” and “a wise man who has walked with God” (Bock, *The NIV Application Commentary: Luke*, 92, 93).

In addition, Luke says that Simeon “was waiting for the consolation of Israel” (2:25), which is another way of saying he lived in the anticipation and hope of the coming of the promised Messiah, who would bring consolation and comfort and deliverance to the people of Israel.

He believed God was going to do what He said He would do. He believed the Messiah was going to come. He lived in eager anticipation of that day.

Not only that. Luke says that “the Holy Spirit was upon (Simeon)” (2:25). What makes this especially significant, of course, is that this was *before* the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon all the followers of Jesus some 50 days after the resurrection. This was a special anointing from God, given for a special purpose – to enable Simeon to recognize the long-awaited Messiah when He came.

There is one more thing Luke tells us about Simeon by way of background. Notice what he says in verse 26: “It had been revealed to him that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.” Simeon was most likely an old man. He knew his days were numbered. But he also knew that God would keep His word. So, when it happened, it did not take Simeon by surprise. On the day Mary and Joseph brought baby Jesus with them to the Temple courts, Simeon, led by the Holy Spirit, was there. And when he saw them, Simeon knew that this child was the One for whom he and the faithful remnant in Israel were waiting.

It was like Christmas morning for Simeon, except that instead of a Lexus or a Mercedes-Benz, he celebrated a gift of infinitely greater value – the coming of the Savior of the world.

Luke does not record this detail, but I imagine that Simeon went over to Mary and Joseph, congratulated them on the birth of their son, and asked if he could hold the baby. As he took Jesus in his arms, he began to praise God. His heart was so full, he couldn’t keep it all in. With people coming and going in the Temple courts, Simeon just started to sing and pray:

Sovereign Lord, as You have promised,  
You now dismiss Your servant in peace.  
(2:29)

It is not clear whether the verb translated “dismiss” is a statement, as in “You dismiss,” or a request, as in “now dismiss” or “let your servant now depart.” Either way, what *is* clear is that Simeon understands that his mission is now over and the time for his departure from this life has come. And he is ready to go. His prayer has been answered. With his own eyes he has seen God’s salvation (2:30). Though Jesus was just an infant, the Holy Spirit made it clear to Simeon that this baby was the One who was uniquely qualified, uniquely fitted to save, uniquely fitted to do the saving work that no one else could or can ever do. Simeon’s “Christmas wish” had come true.

Simeon, I suppose, can be compared to a servant back in those days who was instructed by his master to stay on duty until a certain visitor arrives. When the visitor arrives, even if it is in the wee hours of the morning, the servant tells his master that the guest has come. Only then is the servant relieved of his duty. (Bruce Larson, *The Communicator’s Commentary: Luke*, 56)

James Montgomery Boice uses a similar analogy to describe Simeon as God’s sentinel. He tells of a scene in the play *Agamemnon* in which a sentinel is standing guard on a hill,

watching for the fire that will signal the destruction of Troy. When Troy fell, a fire was to be set that could be seen by a sentinel some distance away. This sentinel, in turn, was to light another fire that would be seen by another sentinel still farther away who would light a fire, and so on, fire after fire, until the word of Troy's fall made it all the way around the Aegean Sea to the palace of Agamemnon in the lower part of Greece. When the play begins, the sentinel is standing on his hill. The fire has not yet come. He bemoans the sense of captivity he feels because he cannot leave his post. He says that the fall of Troy and the captivity of its people will mean freedom for him. While he is giving this speech, he sees the fire, and he is set free. (Boice, *The Christ of Christmas*, 100)

Simeon was God's sentinel, standing at his post, watching and waiting with great anticipation for the arrival of the Messiah, whose appearance would set him free from the duties, demands, and difficulties of life in this world. Jesus arrived. Simeon recognized him. And Simeon sang a song of praise to God.

We must not miss what Simeon says about Jesus. To see Jesus, he says, is to see salvation (2:30). To see Jesus is to see the salvation He brings. The salvation that only He can bring. To see Jesus is to see the only one who can save you in the way you most need to be saved.

Surprisingly, Simeon says that God has prepared this salvation "in the sight of all people" (2:31). The Jews would be likely to object to that. They believed God would prepare and reveal the Messiah to them, not to the peoples and nations of the world around them. The Messiah, when he came, was to be *their* Messiah, *their* Deliverer, *their* Savior and King. But the Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that the Messiah's mission was bigger than that. It was meant for "all people." His coming – the coming of Jesus – would be for both the Jewish people and the nations. It would be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to (God's) people Israel" (2:32).

The same light of the gospel that brings revelation to the Gentiles, to the non-Jewish peoples of the world, to people who live in a world of moral and spiritual darkness – this same gospel truth about Jesus brings glory to God's covenant people, Israel, because Jesus Himself is the glory of His people. The incarnation of Jesus is the glory of His people. Immanuel – *God with us* – is the glory of His people. The sacrificial love of Jesus is the glory of His people. The sinless life, undeserved suffering and atoning death of Jesus for us are the glory of His people. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the glory of His people. The ascension and exaltation of Jesus in heaven are the glory of His people. His coming again – His second advent – will be the glory of His people.

Do you hear that?

Do you get that?

Does it make you want to sing and shout for joy to the Lord?

Are you at your duty station doing what you can to spread the news to others?

What Simeon said made an impact on Mary and Joseph. Verse 33 says they "marveled at what was said about (Jesus)." *The Message* says they were "speechless with surprise" at

Simeon's words. Even knowing what they already knew, it was more than they were able to take in.

But there would be more to the story than sunny days and fair winds. In verses 34 and 35, Simeon pronounces a blessing on Mary and Joseph, but goes on to speak of the opposition Jesus would face, the division He would cause in Israel, and the personal cost in pain and suffering that Mary herself would have to endure. In the rejection of Jesus by so many of the Jews, it would be as if a sword pierces Mary's soul.

Salvation would come through Jesus. Salvation *had* come in the person of Jesus. But it would be salvation through suffering. The baby boy redeemed by the offering given by Mary and Joseph would indeed grow up to redeem us through the shedding of His blood. The baby boy whose mother Mary and father-figure Joseph could not afford a lamb for the ritual of purification after His birth was truly the Lamb of God who, by His perfect, once-for-all, all-sufficient, loving sacrifice of Himself on the cross, died to take away the sins of the world.

His coming is what led Simeon to say: "Lord, I'm ready to go!" We should be as eager and excited for His coming again – His second advent – as Simeon was for His first.

His coming is what makes Christmas Christmas. You all know Donald Trump's campaign slogan was to "Make America Great Again." If you want to make Christmas great, or if you want to make Christmas great again, the place to begin is to take a cue from Simeon and to put (and keep) your focus on Jesus, who is, of course, the greatest and most valuable Christmas gift of all.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.