Simeon’s Encounter

Fourth in the series “Christmas Discoveries”

# Scripture: Luke 2:25-32

# Key thought: Because Simeon was ready to listen, it was revealed to Simeon that Jesus was to be a light for revelation to a dark world.

# Intro:

James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, told the story of his praying great- grandfather. Here’s his story.

My great-grandfather George McCluskey prayed every morning from eleven to noon for his children and for future generations of his family. Toward the end of his life, he announced that God had made him a promise: Every member of four generations of his family would become Christians. That promise has been working itself out in remarkable ways. By the time I came along, every family member from my great-grandfather to me not only had accepted Christ, but also had been or were ministers. H. B. London, my cousin and a member of the fourth generation, is also a minister. I am the only one who did not feel specifically called to this service. Yet considering the hundreds of times I have talked to audiences about the gospel of Christ, I feel like an honorary member of the team!

From <<http://www.drjamesdobson.org/blogs/dr-dobson-blog/dr-dobson-blog/2016/06/23/praying-for-future-generations>>

Well, a promise like that is unusual. But it serves as an illustration that God does give special promises to people. As the Psalmist put it;

“The Lord confides in those who fear him” (Psalm 25:14).

Now in the Scripture this morning, we have a very short story of a man who lived at the time of the birth of Jesus who had also received a special promise from God in his older years. That man was Simeon. Exactly who was Simeon? What was the promise and why was Simeon given this special promise? Let’s work on the answers to those questions and see if we can find some helpful hints for ourselves as we learn.

# Simeon's preparation

The first thing I note about Simeon is that he had prepared himself to be used of God in this special moment in the life of Jesus and his family.

## Simeon is called a righteous and devout man.

The same Greek word for righteous used of Simeon is used of three other people in the Christmas narratives; Zechariah and Elizabeth (Luke 1:6) and Joseph (Matt. 1:19). The word means that they were people who lived rightly. In the case of Zechariah and Elizabeth the term is explained as "observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly." In the case of Joseph the use of the word righteous is closely connected with his compassion for the situation in which Mary found herself.

Simeon is also called "devout." Ananias who prayed that Paul would receive his sight after he was blinded by God's light on the Damascus road was called in Scripture a "devout” man.

These special characteristics prepared Simeon for this moment that is described in the Gospel. There is a lesson for us in this. People who can be described like this as “righteous and devout” are people that God can use.

That is still true. When we live rightly and draw close to God consistently, then God is able to use us to be a blessing. Then we are living in the place where communication with God is unhindered. God can speak to us when that is needed and there is a much better chance that we in our human spiritual dullness will hear his voice.

## Simeon is expecting the Messiah

Simeon is also described as one who "was waiting for the consolation of Israel."  This tells me that Simeon was a person who was familiar with the OT promises that God would send a Messiah to his people. The expression also tells me that Simeon was a man of active faith who believed that God would keep his promises. And it tells me that Simeon was living in expectancy, looking for the time when God’s promises would be fulfilled.

How does this apply to us? An active faith in God and a sense of expectancy also makes it more likely that we will see God at work. God is always at work. We can bank on that. Jesus told us that (John 5:17). But unless we are spiritually attuned; unless we are people of faith expecting God to answer prayers and keep his promises, then we do not see God’s workings.

## The Promise

In Simeon's case he was a man of faith and expectancy and so God extended a special promise to Simeon. The Bible says;

It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Luke 2:26

He would live to see the promise fulfilled that he was anticipating. He would see the fulfillment of God's promise to Israel with his own eyes. What an unusual promise. And what an unusual saint to be living in a way where God could and would give such a promise.   Undoubtedly there were many in Israel who would have confessed to a belief that a Messiah was to come. But it was something else for God to personally communicate to someone that they would in person see the Messiah before their death.

The assumption that most of us make in interpreting this passage is that Simeon was an old man. The text does not specifically say that he was an old man. But it seems safe to say that he was, since the saying, “Now dismiss your servant in peace,” seems most natural from the lips of an older man.

But we can be people of faith and expectancy whether we are young or old. The Christmas story has one key figure who followed God who was likely quite young—Mary herself. This passage has two figures Anna and Simeon who were more elderly. But all of us can be people who expect to see God at work and see God fulfill his promises through faith.

# Simeon's climactic moment

Now the stage is set for the dramatic high point of Simeon’s life.

## Simeon moved by the Spirit

Simeon was spiritually alert enough that when the impression from the Holy Spirit came telling him to go to the temple he knew the voice of God in his spirit and he obeyed. That tells us in one sentence that Simeon was a man walking closely with God, and in tune with God’s Spirit. It reminds me of a verse.

Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Gal 5:25 NIV

Simeon was “in step.” The Bible does not say how that message was communicated. It just says Simeon came "by the Spirit,” meaning that the impetus, the reason behind the movement came from a prompting by the Holy Spirit. So Simeon was there when Jesus was brought in by his parents. The moment that he had been promised had arrived.

## Why was Jesus brought into the Temple?

The question arises, "Why were Joseph and Mary bringing Jesus to the temple?" The temple in Jerusalem was not like our church, a place where people went every week. It was a place where one went for the high holy days of Judaism such as Passover and Yom Kippur and for special family ceremonies. Weekly worship was at the local synagogue in the town where one lived. To answer as to why Jesus’ parents brought him to the temple, we have to understand a little about the ceremonies that were required in the Jewish faith when the first baby boy in the family was born.

There were three ceremonies which a firstborn Jewish baby boy and his family had to undergo. The first happened when he was eight days old. That’s when he was circumcised and named. That event for Jesus is referred to in Luke chapter 2 verse 21.

On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.   
Luke 2:21 NIV

The second ceremony which applied only to firstborn baby boys was the redemption of the firstborn. At the time of the very first Passover recorded in Exodus 13:1, 2, God declared that the firstborn male from every womb, whether of the human family or of the flock or herd, was dedicated to God. That firstborn must be either given to serve God or an offering given as a substitute in the ceremony called the redemption of the firstborn. There was some flexibility in the timing of this ceremony.

The third ceremony was the purification of the mother. In the Jewish faith of that day, a mother of a son needed to offer a sacrifice at the end of 40 days for ritual purification. If the parents were poor, this sacrifice consisted of two pigeons.

The narrative in Luke seems to imply that in the case of Jesus and his family, both the second and the third ceremonies were happening at the time when Simeon came into the temple. The OT passage regarding the firstborn is quoted in Luke 2:23. Purification is mentioned in Luke 2:22 and the sacrifice of two young pigeons is mentioned specifically in Luke 2:24.

When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.” Luke 2:22-24 NIV

So we have our answer as to why Jesus parents were bringing Jesus into the temple on the day that Simeon saw them. They were filling the Jewish law’s requirements for the redemption of the firstborn and the ritual purification of his mother according to the Old Testament Levitical code.

## Simeon’s highlight

Now back to Simeon. There is a conjunction of events here. God had promised Simeon that before he died he would see the Lord’s Messiah.  It was highly unusual to receive such a promise. But Simeon had received this most unique promise.

Simeon had been instructed by the Holy Spirit to go into the Temple and he obeyed. I imagine that his heart was beating strong with expectancy as he entered the temple.

As he comes into the Temple, he sees the baby Jesus being brought into the Temple for these Jewish ceremonies. By the Holy Spirit, Simeon recognizes that this baby is the One of whom the promise spoke. This is the high point for him. It is the fulfillment of God’s promise to him. God adds to the moment by granting to Simeon the grace of uttering a prophecy, an inspired utterance. His short prophecy is recorded here in Luke 2:29-32. This passage is known as the “Nunc dimittis” again after the first two words of the Latin Vulgate version of the Bible which the Catholic Church used for over 1000 years.

Today’s English Version has the sense of the first verse.

"Now, Lord, you have kept your promise, and you may let your servant go in peace. Luke 2:29 TEV

# A light for revelation

Let’s take a moment to look at the content of Simeon’s prophecy. I’m impressed that in his prophecy Simeon uses three phrases to describe Jesus. Each one helps us to understand more about who the baby Jesus would become and what he would accomplish.

When we understand these three names of Jesus and take them to heart, they will be Good News to us—Good News in capital letters—and we will find the joy in our souls and peace with God.

Let’s take a few moments to look at them. I am choosing to look at them in reverse order to what they appear in the text.

## “Glory for your people, Israel” v. 32

Jesus would bring new honor to Israel. We can quickly see the fulfillment of this prophecy from a historical standpoint. Without Jesus, it is unlikely that the Jewish nation would have been more than a historical footnote alongside the other nations of antiquity – the Hittites, the Midianites, the Philistines, the Assyrians, etc. There would have been no reason to notice. Likely they would have faded from history like the others. But Jesus has made the difference. Because of him, people for thousands of years have studied Jewish history and language and customs and Scripture. Certainly he is the glory of Israel. God was using Israel for thousands of years to teach the human race and prepare us for Jesus. That’s why Jesus said to the woman at the well in Samaria, “Salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22). God was speaking through Jewish history. Every nation of the world can share in the general revelation that is available to all through creation (Romans 1:19, 20). But the special revelation that prepared the way for Jesus came through God’s acts among the Jews and through Jewish prophecy. The birth, life and death of Jesus are the apex of this special revelation to all of us.

## “A light for Revelation to the Gentiles” v. 32

A second title given to Jesus in Simeon’s words is “Revelation.” This title reminds us that one of Jesus’ chief functions was to speak to us the words that he was given by his Father. He was sent from God to reveal God the Father to us.

Jesus answered, “My teaching is not my own. It comes from the one who sent me. John 7:16 NIV

Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. John 14:10 NIV

This is why John, the disciple, in writing the Gospel calls Jesus “The Word.”

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:14 NIV

This Word was not just for the Jews but for everyone. The life and teachings of Jesus were also responsible for opening up the Gospel to the Gentiles. Before Jesus, the OT had been read and applied by Jews. Now the Good News of God was for Gentiles as well. Jesus started this by breaking traditions and speaking about God with Samaritans and others who were not Jewish. Then Peter and Paul led the way in taking the Good News of salvation through Jesus to a much wider Gentile audience. Because of Jesus, the Good News is coming to the whole world.

## “Your salvation” v. 30

Simeon also says in the passage that he has seen God’s salvation.

In the OT the word “save” mostly referred to Israel being rescued from their enemies; Egypt, the Philistines, the Midianites, the Syrians, the Assyrians, etc.

That kind of salvation was celebrated in Psalms like the 18th

I called to the Lord, who is worthy of praise, and I have been saved from my enemies. Ps 18:3 NIV

But the idea of God as our Savior soon became much broader than just rescue from physical enemies. For example:

The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. Ps 34:18 NIV

My hope is in you. Save me from all my transgressions; do not make me the scorn of fools. Ps 39:7-8

For troubles without number surround me; my sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see. They are more than the hairs of my head, and my heart fails within me. Be pleased to save me, Lord; come quickly, Lord, to help me. Ps 40:12-13

Especially, did the Psalmist desire to be saved from his sins. So when God declares through Isaiah–

There is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior;   
there is none but me.   
“Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth;   
for I am God, and there is no other. Isa 45:21-22

–then the idea of salvation has gained far greater significance than merely being rescued from a temporary national enemy.

So when Simeon prophesies that Jesus is to be our salvation we can expect much more than just a simplistic release of the Jews from Roman domination.

Jesus became our salvation in a comprehensive and personal way. Here’s one of Paul’s summaries of the magnitude and breadth of God’s salvation in Jesus.

At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. Titus 3:3-7 NIV

Jesus saves us by forgiveness of our sins. He saves us by transforming our thinking with his teaching. He saves us through the inner influence of the Holy Spirit. He raises our lives to new happiness with higher purposes. And it all begins when we simply acknowledge that we need a Savior; we need forgiveness for our sins; we need God’s help. And then we decide to follow Jesus.

# Conclusion

I found a Christmas carol in our hymnbook which was written in 1966 by Kathleen Thomerson.

It is called “I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light.”

I want to walk is a child of the light.

I want to follow Jesus.

God set the stars to give light to the world.

The star of my life is Jesus.

Refrain

In him there is no darkness at all.

The night and the day are both alike.

The Lamb is the light of the city of God.

Shine in my heart, Lord Jesus.

I want to see the brightness of God.

I want to look at Jesus.

Clear Sun of Righteousness, shine on my path,

And show me the way to the Father.

I am looking for the coming of Christ.

I want to be with Jesus.

When we have run with patience the race,

We shall know the joy of Jesus.

When we have a heart like that, we are ready to be like Simeon. The message of Simeon would guide us today to be able to sing a song like that from our hearts.

I close with a story: (Max Lucado – A Love Worth Giving To You p. 34 SP-CH)

Max was invited to a Christmas office party. He had the time slot open on his calendar. He loved being with the people who would be at the party. And he really wanted to go. But there was a big problem. The party was a home-made cookie exchange party. (continue on p. 34)

Simeon saw a glimpse of what Jesus would mean to us. Now in hind sight we know so much more. At Christmas each year we are reminded to make the truth our own—to allow the love that God is showing us through Jesus to enter our lives and transform our days. He will if we ask. That is the Good News.