

Go Now in Peace

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Psalm 148

¹Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights! ²Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host! ³Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars! ⁴Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens! ⁵Let them praise the name of the LORD, for he commanded and they were created. ⁶He established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed. ⁷Praise the LORD from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, ⁸fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command! ⁹Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! ¹⁰Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds! ¹¹Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth! ¹²Young men and women alike, old and young together! ¹³Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven. ¹⁴He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the LORD!

Luke 2:22-40

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), and they offered a

sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Guided 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, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then 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 so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” There 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, 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. At 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. When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Here we are, the first Sunday after Christmas. Only a week ago, we were all anticipation and preparation, ready to hear a story that never grows old, and to sing familiar carols, to hear tidings of comfort and joy.

Today is not only the first Sunday after Christmas, it also happens to be New Year’s Eve, so some of you may still be in a state of anticipation and preparation, ready to ring in the New Year’s Eve with another round of festivities. The rest of us are hoping for an early bed.

For me, there’s always something about these first days after Christmas. I enjoy the pageantry of the Christmas season, the crescendo leading up to Christ’s birth, and

even the drama of human relationship -- but then I am ready for a time of quiet. I'm ready for a more contemplative time in which to consider of the birth of Jesus and what it means.

Christ is born - a child and yet king.

Now what?

On Christmas day, Christ is born. But on the first Sunday after Christmas, we may find ourselves asking, now what? Or maybe even, so what?

In the Buddhist tradition there is a saying:
Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.
After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.

We are back to chopping wood and carrying water and it's tempting for us to put Jesus back up on the shelf, along with the elf, tucked away for another year. Year after year.

Once the Christ child is born, once Christmas Eve and Christmas day are over, the company begins to go home. The decorations go back in the box. We go back to work, back to life as usual. Meanwhile, back on our electronic devices, the bad news keeps coming. After Christmas, we go back.

That's one thing about having a baby. There is no going back. Everything in life is different and the only way through is forward.

In these days after Christmas, we are the new parents.

For, unto us a child is born. Unto us son is given. Congratulations to us. Now what?

What does this child mean to us?

What difference does this birth make in our life?

For some, the birth of Jesus doesn't really seem to make much difference, but for others, for those who long for God's intervention, who yearn for the establishment of God's realm, this birth makes all the difference in the world.

Really, who isn't longing for a little divine intervention?
Who isn't longing for God to come and set things right?
To save us, if only from ourselves?

Simeon and Anna were two such people. They longed to see the prophecies fulfilled. They longed to see the coming of God's promised one. They longed to see a peaceable kingdom, order restored.

Anna and Simeon, we are told, are old. They are old, which means they have lived with longing for a long time. They lived their whole life longing. Some of us know something about that.

Anna and Simeon are old, which means they've chopped a lot of wood, carried a lot of water, and lived year after year, looking for something different, praying for something different, waiting for God to do something different.

They are old, but no matter how old they get, it seems that they are not looking backwards, they are looking forward.

Whatever is behind them, whatever has happened in their lives, Simeon and Anna still look forward. They live in hope.

Anna is 84 years old. She was married for seven of those years, but then lived the rest of her life as a widow, presumably without children. She spent those years fasting and praying, which are the hallmarks of a person in grief. Anna spent her whole life grieving. Someone of us know something about that.

Anna grieved for her husband, for the children she did not have, for her life, but more than that, she grieved for the tribe of Israel, for her people who were living in a time of great darkness, oppressed and subjugated by the Roman Empire. Anna wept in the temple.

Blessed are those who mourn, Jesus said, for they shall be comforted. Indeed, Anna was comforted. Mary and Joseph brought their baby to the temple when he was 40 days old, according to the traditional ritual of purification. Anna saw Jesus, and in that moment, her mourning turned into dancing and her wails of weeping turned into shouts of joy.

And then we have Simeon. Simeon, like Anna, is old. He is, we are told, righteous and devout, one firmly rooted in the faith, in the tradition and theology of the Hebrews. All of this means that Simeon is not just another crackpot; he is credible. Like Anna, has lived his life looking forward. He has had his eyes peeled for to the coming consolation of Israel. It's also personal for Simeon – his life, and his death, are intertwined. Simeon has been told that he will not die except he sees the Lord's Messiah with his own two eyes.

I'm not sure if a prophecy like that comes as blessing or curse. You will live to see the Messiah. On the other hand, you can't die until you've seen the Messiah. It would certainly make your life focus clear – provide a unifying principle. Simeon, in your life, there is one task that you must complete. Look for the Messiah.

There's a sign I've seen, usually tacked on a bulletin board in the office break room. "God put me on this earth to accomplish a certain number of things. Right now, I am so far behind that I will never die."

Life has us running in so many directions. We are pushed and pulled. What if I told you, when you leave here today, that for the rest of your life, before you die, and that is to see the Messiah? Look for the God who is coming to be with us. Wouldn't that be an interesting way to live – get up each morning and right there at the top of your "to do" list: look for God showing up in your day?!

So, there is Simeon everywhere and always, year after year, on the lookout for the Messiah. Then one day, the Messiah shows up, as expected. In the Temple, as expected. In the arms of his mother – not expected.

How on earth did Simeon know? No one was looking for a messiah to be manger born. No one thought salvation would show up in the shape of a sweet baby boy. No one thought God's strength would be made perfect in human weakness. It was a bold move. Audacious. Simeon was there to see it and to recognize it for what it was, recognize him for who he was. Why? Because Simeon was looking, looking and living with hope.

In Luke's story of the nativity, Simeon serves as another herald. Hark, the Lord's Messiah. Come and see.

You know what else Simeon saw? Simeon understood that this Messiah was going to be something different, that this long-expected Jesus would turn the old

Messianic expectations upside down. In Jesus, Simeon saw a shift away from a nationalist agenda and into a broader paradigm of salvation. God intends more than the redemption of Israel alone. Jesus would be a glory for the people of Israel, but more than that, he would be a light for revelation to the Gentiles, good news of everyone, including me, including you.

Simeon spent his life looking for God's revelation, for this experience of enlightenment, and when it came, it was a doozy. Worth waiting for. Worth living for. Jesus was not only the culmination and fulfillment of ancient prophecies; he was the culmination and fulfillment of a life: Simeon's life, and now he could be released from his charge. Simeon could go now, to live or die, in peace.

"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace." This moment in Simeon's life has become immortalized, not only in Luke's scripture but in song. "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace." You may know it as the *nunc dimitis*, a name taken from the Latin beginning of this passage as found in the Vulgate translation of the Bible.

For Anna and Simeon, the coming of Christ made all the difference. It changed grief into rejoicing. It turned expectation into fulfillment. Jesus brings redemption and release, not only for Anna and Simeon, but for us and for any with eyes to see. Whatever your story, whatever your grief, whatever yoke has been laid upon your shoulder, the Christ can take it and turn it into something else – redemption, release, rejoicing.

When Simeon saw the baby Jesus, he saw a lot:
Simeon saw a savior born,
not just for Israel, but for all peoples.
Simeon glimpsed a new paradigm of salvation,
What we have come to know as the Christ pattern--
That we fall into order to rise.

And Simeon recognized that Christ cares more about our inner conversion than our material conquest.

Simeon saw many things, but there was something that Simeon didn't see.

Simeon did not get to see the Kingdom of God fully realized.
He never saw the plans completed,

nor the prophecies fully fulfilled.
He did get to walk those streets.

Come to think of it, neither did Jesus,
nor the disciples that followed him.

The same is true for Moses, who was given a glimpse of the Promised Land, but didn't live to experience it for himself.

Christ is born, but God's kingdom has not fully come. But then, you already knew that.

In these days, and in the many generations following the birth of Jesus, Christians, along with Anna and Simeon, live with a Christ who has come but whose reign is not yet fully established.

Theologians describe this as an "inaugurated eschatology." The birth of Jesus inaugurated the reign of God here on earth in a new way, but his kingdom has not been fully realized. There are both "already" and "not yet" aspects to God's kingdom. The salvation of the world is begun but it is not complete.

When I look around at the state of the world, or when I look inside at the state of my soul, this seems to me a completely accurate statement. God's work redemption has begun but it is surely not complete.

The older I get, the more likely it seems that heaven on earth will not be fully operational in my lifetime. Turns out, God isn't coordinating with my schedule.

As I get older, I find that my perspective on these things is shifting and maybe that's how it is with you. Like Anna and Simeon, maybe we don't really need to see the whole shebang. Maybe it's enough to know that God is on it. Maybe it's enough to glimpse the contours and the character of Christ's kingdom as it comes, bit by bit, baby by baby, manager or mountain top.

For people of faith, hope is more than a feeling of optimism. Hope is the deeply held conviction that the Holy Spirit is coming and coming and coming. Hope is trusting that a power greater than ourselves, that a God more gracious than ourselves, is present in our lives right now, that God still shows up in ways that we don't expect. So, maybe we

too can look upon the face of Jesus and go our ways in peace, even though Christ's coming is not complete.

One of the great prophets of our age, Martin Luther King, Jr, preached this kind of hope in his now famous address delivered on the night before his assassination.

"Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life — longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything, I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

In this season of Christmas, we get to see the glory of the coming of the Lord. We get a birth and a beginning. We get promise and potential. We get an organizing principle for our lives. We get to live as heirs of grace, as citizens of God's kingdom — as it was promised in the past, revealed in the present and as it unfolds in the future.

Christ is born. And do you know what's different? We are.

So don't put Jesus back on the shelf. Be on the lookout for him everywhere. Live looking forward, in hope. You never know where the Lord's Messiah will show up next, or in what form. God is tricky like that - always ready to surprise us with joy or amaze us with grace.

Someday, as with Anna, all our weeping will turn into rejoicing. Someday, as with Simeon, we will find release and go in peace. Someday just might be today.

For the Lord's Messiah has been revealed,
Unto us, a child is born,
A babe, the son of Mary.