

Simeon's Nunc Dimittis (*"Lord, what took you so long?"*)

*Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon . . .
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 . . .
Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,
"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace."
(Luke 2:25, 26-29)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the First Sunday after Christmas, December 30, 2018
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I want to begin by calling attention to this morning's Call to Worship, for which I blended Psalm 89 and Luke 2. Psalm 89 was written during the Babylonian captivity, nearly six centuries before Jesus' birth. It was a time when God's blessings upon Israel seemed to have vanished. The psalmist, in this time of subjugation to a foreign power, regards God as having reneged on his promise to David and so asks uncomfortable questions. "*Why God, have you turned your back on us? Why have you annulled your promise? Why have you cast David's throne into the dust? How long, O Lord! Will you hide yourself forever?*"

If Psalm 89 is written in a time when Israel suffered under the heavy foot of the Babylonians, Luke's gospel is written under a heavy foot as well, the weight of Caesar and the Roman empire. We read on Christmas Eve, "*And it came to pass in those days that a decree went forth from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. And all went to be taxed, every one to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David.*"

So for this morning's Call to Worship I spliced Psalm 89 (the minister's lines) with Luke 2 (the congregational responses), yet they read as a single narrative:

How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever?
Remember how short my time is!
Now there was an old man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon . . .

Who can live and never see death?
Who can escape the power of Sheol?
**It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit
that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah . . .**

Lord, where is your steadfast love of old,
Which by your faithfulness you swore to David?
**Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple,
and when the parents brought in the child Jesus . . .**

How long, O Lord? Remember how short my time is!
**Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,
“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word!”**

Blessed be the LORD forever!
Amen and Amen!

When Jesus is born Israel is still waiting for a king born in the line of King David so, while these two passages I've spliced together are from different historical periods, they read as a single narrative, waiting for the fulfillment of God's promises to David.

Each of the four gospels owns unique characteristics. For example, the birth narrative of Jesus is told only by Matthew and Luke. Mark skips it entirely, moving forward to open with Jesus' baptism. John skips it also, moving backward – way, way backward! -- to cosmic-like Genesis Beginnings. *In the beginning was the word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.* His birth statement comes in verse 14, *“And the Word became flesh and dwelled among us.”* He offers nothing about Joseph and Mary and the shepherds and the angels and the wise men, nothing about Bethlehem and the taxation and *“no room in the inn.”*

While both Matthew and Luke tell the story of Jesus' birth, they do so in different ways. Matthew is brief and stresses the angel's words to Joseph, while Luke is expansive concentrates of the angel's revelations to Mary. Luke has another unique characteristic, wrapping the narrative of Jesus' nativity around four songs of praise known as canticles.

Of these four canticles two are long and two short. We've visited both long canticles during Advent, Mary's *Magnificat* and Zechariah's *Benedictus*. On Christmas Eve we visited the first of the two shorter canticles, the Angel's *Gloria* (*“Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth, peace, goodwill to men”*).

Today we come to the fourth canticle, the song of the aged Simeon known as *Nunc Dimittis* (*Now Dismiss*). *“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation”*).

If Hot Springs Village is home to a large percentage of retirees, we should be very comfortable in Luke, where his birth narrative may be regarded as a metaphorical retirement village for elderly Jews looking forward to the fulfillment of the messianic promises.

Luke offers us Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, both having lived long and righteous lives despite their disappointment in being childless. Luke opens his gospel describing them ever so delicately, as *“getting on in years.”* In today's reading Simeon makes his appearance, a devout believer old enough to be contemplating his own death, looking expectantly for the appearance

of the Messiah. In the same passage Luke tells us of Anna, an 84 year old widow praying in the temple daily, searching for a sign that God would break his silence, and at last redeem Israel.

These four aged folk God gathers into the opening scene of the drama of our salvation. As Zechariah sings, “*By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us,*” he is witnessing a glorious Dawn at the no-less glorious Dusk of his life. Simeon, who seems to have been gazing at actuarial charts of his own mortality, amazingly finds himself in the temple gazing into the face of the Messiah.

Rembrandt painted this “*Simeon in the Temple*” in 1631, which now resides in The Hague. I love it for its contrast of light and dark, as if commentary on Israel’s past and future, the painting doing what I sought to do with our Call to Worship, Psalm 89 represented in the dark background, and Luke 2 represented in the light surrounding Jesus and illuminating Mary, Joseph, and Simeon.

When the old man Simeon sees the soft flesh of the face of Jesus, his wrinkled gaze sees *A Love Supreme*, God’s love in this child destined to redeem Israel. This sight moves him to speak poetically, powerfully, and prophetically. “*Now, Lord, let your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation.*”

A Love Supreme. Jazz fans among us, and I know there are many, will know the name John Coltrane. One of the greatest works of this jazz saxophonist was a 33 minute piece he composed and performed called, *A Love Supreme*. It was recorded in a single session on

December 9, 1964 as an ode to his own search for God, intended to be a work of deep spirituality. Both of his grandfathers were pastors in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and his own spiritual search had taken him on a 60s exploration in many confused directions. *A Love Supreme* is regarded as one of the greatest albums of all time, ranking 47th in Rolling Stone’s 2002 survey of the 500 greatest albums of all time.

Why do I mention this? The only time *A Love Supreme* was ever performed live was seven months later, at a jazz festival in France on July 26, 1965. It is said that John Coltrane was so pleased with the performance, which he thought he could never equal, that when he walked off the stage he said, “*Nunc Dimittis,*” quoting the old man Simeon. “*Now dismiss, me!*” Unfortunately, John Coltrane died only two years later at the youthful age of 40.



Have you ever had a moment of such success, such bliss, where you felt you had reached the pinnacle of your abilities and could go no higher, that you were so high on the mountain you could just reach out and touch heaven? That's a *Nunc Dimittis* moment, and that's where Simeon was, not his own Doing, but a recognition of God's Doing.

At that point in Luke's story, these senior citizens, having sung their songs and spoken their lines, disappear, not to be heard from again. It's almost as if, now certain of the fulfillment of God's promises, they get up, turn off the television, go to bed, and leave the rest of the story to the younger folk. Not because they're weary, but because they are full of hope in God's providence, trusting the future to God. All they had hoped for will be accomplished in this child – he will be Israel's Consolation, the Gentiles will be given a God-burst of light.

I see another key difference making Simeon's canticle stand out from the rest. Mary's *Magnificat* and Zechariah's *Benedictus* and the Angel's *Gloria* were filled with wonder at a blessing unexpected. Zechariah and Elizabeth were caught by surprise, past the age of bearing a child. Mary was caught by surprise, saying "*How can this be?*" The shepherds were tending their sheep and filled with unexpected wonder.

Not Simeon. Simeon was going to the temple expecting the promise to be fulfilled. *I will not die until I've seen the Lord's Messiah!* When Simeon sees Jesus, the wonder that fills him was anything but Unexpected. If the psalmist had prayed, "*How long, O Lord?*" Simeon's wonder may better be expressed, "*Lord, what took you so long!*" Mary would never have prayed that, nor Zechariah, nor the shepherds. Only Simeon.

Simeon saw this light in the face of Jesus, but he saw something else, an encroaching darkness, and so says to Mary that "*A sword will pierce your own heart also.*" Laura Lewis, professor of Christian education at Austin Seminary, tells the story of a student who, as part of a preaching project, decided to find the darkest place on campus. She discovered a little-used racket ball court in the basement of the McMillan Building, accessed by going down two flights of steps and through heavy doors. She found that when you closed the door and turned out the lights, it was really dark, not a single stray photon bouncing around to make an impression on a human retina.

When the time came she led the class down the stairs, through the doors, and sat them down around the edges of the court. She read Isaiah 9, a people "*dwelling in a land of deep darkness.*" Then she turned out the light. In silence they sat in the dark. After five surprisingly long, deep dark minutes, she struck a match and lit a small candle. By no means did the small candle fill the room with light, but all the same, it changed things, radically. With the flickering of the light, people saw themselves, and each other. Surprised faces. Puzzled faces. Tear-streaked faces. The lesson? For those in deep darkness, even a little light makes a great difference!

Christmas is a time when the spirit of generosity becomes a testimony to what a difference the light makes to those in darkness. There are many ways our congregation is missional and impacting lives in our community, but I want to mention one, the \$1.00 offering. Each \$1 bill in the offering plate is such a small thing, but it makes a huge difference for so many local and regional ministries bringing help to those in need, amounting to some \$26, 000 annually given to worthy mission causes that bring light to the darkness, all in the name of the child who brought light to the world. Keep it up! Happy New Year!

