



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

www.goodshepherdwi.org

First Sunday after Christmas

December 30 , 2018

“Simeon’s Sigh”

(Luke 2:29-30)

Rev. David K. Groth

*“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word; for my eyes have seen your
salvation” (Lk. 2:29-30).*

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: O God, our Maker and Redeemer, You wonderfully created us and in the incarnation of Your Son yet more wondrously restored our human nature. Grant that we may ever be alive in Him who made Himself to be like us; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

The Christmas season is full of rituals. However, there's one final ritual that completes the season. For some, it already happened on Christmas Eve when sitting in the darkened sanctuary for the evening service. You realized that you had done everything you could do: the post office was no longer processing any more packages or cards; the stores were closed; and it's too late to bake any more cookies. All you could do was sigh. [Sigh] It can be a sigh of contentment and satisfaction, but usually it's a sigh of resignation and defeat because you didn't get everything done.

For others, this annual ritual happens on Christmas Day, after all the packages have been opened, the meal is over, dishes are done, and you just closed the door on the last guest: [Sigh]

For some, it won't happen until the decorations have been taken down and packed away, the tree is at the curb, and the children made ready for school: [Sigh]

We invest so much into Christmas, emotionally, physically, financially. We eat and drink too much, exercise too little and stay up too late. We expect ourselves to love all of our relatives. In general, we grossly overestimate our powers, and so we sigh our stressful Christmas sighs.

But the best Christmas sigh, the most positive one, happens when Mary and Joseph take their six-week old baby to Jerusalem, to the Temple. They are met in the outer courts of the Temple by two very interesting older adults, a man named Simeon and a woman named Anna. They are devout. They spend most of their time in or around the Temple, attending worship, praying, volunteering. Every congregation has to have a few Simeons and Annas. One pastor called them "Church Mothers" and "Church Fathers," older women

and men who are at every worship service, every activity, and sort of serve as mothers and fathers to the entire congregation. Sometimes they have and exert enormous influence; usually, though, they are just loving and supportive, the backbone of the congregation. We have them here too.

That's who Simeon and Anna are. Simeon takes the child from Mary's arms, cradles it in his own and sighs his Christmas sigh: I give it to you in the King James Version: "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace. . . for mine eyes have seen thy salvation."

What do you suppose Simeon saw when he cradled the child? Of course, the first thing he saw was the baby himself. Of course, babies have a way of seizing the agenda, commanding our full attention. I'm sure Joseph and Mary were smiling as the old man Simeon took Jesus in his arms and smiled into his face.

Think of the wisdom of that. When it comes to religion, usually our intellectual guard automatically goes up, not wanting to believe much, not wanting to be challenged, not wanting to be changed. And here comes God in a way guaranteed to cut through all that, in a way we can hardly resist, in the vulnerability of a baby. Can God make himself any more approachable?

Ever notice how when you approach a new born we draw close, face to face, within 12 inches or so. We do that instinctively because newborns cannot focus their eyes on anything further away. Don't you think God was using that in his favor? Any God who comes to us as a baby means us no harm; he's not wanting us to flee for our lives. He's wanting to get close to us. He's wanting us to know who he is and what he's about.

So the first thing Simeon sees is a baby. But he sees much more. The text says the "Holy Spirit was upon" Simeon, and so therefore he also knows he's cradling God's plan of salvation in his arms. "My eyes have seen your salvation" he says, "that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples." Salvation for himself, and salvation for his

own people for sure, but also for all peoples, for all the nations: “a Light to lighten the Gentiles” he says.

But there’s something more Simeon sees: he sees controversy and confrontation. He sees this infant, this Jesus, would forever bring a crisis point into the world, and into every single human life. “This child” he says, “will cause the falling and rising of many.” If Joseph and Mary were smiling before, they aren’t any longer. These are sobering words. Peter says the same thing this way: Christ is the corner stone for those who believe, but a stumbling block for those who do not (1 Pet. 2:6-8).

And Simeon sees something of the cost of salvation: even the child’s mother would experience deep anguish, a pain more severe than any other, as when your child suffers and dies. Ominously, Simeon tells Mary it will feel like a sword piercing her soul. Joseph and Mary are no longer smiling, but are troubled by these and other words said of their infant.

Simeon also sees something new. As with most prophecies, it’s not in sharp relief or clean focus, but he sees the vulnerability of God. Simeon says he will be “opposed.” That is, people will resist him, even attack him. That can only happen if God makes himself resistible. No one would dare resist God when God is working through and expressing his power, his might. But if God makes himself vulnerable and frail and mortal, then he can be opposed; he can be resisted.

Everybody expected Israel’s salvation and everybody knew what it would look like: a mighty warrior who would gather forces, inspire the troops and throw off the humiliating yoke of Roman occupation. But salvation in this helpless, frail little infant? Yes. Simeon saw what most could not see, and what many still cannot see. He sees God’s plan of salvation in weakness, not in power. He sees a God who is willing to suffer.

And with that, Simeon saw something that addressed him very personally: his own consolation, his own comfort, his own salvation. Remember, he had been promised earlier

that he would not die before he had seen the Christ, the Messiah. And now he was cradling the Messiah in his arms. By inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he could finally close his eyes in peace, and that everything would be ok.

Let that be our consolation as well. This side of Christmas, and as we approach another new year, let that be your peace. Let that be your Christmas sigh: not a sigh of weak resignation for having been defeated once again by all the expectations. Not a breathing out of anxiety and nervous tension. Not a sigh of distress as you step on the scale for the first time in a long while. Not a sigh of frustration . . . or a dramatic sigh to signal the kids you've had just about enough now.

Instead, I invite you to sigh Simeon's sigh, knowing that God has included you in his plan of salvation, and that because of Jesus, it's going to be ok. It's going to end well. This infant in Simeon's arms wasn't born just for him or his generation. He was born for you. He was born for this generation. He was born out of God's fierce and unrelenting love for you. It's a love that knows that what you and I need the most, only he can give. There's no one else who will come to do what Jesus came to do.

If you want the God who runs down the road like a Father to embrace you as a prodigal son or daughter coming home, you'll only get that with Jesus. No one else! If you want a God who's willing to suffer for you, you'll only get that with Jesus. No other idols or gods of the nations would ever permit a mere mortal to arrest him, beat him up, spit at him, mock him, and whip him within an inch of his life. If you want a God who's willing even to die for you and for your sins, among all the false gods out there, none is willing. None will step forward. None can be found anywhere near a cross. And they certainly wouldn't be caught dead on a cross. Not one other than Jesus, the true God. So if salvation is what you need, it's going to have to come from Jesus, the only One who is willing to suffer on a cross, the only One willing to fight that battle.

There were times in the Old Testament when the

Lord told his people to stay out of it; this battle is not yours. Remember when God's newly freed people were trapped? They had reached the shores of the Red Sea, and Pharaoh's army was bearing down on them from behind, Moses said to the people, "Fear not. Stand firm." The men must have thought to themselves, "That's no way to win a battle, by standing around with our hands in our pockets." But Moses doesn't concede an inch. "Fear not. Stand firm, and you will see the salvation of the LORD . . . The LORD will fight for you and you have only to be still" (Ex. 14:13ff). Their salvation would not depend on anything they would do. It would be God's doing; God's gift. The people did not need to try to save themselves, nor were their feeble efforts even welcome.

Similarly, the battle for our salvation is one that we cannot fight. All we can do is "be still and know he is God." We can't go head to head with the devil. We're not big enough, strong enough, fast enough, smart enough. You and I, we cannot wash away our own sin. There's no solvent strong enough on earth to do that; only his blood will suffice. You and I, we cannot avoid the wages of sin; sooner or later death will catch up to and overtake each of us. All we can do is stand firm. Isaiah 30, "In repentance and rest is your salvation; in quietness and trust is your strength" (v. 15).

I don't think Simeon could see all the details of Christ's life or death. By the Holy Spirit, however, he did see God had a plan of salvation for himself and for the whole world, and it rested on this infant Jesus. Jesus would somehow win salvation for us, but it would not come by way of a great military campaign of one army waging war against another. It would come alone through Jesus, and it would come through weakness. Therefore, cradling God's salvation in his arms, Simeon was ready to close his eyes in peace. Because of Jesus, in God's good time, we can do the same, because the victory has been won. Amen.

Let's close by singing the Song of Simeon, known as the Nunc Dimittis. It's found in your bulletin as an insert.

Please stand.

[**Note:** I recently received a Christmas card from one of my former professors at the seminary. Actually it doesn't look anything like a standard Christmas card. It's a colorful sketch of the corpse of Jesus, just on the front edge of rising from the dead. In line with the overarching theme of this sermon, my professor wrote, "I can think of no better Christmas card for you – he became incarnate so that he could rise from death. Even as will Gail."]

