

Luke 2:22-35

Christmas 1, January 1, 2023
Pastor Sam Rodebaugh

And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord²³ (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord")²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons."²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.²⁶ And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.²⁷ And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law,²⁸ he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,²⁹ "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word;³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation³¹ that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."³³ And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him.³⁴ And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed³⁵ (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."

When I was in college, I worked at Target for a few months around the Christmas season. And I remember finding it particularly easy to get into the Christmas spirit while I was there. There was a large display of Christmas trees, several aisles of ornaments and stockings and wreaths, a few end displays of Target branded stocking stuffers. And there was one of those Christmas music displays, the kind that had a motion sensor so that when you walked past, suddenly some favorite Christmas tune would start playing. I loved it. I loved all of it. Being surrounded for 32 hours a week of reminders that Christmas was right around the corner, it was easy to get excited for my Christmas celebration.

And then Christmas came and went, and I was still surrounded by those Christmas reminders. Now, I was consolidating decorations into one clearance aisle, needing to pick up the many stockings and ornaments that were strewn about by careless shoppers. I would walk past that Christmas music display, the same Christmas music would start playing again, and I would groan. Because now, Christmas was a whole year away, and all those displays and decorations were reminders of that.

Well, today is the First Sunday of Christmas, which means that today we are spending even more time thinking about Christmas, singing even more Christmas hymns. Well, can't we just give it a rest already? Isn't Christmas over and done with? Should we really be singing these hymns when we still have 358 days to go until the next Christmas? I guess that depends. Is Christmas just a day for you? Was the excitement of Christmas gone when you woke up on the 26th? If that was the case, then today's sermon is for you. Because, like I needed to be reminded when I worked at Target, Christmas is much more than just a day. For Christians, Christmas ought to be a year-round celebration! And so, the theme we'll be considering today is:

Redefining our Christmas Joy

- I. Christmas has given us purpose to live
- II. Christmas has given us peace to die

The first verse of our text says, ***“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.”*** If you haven’t caught on yet, this text is about Mary and Joseph bringing a 40-day old Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem. They had to do this because in God’s Law, there were certain rituals that had to be performed for every newborn.

The particular law revolving around this appearance in the Temple is found in Leviticus 12, where we’re told that after a woman gave birth to a child, she was considered unclean for 7 days. Then, she had to wait for 33 more days before becoming ceremonially clean again. And that was just for baby boys. If the baby was a girl, the time was doubled—80 days of waiting were required before the mother could journey to the Temple to be declared ceremonially clean.

During those 40-80 days, the law placed many restrictions on the mother. She couldn’t touch anything sacred. She couldn’t appear in the Temple. Then, finally, once the days of waiting were over, in order to be declared ceremonially clean, the family would go to the Temple and offer a sacrifice before the Lord. The sacrifice was to be a one-year-old lamb and a pigeon. If you were poor, you could offer two pigeons instead, which we know was the sacrifice offered by Mary and Joseph. As you can imagine, this was all very burdensome. And that was the point, really. God had placed this burdensome law in His people’s lives to serve as a reminder that all was not well between them and God. The burden of it all was a constant reminder that they were to be waiting for the day when God’s Messiah would remove their burdens and make it well once more. And so, being faithful believers waiting for the Messiah, Mary and Joseph followed God’s Law. After the 40 days were up, they took the 6-mile jaunt up the hill and into the Temple, and they offered their sacrifice of two pigeons.

And there were two people waiting in the temple that day as Jesus and his family arrive. One is discussed right after our text, and that’s a prophetess named Anna who was 84-years-old. The other is the man found in our text, a man named Simeon. But they weren’t the only two waiting in the temple that day, because there was *something* else waiting which was much older than either Simeon or Anna. And that was the Law of God. You see, there’s such an emphasis in our text on God’s Law and the people involved in following it. And the Temple itself was the headquarters of all of God’s Law. Everything that took place in the Temple from the sacrifices to the burning of incense to the ceremonial washings to the priests to what the priests wore to the pieces of furniture, even the locations of the furniture—every single feature had been commanded in God’s Law given to Moses.

And there at the temple, the Law had been waiting for centuries for this very moment. It’s almost like the Sword in the Stone. You know that story, the sword that was stuck in the stone until the one came who was worthy to pull it out. Then the young Arthur came and pulled Excalibur from the stone and became king. Just so, the Law had been waiting all these long years to find its purpose and fulfillment.

You see, all of those countless sacrifices through the centuries to redeem all those children, all of the incense burning and everything else that took place in the Temple—all of those prescriptions of the Law were foreshadowing *this Child* who had now come into the Temple of God in the arms of His parents. This is what Paul was speaking of when he wrote to the Colossians: ***“Food and drink and festivals and new moon and Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.”*** (Colossians 2:16-17) When the baby Jesus came into the Temple, God’s Law

collided headlong into its conclusion in dramatic fashion. All of these shadows of Christ were there, and suddenly, there was the flesh and blood Christ Himself. The Law's wait was finally over. The Messiah had arrived, and the Law had finished its job. That's why Paul wrote to the Romans, **"Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to everyone who believes."** (Romans 10:4) There didn't need to be anymore restrictions regarding childbirth or what you could eat or what day you had to worship. *Jesus* was the Lord of the Sabbath. *Jesus* was Lord of the Law. It all served to point forward to Him, and now that He had come, the Law's purpose had come and gone.

And this is why Christmas is much more than just a one-day celebration. Christmas brings an ongoing, permanent and wonderful change to our lives. And Christmas brings joy for every single day of the year. Because of Christmas, because of Jesus' arrival, we have been given a purpose to live every single day. For the Law of God, it was burdensome for us as well. Not the ceremonial laws about where to worship and what to sacrifice, that was over and done with before any of us were born. But God's Moral Law, the 10 Commandments, that was the burden hanging over us. Paul writes about its purpose for us in his letter to the Romans: **"For by the works of the law, no human being will be justified in God's sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin."** (Romans 3:20) The knowledge of where we ought to rank before God because of our sin—that is the burden to bear!

And yet again, as Paul also wrote, **"Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes."** That's great news, because, as you know, God says to us, **"You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy."** (Leviticus 19:2) And if that was the final word, and if that was our only chance for heaven, then we would live a life of fear and despair. But that wasn't the final word. Because when Christ became one of us, He did so to take away the law's accusatory finger that was pointed squarely at you. Though in God's Law He lists out the type of lifestyles that He expects of us, the Law is not something we *have* to do to *earn* God's favor. And that's because, through Jesus, we have already been made favorable to God! We have already been given the promise of life after this life.

And that means that we suddenly have purpose in *this* life. When Christ arrived and put an end to all these necessities of God's Law, it was transformed from something we *have* to do in fear in order to please God to something we *get* to do *because* God is pleased with us. And what an amazing statement! God is pleased with you! Might seem hard to believe, but it is true because of this baby Boy in His mother's arms. Knowing that to be the case, we can live now as Paul instructed us in our epistle lesson, with compassionate hearts, bearing patiently with one another and forgiving one another. We can suddenly do this, because we know that's exactly what God has done for you. So Christmas joy isn't just for one day a year, because when God sent His Son it was to give you purpose to live every day! And through His Son He has also given you peace to die.

For many people, when they think about being at peace in order to die, a lot of that feeling of peace revolves around what they were able to get done in life. The idea is that once you've accomplished all of your goals, now you can die in peace. And that's why some people make bucket lists, the list of things they absolutely want to do before they "kick the bucket." Well, there is a man in our text named Simeon who had a bucket list of sorts. We don't know much about Simeon. We *assume* he was elderly, but we *know* that he was a believer because of how he's described in this text. We also know that in some way God had given him a very special, personal promise about his Savior.

That had been done before; you might think of Eve who was given a very special promise that not only would she be the mother of all living, but that the Savior would come from her too. Or you might think of King David, whom God told would have a descendent after him who would also be King, who would shepherd His people with no end. To them and many others, God had given special promises about a Messiah coming in the *future*. God had also given Simeon a very personal promise, but he received a detail that no one else had been given. That was *when* the Savior would come. As verse 26 indicates, God had revealed that His Son would come *before* Simeon died, that he would see Him!

And so, Simeon had *one item* on his bucket list. There was one thing he wanted, one thing he needed before he died, and it didn't include traveling or swimming in the Dead Sea or visiting the mountains or anything like that. The only thing he wanted was to see *this* Child, and he knew that he would. To him, this was *everything*. All those promises of a coming Savior that those Old Testament believers held onto by faith—Simeon would actually *see* Him with his eyes and *hold* Him in his arms.

And so, that's why, when the day finally arrived, Simeon says, ***"Lord, now I can depart in peace."*** I'm ready to die! I've seen the only thing I need to see. You see, in viewing His Savior, even as an infant, Simeon knew everything that Jesus would accomplish. And by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he told Mary and Joseph all about the life of their child. He says, ***"This child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed."*** He means that many, in stubborn unbelief, would reject Him because they do not want to repent of any sins; but many would also rise on Him in faith, trusting in Him for their forgiveness. He sees what would happen at the cross, too. He turns to Mary and says, ***"A sword will pierce through your own soul also."*** For she would stand at Calvary and watch as her Son's life drained out of Him. In this one moment, he can see all of this and speaks of it all as if it was as good as done. He says, ***"My eyes have seen Your salvation that You have prepared."***

What Simeon understands is that to see any part of God's promise fulfilled is to see it all fulfilled. He knows that this is only the first move in God's plan of salvation, but Simeon also knows that the God who faithfully sent His own Son into the world *would not fail* but would succeed in all He'd promised. And *all of this* that God had done specially and personally for Simeon, He's done *the same* also for us.

You know, we tend to be pretty misled about what's important, what is important to see, what is important to experience. If we were to fill out a bucket list, it would tend to be filled with all sorts of goals and things we want to do and places we want to go; and there's nothing really wrong with this. But people will sometimes speak about those who have died as if these types of things are the only things that are important. They'll say, "He died so young, he had so much life left to live." "Grandpa died, and he never got to see his team win a championship." Or when someone dies after having accomplished much in life, they'll say, "It's ok, because they had a full life."

I know one thing. When you lie on your death bed, you will not care one iota about what you did in life or about what you were able to see. It will not give you any peace to know that at least you traveled the world or went skydiving or swam with dolphins. There is only one thing that will give you peace on your deathbed. One thing that you *must* see before you die, and it is *this* child.

And you have! Just as Simeon had received this promised child in a very personal way, so you have as well. It started with your baptism, in which God came to you in a very personal way through Word

and water and pronounced *you* as His own dear child. He declared to you that He has redeemed you, that you are an heir of heaven, that everything God has is now also yours. In the Lord's Supper it's the same thing. He comes to you so that you hold in your hand and receive through your lips the very body and blood of Jesus Christ. You are holding the Savior, just as Simeon did, and seeing all of God's salvation in this one thing. All the ways that God comes to us in Word and Sacrament are very personal promises of forgiveness and love. And so, you can lay hold of these and know that because of this Christmas Child, you can have peace to die. Because you have *seen* and you have *held* the Lord's salvation. And there's no question then about how God feels about you.

So, we celebrate Christmas, even today, a week after the holiday. And we can keep right on celebrating it until the day we die, for Christmas brings us the gift of joy for every day.

There was a week-long series of devotions in the Daily Rest devotional booklet from the CLC that came out a few years ago, and I still remember how this certain series ended each day. Each devotion that week ended, ***"Do you want (a certain gift)? It's for the asking, gift wrapped and waiting beneath God's tree—the cross."*** And I really loved that picture. So much of our family Christmas celebrations revolve around our Christmas trees and what is under those trees. But if that's all Christmas is, well then it would be expected for us to wake up on the 26th and be done with the Christmas excitement.

So instead of that, let's look at God's Christmas tree, the tree upon which the Son of God hung for your sins and mine. And let's also look at the gifts which God has gift wrapped and placed under that tree with your name on them. Lasting peace with God knowing that your sins do not condemn you; everlasting life in heaven with a God who calls *you* His very own; a purpose for your life knowing that you are a child of God; and the peace required for a peaceful departure in death, because you have seen God's salvation and know that it was prepared for you.

Thinking of *that* tree and *those* gifts—Christmas, a one-day celebration?! It couldn't be, thanks to our Christ Jesus our Lord. In His name, Amen.

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Amen. (Philippians 4:7)