

# Recognizing the Gift

Luke 2:22-40

Dr. Rick C. Dye

January 1, 2012

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.

\*\*\*\*\*

Well, another New Year has arrived. It is interesting to see how the changes in seasons direct the things we focus on in our lives. During the past week, we have discovered that we all need to lose weight, go on diets, consolidate our debts, prepare to pay our taxes and make life changing resolutions. Christmas decorations will soon disappear and Valentine’s is only 45 days away!

I use to think there was something magical or mystical about a New Year. After all we are moving to a new year, surely we have a fresh start at some issues in our lives. Making a resolution to lose weight on New Year’s Day has to have more power than making it in July. But, it doesn’t! There isn’t anything magical about the New Year. Most of us will continue to live the same lives we have always lived.

As we think about this First Sunday after Christmas, it is tempting to put the baby Jesus behind stained glass. We might want to think that Mary and Joseph, at the birth of their firstborn son, would not face any issues or problems. Yet, that isn't true. Jesus was a typical baby that did all the typical things. Mary was not the Madonna, she was a peasant girl, raising her first child and learning every step of the way.

In this passage of scripture, we read the story of Simeon and Anna. They become the first to have their hopes and dreams fulfilled by the Christ Child.

My message this morning is about two biblical senior citizens and what we can learn from them about the nature of faith. The setting for today's Gospel jumps from the stable in Bethlehem to the temple in Jerusalem where Mary and Joseph had brought Jesus to be "presented to the Lord." It was there that they met Simeon and Anna.

Their reactions to Jesus suggest a question that I have for you this morning: "***What are you going to do about Jesus now that Christmas is over?***" These two biblical members of "PrimeTimers" suggest two responses which are the theme of my sermon: "Waiting ... and Witnessing."

***Simeon had been waiting -- waiting for a lifetime, in fact -- for the coming of the promised Messiah.*** Waiting is a familiar experience which we talked about before Christmas as we waited for Christmas to arrive. However, this morning I am talking about a different kind of waiting. It's not like waiting in line at the supermarket. This kind of waiting is waiting to reach a goal or waiting for a "dream" to happen.

Children wait to be grown-up. Teenagers wait to meet the "right" boy or girl in their lives. Young adults wait to graduate from college. A husband and wife wait for their child to be born. Middle-agers wait for retirement. The longer we wait with nothing seeming to happen, the more impatient and discouraged we become.

Simeon had probably been to the temple hundreds of times without finding his hopes fulfilled. I can picture other people coming up to Simeon and saying to him, "Give it up, old man. You're never going to see any messiah in your lifetime. You are a hopeless fool. Forget your dream."

There probably were times when Simeon did feel like giving up on his hopes -- when he felt that God's promise was nothing but the whistling of wind in the trees. However, Simeon clung to that hope. And therein he teaches us something about the nature of faith. At those times when he felt like throwing in the towel on his dream, when he felt like he was at the end of his rope, he tied a knot and hung on, even though the rest of the world called him a dreamer and a fool. Simeon kept his vision. And he did live to see its fulfillment! That's the part we read this morning. That's something I think we can learn from him. I would call it "trusting patience."

Too often we are tempted to "give up" when we don't see something happen immediately. There is an old saying that says, "***The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine.***" I didn't understand it when I first heard it, but he was saying, "Be patient. God is keeping his promise, even though you can't see it now."

Simeon models for us how to wait with patience. He also waited with knowledge. He recognized the Christ child as the messiah when he saw Him. ***We all need to remember that if we don't know what we are looking for, we won't know when we find it.***

His response to seeing Jesus that day in the temple has been preserved over the centuries by the church, "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

***Anna models for us what to do after the dream or promise is fulfilled.*** Her response was one of enthusiastic witness. "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." To put it in the words of one of our Christmas carols: "Go tell it on the mountain ... over the hills and everywhere ... that Jesus Christ is born." Her example is basic to the life and mission of the church. It is about evangelism ... an "enthusiastic sharing of a discovery that cannot be contained."

I hesitate to use the word "evangelism" in a sermon because it appears to turn off a good many people. For some reason, there are a lot of folks out there who think evangelism is telling others what they have to believe and how they have to live. Evangelism simply means being God's messenger by sharing the good news of God's love in Christ with others.

The primary motive for evangelism is to bring others to acknowledge God's love in Jesus Christ. However, an equally important motive relates to the life of the church. Unless evangelism stands at the center of a congregation's ministry, that congregation will begin to wither on the vine. Much has been said in our times about the decline of mainline denominations and the growth of fundamentalist denominations. In almost every case, the reason for the growth of any church can be traced to an enthusiastic witnessing to the gospel.

The need for evangelism is greater now than ever before in our history. As long-time members retire to other communities, it is important that new people take their place. But these new families need to be invited! That is a task which belongs to every member of every congregation throughout the world. We can advertise about our congregation until the cows come home. But in the final analysis, it is through the personal witness of individual Christians that the church of Jesus Christ grows and fulfills its mission. It will take your active witness to make it happen.

I need to make a statement. I am not a big fan of Rush Limbaugh and I don't normally listen to his programs. However, I did read about a story that did involve him.

"There was a fascinating conversation on Rush Limbaugh's talk show. Having just completed Tom Brokaw's wonderful book *The Greatest Generation*, a book filled with inspiring stories of the WWII generation, Rush had taken the position that the current generation of young adults, those in their 20's, are, for the most part, a bunch of whiners. He said that while they are constantly whining and moaning about the difficulty of their lives in fact, when compared to the hardships faced by their grandparents' generation, they've actually got it easy. Their grandparents had endured truly devastating events like The Great Depression and WWII. The current crop of young adults, he concluded, doesn't even have a clue about real hardship.

“Once Rush had finished his monologue a self-professed member of this younger generation of adults called in to offer a different perspective. Bright and extremely articulate, the 23 year-old caller said that, while The Great Depression and WWII certainly created terrible hardships for the people who faced them that he, nonetheless, believed his generation faced an even greater hardship.

“Limbaugh asked, “And what exactly would that be?”

“The caller said, “The loss of hope.” He said that his experience indicated that many of today’s young adults had simply stopped believing that things were going to get better. They didn’t expect to live as well as their parents had lived. They weren’t expecting a brighter future. They have simply given up hope.

“He said, The Great Depression, as terrible as it was, in many cases brought families together as they worked side by side in the hope of saving their families. Most of his friends, he said, grew up in families in complete disarray and have given up the hope of ever having a real family experience of their own.

“He said, WWII was a terrible event that obviously cost thousands of Americas’ young men their lives. Then he said, and even though they knew the risks they still enlisted voluntarily by the millions because they saw it as a cause worth dying for. Most of those in his generation, he said, can’t imagine anything worth dying for and they’re committing suicide in record numbers because many can’t imagine anything worth living for.

“He said, “Mr. Limbaugh, The Great Depression and WWII created terrible hardships. But I submit to you that the greatest hardship of all is living without hope.”

Sadly, we are all too often living in a world without hope. The good news of Christmas, the good news of Simeon and Anna is that hope still lives. It lives in each of us and we anticipate what Christ will do in our lives to build His Kingdom.

Resources:

Tom Marcum, Rediscovering the Hope of Christmas

Sermons for Sundays in Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, Paul E. Flesner, CSS Publishing Company, 2002, 0-7880-1900-7

[www.esermons.com](http://www.esermons.com)

Please know this is not a word for word manuscript of the preaching event. This is background material and primary thoughts that may or may not be used during the sermon delivery.