

**Galatians 4:4-7**  
**Luke 2:22-40**

**First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ**  
**Sunday, December 28, 2008**  
**First Sunday after Christmas**

### Israel's Redemption and Ours

Luke's story of the presentation of Jesus in the Temple is far more than a simple story about the piety of Jesus' parents, although it does involve that theme. The sayings of Simeon announce thoughts which are central to Luke and Acts, making this a key text.

As we move on from the Christmas story, the shepherds are back with their sheep; and Joseph and Mary are back in Nazareth. We can imagine Joseph putting up with difficult customers in the carpenter shop while Mary washes diapers and other clothes. The glamour is gone, and life is back to normal. We enter Luke's story with Mary and Joseph going through ritual Jewish activities, such as taking their baby to the Temple in Jerusalem to offer a sacrifice. Mary and Joseph are proceeding with all the usual Jewish customs in connection with this most unusual infant.

They take the Baby Jesus to the Temple for their purification and to offer the proper sacrifice. This visit to the Temple underscores the faithfulness of Mary and Joseph already established. The fact that the sacrifice of Mary and Joseph consists of a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons, rather than the more costly lamb, emphasizes the modest economic standing of the family. Sacrificing the small birds comes under the poverty clause of Leviticus 12:6-8 for those too poor to afford a lamb.

Although His parents begin the steps in the ritual of taking Jesus to the Temple, their actions are complemented by those of Simeon and Anna. In the Temple, Mary and Joseph meet these two Jewish prophets whom Luke presents as waiting for God's intervention and the salvation of Israel. The Holy Spirit is upon Simeon as he looks forward to the consolation and redemption of Israel, and he recognizes the Baby Jesus and His importance for both Israel and the Gentiles. Anna worships constantly and daily in the Temple. This time, though, no angels appear as they do to Zechariah, Mary and Joseph, and the shepherds. This revelation comes through a faithful believer, just and devout.

Both Simeon and Anna enter the story largely to focus attention on Jesus and His future. Luke lays the foundation for their statements by listing their impeccable credentials. Simeon is said to be a righteous and devout person who longs for the consolation of Israel. Luke gives three distinct ways the Holy Spirit's inspiration of Simeon is asserted. Vs. 25 claims the Holy Spirit rests on Simeon; after that, the Spirit tells him he will not die until after seeing the Messiah; then the Spirit directs Simeon to the Temple when Jesus is presented. By the time Simeon speaks, there is no doubt about his reliability. Even though Anna's speech receives less attention in vs. 38, her credentials are nevertheless clear. She never leaves the Temple but worships there with fasting and prayer, night and day.

The words Simeon says are not exactly a prophecy. In the Greek, his words give the image of a servant who is being instructed by his Master to stay where he is until a certain visitor arrives. Simeon has been watching all night and is sleepy. When the visitor finally comes in the early morning

hours, Simeon says, “Master, it is happened. I have announced the coming of the One you are waiting for. Now I can go to sleep.” After seeing the infant Jesus and realizing who He is, Simeon is telling God he is ready to die in peace knowing our Savior is come into the world.

No doubt this encounter surprises Mary and Joseph, but they receive a further sign from God in the person of Anna. By any estimate, she is at least eighty-four years of age. Anna is in the Temple night and day. She possibly lives in a house nearby or maybe in the Temple itself. Whenever the church opens for worship, she is there. The message Luke gives us is that people like Anna are not to be frowned on. They may have a special understanding of God’s plan and purpose. We assume Anna’s testimony about the Baby Jesus is honored. At her age, she, too, is considered an effective witness.

Part of Simeon’s prophecy may have been a great shock to Mary and Joseph. For thousands of years, the Jews expect a Messiah who will deliver Israel. No one expects the Messiah to be for all people. Simeon says this light, this salvation, is not only for Jews. He is for everyone. Then Simeon adds that not all will be blessed, but many in Israel will fall because of Jesus. Simeon is a true and accurate prophet. We may have a hard time knowing what to make of prophets, then or now. There have always been false prophets and true ones.

Simeon and Anna are true prophets. They are not prophets in the sense of future telling or fortune telling. Prophecy is forth-telling. They speak forth for God to people or a nation about the people’s or nation’s unrighteousness

and about those things they might do to be faithful and obedient. The true prophet speaks to us of our sins, our false values, and our unloving behavior.

The two astonishing figures of Simeon and Anna announce that the infant Jesus is directly connected with “the consolation of Israel” and the “redemption of Jerusalem.” It is made clear in vs. 30 when Simeon proclaims he has witnessed God’s salvation. Whatever else is said about Jesus, the reader knows Jesus is God’s salvation.

One of the most important lessons in this particular Scripture is that we are to live in hope. Simeon and Anna live in hope. All of us are living in hope, although it may be a false hope. What do we mean by false hope? A number of years ago, the magazine Ladies’ Home Journal conducted a survey which revealed some startling results. The readers were asked, “In whom do you trust?” The winner with 40% of the vote was news journalist Walter Cronkite. Pope John Paul, who was before Pope Benedict, came in third with 26% of the vote. The Reverend Billy Graham got 6%, 3% more than God! How sad!

Simeon prophesies suffering for Mary. To begin with, we learn how poor she and Joseph are because they bring two turtle doves to sacrifice for the ritual of cleansing instead of the usual lamb. The mother of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world could not afford a lamb. While she and Joseph are making their sacrifice, Simeon addresses Mary directly, warning her that a sword will pierce her soul. Mary suffers poverty and pain. Yet she is the most blessed among women. Poverty is relative. Mary and Joseph seem to have nothing, but they have everything. This is what life

is, for most of us. The angel speaks only of joy, but life for all of us is bittersweet. Mary is to have a great deal of pain, just as Simeon predicts.

We are unsure of Joseph's age. Some scholars document he is a mature, older man; others indicate he may be several years older than Mary, perhaps in his twenties. He already is a carpenter. All we know is he is definitely older than Mary who is only 13 or 14 when they quietly marry. We have no record of how long Joseph lives. He is alive when Jesus goes to the Temple again at age 12, but we do not read about Joseph after that. He may not have lived long enough to endure the suffering as Mary does. It is likely Mary sees Joseph die, she sees her first-born son crucified, and sees many of Christ's disciples persecuted and martyred.

Simeon, the prophet, sees and understands the present. Standing in the midst of the Temple, the most splendid building imaginable, shining brilliantly with gold and marble and alabaster, Simeon predicts Christ will divide the people who build and love this very Temple. He sees the ultimate division between Jesus and the religious Jews, because it is one of the reasons for which Jesus comes. Christ comes to do a new thing in our lives; and the traditionalists, those who support the past, who insist on maintaining business as usual, understand why this troublemaker is to be removed or done away with.

Charles Cousar, a Biblical scholar says, vs. 32 makes two claims about this salvation. These claims echo the language of Isaiah, and echo throughout Luke's Gospel and Acts. This salvation is to be a "light for revelation to the Gentiles" and "glory to your people Israel." The Gospel of Luke and the

early chapters of Acts are mainly concerned with Jesus in relation to Israel, for whom Christ is the fulfillment of Israel's long-cherished hopes.

The story of Luke and Acts plainly reveals that neither all of Israel nor all the Gentiles agree with Simeon's judgment. Many see in Jesus anything but salvation! Jesus is God's salvation and is to inherit the throne of David. Christ comes as the fulfillment of God's promises, our Savior. Luke reminds us along with Christ's joy and triumph, He will also prompt divisions. Many will oppose Him. The relentless theme of rejection and resistance cannot wait even for the story of the Baby Jesus to end.

Like other scenes in Luke's story of Jesus' birth, this one ends with the idea that all the characters involved go to their homes or go away. Continuing the parallels with the birth of John the Baptist, Jesus is described as growing in strength and in wisdom and as having God's favor upon Him.

True prophets, then and now, are the hope of the world. We are to be prophets like Simeon and Anna, not consumed with the ordinary and temporary, but caught up in the ultimate issues and witnessing to those around us of our Awesome God. The glory of the new Israel is one church, solely committed to Jesus Christ, serving the world in all its needs.

God calls us to serve the Prince of Peace with constant, sometimes dangerous, and expensive loyalty. To serve in this way, God calls us to always watch and look for Christ in those around us. When we are given an opportunity to help others, God encourages us to not hesitate but to reach out in whatever way we are able. We will probably not face dangers as the early

Christians do. There are those in other geographic and social areas who will. We are to pray for them, as we would want to be prayed for ourselves. The expense is not always monetary. The expense is in giving of ourselves and of our time. The expense is also in showing our loyalty by making God and our service to God our highest priority every day. It is not an easy choice, but it is a very rewarding one.

May each and all of us prayerfully consider answering God's call and serving God as our first priority. We may be surprised to discover how our blessings increase as Simeon's and Anna's do. May God be with us as we use God's opportunities and answer God's call to become prophets and witnesses for God and His love for us. Amen.