

Simeon's Song, Luke 2:29-32

Bradley Bell

December 22, 2019

Introduction

Good morning, my name is Brad and I'm one of the pastors here. To help prepare us for Christmas we are picking back up today in our sermon series in the Gospel of Luke titled, **The Songs of Advent**. I would like to thank Hayley Moss and David Yeiser for putting together the artwork for this series, which is meant to capture in one image the wonder of Luke's songs. You might think of it like a musical nativity: as God's revelation comes down in the birth of Jesus Christ, people of faith respond by lifting up songs of praise. And we'll see this culminate next week as we consider the song in heaven around God's throne, which is what the surrounding oval represents.

This morning I invite you to turn in your Bibles with me to Luke 2:29-32. You can find that on page 857 if you're using one of the Bibles in the chairs. The title of today's sermon is "Simeon's Song," and the main idea is this: Only those who wait for God's salvation will see it. I have found that the song will exhort us in two main ways:

- 1) Wait for God's salvation so you're ready to die - vv. 29-30
- 2) Wait for God's salvation so you're ready to live - vv. 30-31

- With that said, if you are able, please stand with me to honor the reading of God's word. Again, today's passage is Luke 2:29-32, but for context I will be reading vv. 21-35. Church, hear the word of the Lord:

²¹ And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

²² 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 Lord ²³ (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 salvation

³¹ 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 opposed ³⁵ (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.” Luke 2:21-35

The Lord has spoken to us. [Congregation:] *Thanks be to God!* You may be seated.

Exposition

One of the things that really makes the Christmas season special for all of us is a deep sense of anticipation. Once you’ve experienced a few Christmases, you know what to expect, and what you especially look forward to. It may be the break you get from work or the rush to open presents on Christmas morning or the food or having family all in one place. Whatever it is, it’s worth the wait; it’s what keeps you hopeful during the holiday rush. Perhaps the most iconic thing that has come to bind our Christmas anticipation together is, interestingly, a plump, elderly man in a red suit. Who am I talking about? Of course, Santa Claus! Listen to how well this classic Christmas song builds a deep sense of anticipation:

*You better watch out, You better not cry
You better not pout, I'm telling you why
Santa Claus is coming to town
He's making a list, He's checking it twice
He's going to find out who's naughty and nice
Santa Claus is coming to town*

Now, the melody of the song gets you excited, but if you pay attention to the lyrics, then what’s the message: *you better get ready!* Because you don’t want to miss out on the best part of Christmas: opening presents. After all...

*He sees you when you're sleeping
He knows when you're awake
He knows when you've been bad or good
So be good for goodness sake¹*

So apparently Santa is all-knowing and all-present? Reigns so supremely over Christmas that he can discern and pass moral judgment on my heart. Hmm. And sees me when I'm sleeping—creepy! More like a Halloween song.

The point here isn't to preach against Santa or presents or whatever, as though these things can't point us to more glorious things. The point is to take a moment to examine together the focus of what you're waiting for at Christmas. What are the things that reign so supremely over Christmas that—if they were taken away—your Christmas would be ruined? What exactly are you waiting for?

Today in the Gospel of Luke we meet a man who has also been anticipating Christmas. His name is Simeon, and even though we don't know much about his story, it's really clear what exactly *he's* been waiting for. Here's what we do know:

After Jesus was born, Mary and Joseph were faithful Jewish parents who did everything for their son according to God's law.² That means when he was eight days old they had him circumcised (probably the first time Jesus bled for us). And then when he was forty days old they made the necessary sacrifices to “redeem” him as a firstborn son, to dedicate him to the Lord's service, and to ceremonially purify Mary (and possibly Joseph as well since he would have likely become unclean by touching blood during Jesus' birth).³ These may seem like unimportant details in the Christmas story, but they matter tremendously if we are to understand this momentous word from Galatians 4:

⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. Galatians 4:4-5

¹ John Frederick Coats and Haven Gillespie, “Santa Claus Is Comin' To Town,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gWIFpjsxMY>

² Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke, Reformed Expository Commentary* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2009), 89

³ Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1974), 103-104; Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), Loc 5305-5311

We who are crushed under the weight of the law, like a collapsed building, unless we have a Savior who keeps that law perfectly, who gets up underneath that weight and bears it for us, there's no way we can be saved.⁴ And so, even from infancy, Jesus was bearing the weight of the world.

And it's significant that he's doing this—of all places—at the temple in Jerusalem. Tracking back to our Psalms series, we learned then that the temple was meant to be the primary place on earth where God revealed himself to man, where God dwelled with his people, a model of the Garden of Eden. And so notice how bound up Jesus' birth is with the temple. Luke begins the Christmas story with an angel revealing God's salvation to Zechariah—where? The temple. Now Luke is going to conclude the Christmas story by God revealing his salvation to Simeon and Anna—where? The temple.⁵ There, in a model of the Garden of Eden, a man and woman longing for salvation will see and hold Jesus. The ancient promise really is coming true.⁶

So we read in v. 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. Luke 2:25

In order to make the most of what little we know of Simeon, we have to understand that he is very unique. These were not the best of times for God's Old Testament people.⁷ Although many were waiting for the benefits of God's salvation, few were waiting for God himself.⁸ Few could be described as righteous and devout and waiting for the consolation of Israel (or waiting for the Messiah), and far fewer as having the Holy Spirit upon them. Clearly, God had been doing a special work in this man by his Spirit, and the ultimate result was that he believed in God's salvation and also *waited eagerly for it*, full of faith.⁹ We see this in the very next verse (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. Luke 2:26

⁴ Morris, 103

⁵ Bock, Loc 5271-5277

⁶ Genesis 3:15; Bock, Loc 5218-5223

⁷ J. Ligon Duncan III, "Luke's Christmas Liturgy: Nunc Dimitis, Luke 2:29-32,"

<https://www.fpcjackson.org/resource-library/sermons/luke-christmas-liturgy-nunc-dimitis>

⁸ John 1:10-11

⁹ Morris, 104; Bock, Loc 5379-5397

A big part of what led him to wait so eagerly and to be so convinced was that God had given him a special promise. Wouldn't you love to know how that happened? But like so many things with Simeon, we just don't know:

- We can assume he's a priest because his story takes place in the temple—but the text doesn't tell us.
- We can assume he's an old man because he later says he's ready to depart—but the text doesn't tell us.¹⁰
- We can assume he's going to die soon after seeing the Lord's Christ—but the text doesn't tell us.

All it tells us is all we need to know: that those who wait for God's salvation above everything else, they're the ones who will see it. This is what it means to be a believer, Old Testament or New: waiting in faith for God to do what he has promised.¹¹ And so, true to his word, one day God finally nudges Simeon (v. 27),

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, Luke 2:27-28

See why it's so necessary to get into the backstory in preparation for this moment? If you don't have a sense of the darkness and the waiting and the longing for this moment, then it's just another creepy stranger wanting to hold the newborn again. But if you can get a glimpse into the heart of Simeon, then you can see this painting of him and understand the artist's rendering.¹² I'll give you a few seconds to just take it in.

¹⁰ Morris, 104

¹¹ Ryken, 92

¹² Ron DiCianni, "Simeon's Moment,"

<http://www.tapestryproductions.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Ron-DiCianni-Simeons-Moment-Full.jpg>



1) Wait For God's Salvation So You're Ready to Die - vv. 29-30

While everyone else walked right past their God, Simeon embraced the One he'd been waiting for. No wonder he blesses God! And then sings what church history refers to as the Nunc Dimittis, Latin for "now you dismiss". This brings us to the song's first exhortation: wait for God's salvation so you're ready to die. Read with me in v. 29:

²⁹ *"Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word; Luke 2:29*

The departure that Simeon refers to here is nothing less than death itself. The language he uses is like that of a slave being released from his labor, or a watchman relieved of his duty.¹³ This is described poetically in Psalm 130, which says,

⁵ *I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;*
⁶ *my soul waits for the Lord
more than watchmen for the morning,
more than watchmen for the morning. Psalm 130:5-6*

¹³ Morris, 105; Bock, Loc 5448-5451

If you've striven all night to stay alert and keep your eyes open for fear of the enemy, then when morning finally comes, what are you ready for? To depart your post and rest in peace. (If you've ever been a chaperone at a youth lock-in, then you know exactly what I mean!) The crazy thing about Simeon is, he's ready to *literally* rest in peace. How many people do you know who are eager to die? Not many, right?

Interestingly, one of the humanly impossible tasks given to pastors is to help people be ready to die. In fact, you might even say it sums up the whole task of the church. Not in the way of reading last rites or doing funerals, but as in guiding people toward being eager to meet their God face to face. Just this week I sat with Jack Mitchell and read Simeon's story to him; after a time he looked at me and said, "All I can say to that is AMEN." Last week at Mrs. Louise's funeral I was able to talk about how often she spoke of "the hope of heaven" and "going home to be with Jesus". Where does this readiness come from, and how can we as such a young church get it?

Well, it begins with the good news that we preach: that Jesus Christ came to save sinners like us; that we are separated from God and bound to be that way forever. But Jesus by his death and resurrection offers us restoration with God and eternal life, if we will turn from our own effort to his. If you're not willing to do that, then there's no way you're ready to die.

But if you have put your hope in Christ, then you have started to be ready. I say "started" because it really is just the beginning of the journey, not the end. When Simeon says in v. 20,

my eyes have seen your salvation, Luke 2:30

he's referring not to a thing to be obtained, but a Person to be embraced: Jesus, the One whose name *means* salvation. If salvation is bound up in a Person, then you haven't fully obtained it until that Person is in your arms. So until then, you wait. And in the waiting—that's where the magic happens.

Think of it like a visit to the doctor's office. You hope to only be there for an hour or so, but of course that never happens. While you're waiting, however, there might be some nice things to keep you company. Perhaps the furniture is comfy and you enjoy the moment of being away from work. And then after a little while you catch up things in some great new magazines. And then you notice there's a nice flatscreen tv with a show on, so you watch that for a little while. Oh, and there's a big window with a pretty good view of the neighborhood, so you enjoy that for a bit. But what happens as the

time drags on—two hours, three hours, four hours? What do you want more than anything? TO SEE THE DOCTOR! That’s what you came for. Everything else fades away and you just want to see him.

That is, if you will, the Christian life. It’s not that you get to where you don’t want anything else, it’s that everything else fades in light of him. And as all your other desires begin to be defined by this desire, to see Jesus and be with him, that’s when you’re well on your way to being ready. Church, wait for God’s salvation so you’re ready to die.

2) Wait For God’s Salvation So You’re Ready to Live - vv. 31-32

And if you are prepared to die, then that means you are actually ready to live. This brings us to the song’s second exhortation: wait for God’s salvation so you’re ready to live. Continuing in v. 31, Simeon says of God’s salvation through Jesus

that you have prepared [it] in the presence of all peoples, Luke 2:31

It’s amazing the depth of insight Simeon had into things at this point. Truly, the Holy Spirit was upon him. First, he recognizes that God’s salvation had been intentionally prepared.¹⁴ Now, the Old Testament writers had been declaring such things for centuries, but it wasn’t until the coming of Christ that people really began to understand. This salvation wasn’t just a matter of God preparing it over a few hundred years. No, the New Testament writers declare that Jesus was chosen to be our salvation “before the foundation of the earth,” before the world was even made in eternity past.¹⁵ Wrap your head around that this Christmas!

The second thing that Simeon recognizes is that God’s salvation had been intentionally prepared *for all peoples*.¹⁶ Once again, in our age we can easily look back to the Old Testament writers and see their description of God’s salvation as a light for all people—Jews and Gentiles.¹⁷ But not in Simeon’s day. In fact, later, when Jesus even hints at the idea of God’s salvation going to the Gentiles, his Jewish hometown tries to throw him off a cliff.¹⁸ We’re talking about Simeon understanding something that even Jesus’ disciples didn’t after walking with him for three years and watching him die and rise and ascend and send his Spirit! How in the world did Simeon get this?

¹⁴ Bock, Loc 5484-5490

¹⁵ Ephesians 1:4; 2 Timothy 1:9; 1 Peter 1:20

¹⁶ Bock, Loc 5491-5499

¹⁷ Psalm 22:27; 67:1-7; Isaiah 42:6; 49:6;

¹⁸ Luke 4:16-30

I think there's more to it than just the Spirit revealed these things to him. I believe *a deep understanding and love for God's global mission is born of a deep understanding and love for Jesus Christ*. If you're learning to wait for him in such a way that your heart's desire is set on him, then you want those who don't know him to know him. And that, my friend, is being ready to live.

- That's why you see Antioch continuing to send and release people into God's mission even to the detriment of our own numeric growth
- That's why you hear Antioch distributed members leading our Call to Worship through the season of Advent
- That's why you feel the annoying push to give toward Antioch missions initiatives in a month when we're all strapped for cash

The coming of salvation is coming for all peoples. And Advent ceases to be Advent when it's only for us. That's why Simeon says in v. 32 that Jesus is

a light for revelation to the Gentiles, [in other words, for pagan peoples who had no clue about the true God because they never received the gifts given to God's Old Testament people, nor the light that should've shone from them—*finally* they will see God.]

and for glory to your people Israel." Luke 2:32

Why glory—why something different—for Israel? I think this is explained well in Paul's letter to the Romans. There, in describing God's Old Testament people, he writes,

⁴ They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. ⁵ To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen. Romans 9:4-5¹⁹

To Israel had been given everything they needed for knowing salvation, for knowing God. And so, Simeon says, here would be the final, crowning glory given them: that Jesus Christ, the Savior of the whole world, would come from among them. What's heartbreaking, and already evident even here in the story of Simeon, is that Israel would seek to hoard that glory for themselves. And that would be the very thing that would cause many of them to walk right past God's salvation and miss it.

¹⁹ Bock, Loc 5528-5532

Church, if the pastoral task is to help get the church ready to die, then that really means helping get the church ready to live. Don't miss this—that the glory of Jesus Christ has come to you in order to be embraced by others. When you're waiting and longing for that, that's when you're ready to live.

Conclusion

Well, we are just a few days away from the time set aside to celebrate Christmas. And especially in light of today's passage, I want you to be ready. To celebrate the true Christ of Christmas isn't just to be comforted, but to be confronted. So let me ask you, what are the things that reign so supremely over Christmas that—if they were taken away—your Christmas would be ruined? What exactly are you waiting for?

Unlike Santa, who can only pretend to discern and pass moral judgment on your heart, Jesus Christ actually can. In fact, a significant part of why he came was to climb down the chimney of your heart and reveal what's there. Listen to what Simeon says after his song:

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 opposed ³⁵ (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed." Luke 2:33-35

...so that your deepest hidden desires, that which you are waiting for most, may be revealed. Jesus is like a sharp, "two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."²⁰ And what he does is he shows us whether we are appointed for falling or rising—because his coming means we can't stand neutral.

Here is the good news of Christmas: with his life and death and resurrection Jesus prepared a great salvation for all who would believe. He doesn't intend to simply climb down the chimney of your heart and reveal the mess of what's there—he wants to leave the greatest gift of your life: the gift of salvation. And in a way, that gift comes with two things: a new heart and a promise that one day he will return to make the rest of you new. So that means both receiving it *and* waiting for it—at the same time.

²⁰ Hebrews 4:12

- That means when your desires are shown to be the mess that they are, you run to the light instead of the darkness.
- When you realize that Christmas has become about something other than Jesus, you run to the light instead of the darkness.
- When it's clear that sin has appointed you for falling into hell rather than rising to heaven, you run to the light instead of the darkness

That means running to the light more than watchmen for the morning. And while everyone else walks right past it, those who wait will soon embrace Jesus in their arms and

It will be said on that day,

“Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us.

This is the Lord; we have waited for him;

let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.” Isaiah 25:9

And this table is given to help us as we wait. On the night that he was betrayed, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it, he broke it and said to his disciples, “This is my body, which is broken for you; eat this in remembrance of me.” He also took a cup of wine, and after blessing it, gave it to his disciples and said, “This cup is the new covenant marked by the shedding of my blood. For as often as you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you announce the Lord’s death until he returns.” **Today we are announcing that Jesus Christ is the One we are waiting for.**

Our tradition here at Antioch is to come forward and break off a piece of bread and dip it in the juice. There will be stations here in the front; gluten-free bread will be available to your right. If you're a baptized believer, come and remember who you are and whose you are. If you're a believer but not yet baptized, before coming to the table, we would love to help you first come and declare your faith publicly through baptism. If you're not a Christian, this sacred symbol is not for you, but rather than taking communion, we encourage you to take Christ. He has made himself available to you this very moment. There will be pastors in the back to talk and pray with you about any need you have. Let's pray.

Bibliography

Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994)

Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1974)

Robert A. Stein, *Luke: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1992)

Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2009)

J. Ligon Duncan III, "Luke's Christmas Liturgy: Nunc Dimitis, Luke 2:29-32,"
<https://www.fpcjackson.org/resource-library/sermons/luke-christmas-liturgy-nunc-dimitis>

Ron DiCianni, "Simeon's Moment,"
<http://www.tapestryproductions.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Ron-DiCianni-Simeons-Moment-Full.jpg>

John Frederick Coots and Haven Gillespie, "Santa Claus Is Comin' To Town,"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gWIFpjsxMY>