

BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

December 31, 2017

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Text: Luke 2:22-40

SCRIPTURE

Luke 2:22-40

²² 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 firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), ²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated 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;^[a] this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.^[b] ²⁷ Guided by the Spirit, Simeon^[c] came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸ Simeon^[d] took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹ “Master, now you are dismissing your servant^[e] in peace,
according to your word;

³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹ which 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 the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon^[f] 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 ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna^[g] 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, ³⁷ 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. ³⁸ At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child^[h] to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

³⁹ When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

SERMON

I was the preacher on the first day of January and here I am today, the last day of December. We are using the same bulletin cover and I thought about using the same hymns, scripture and sermon too, just to see how well you were listening 365 days ago. Instead, I started fresh, I was curious enough to find out how often a year begins and ends on a Sunday, so I googled it. I discovered the last time was 2006 and the next time will be 2023, who knows what I will be doing then; probably not preaching. When I shared this with Howard, he said I served as the bookends for 2017, the beginning and the end. I thought Alpha and Omega sounded better, well, maybe not! That title is reserved for Jesus the Christ, the Holy One of Israel, the first and the last, the one whose birth we celebrated on Christmas Day.

In the sermon I preached on New Year's Day I challenged us to take time to discover how God is revealed in the everydayness of our lives. I encouraged us to hold the promises of God's never ending love and mercy close to our hearts this year. And to offer our lives in service by using our gifts to build up the beloved community where all will find peace and welcome. As the year comes to an end, think about how God was revealed to you in the events of your life. What progress did you make toward fulfilling your goals? As you look back at 2017 I hope you will find some sure sign that God has been present in your life.

In our waiting time during the Advent season Howard and Beth focused on the angel voices that spoke to Zachariah, Mary, Joseph and the Shepherds. The common greeting was, "do not be afraid" and each had a different response to these jarring words. Zachariah was frightened by the appearance and words of the angel. Mary and Joseph took the news with a calmness, accepting the angel's message that Mary was carrying the Messiah in her womb. The shepherds tending to their sheep, maybe snoozing, they were startled by the bright lights and terrified by the heavenly chorus, still they headed off to Bethlehem to see this child destined to be the Savior.

We know so very little about the infancy and childhood of Jesus.

Luke is the only gospel writer that gives us any clue and that is sketchy at best. It is all in the second chapter of Luke. The first event is the birth in Bethlehem; the second, eight days later the circumcision and naming ceremony which in the Jewish tradition symbolized the Jew's unique relationship to God. The third event takes place when the child is a month old; Jewish law requires parents to bring their first born son to the temple in Jerusalem to be dedicated as holy to the Lord. Mary and Joseph were faithful Jews, following the traditions of their faith.

It is at this point that we meet our characters for today, Simeon and Anna, two more heroes of the Bible who did God's work in the world. Simeon is described as a devout Jew, a righteous man whose life's work was serving in the temple. For years and years Simeon had been looking forward to the coming of the Messiah, promised by God through the prophets, to bring peace and salvation to Israel. He was now an old man and still he went to the temple each day hoping that he would meet the promised one. You see, Simeon had a revelation from God, not in the form of an angel but the Holy Spirit had lead Simeon to believe he would see the Lord's Messiah before he died. Simeon knew in the very depths of his being that he could trust the promise of God. He never gave up – the day arrived; Mary and Joseph came into the temple with their son, Jesus, and as he had done each time a child was brought for the dedication ceremony – Simeon took the child in his arms and knew immediately he was holding the Lord.

On this day Simeon's voice was raised in praise to God that the long ago promise had been fulfilled. Simeon cradled the baby against his shoulder and then Simeon spoke and his words echoed those of prophets before him; salvation has come in this tiny child, the light that will shine on all people; Jew and Gentile alike. All this has been prepared by God whose glory shines for all humanity. Simeon now could leave this world in peace, knowing that in the hands of Jesus hope would be restored and God's love would change the world.

These words amazed Joseph and Mary and then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and 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." Imagine what effect these words would have on new, young parents. Simeon speaks of the difficulties Jesus will face; the opposition, criticism, unbelief and finally death. We don't know how Joseph and Mary responded to Simeon's words that must have shattered their expectations for their son. It occurs to me that the joy of that day would have been tempered, filled with apprehension as Mary and Joseph took their newborn back to their home in Nazareth to raise him with Simeon words echoing in their hearts.

There was another character in the temple that day. Anna, a prophet, she was a widow who never left the temple. Each day she offered her prayers, she fasted and worshipped without ceasing. We know little about Anna except she was from the tribe of Asher one of the 12 tribes of Israel. She was an old woman who had dedicated her life to God and in the midst of the ceremony her voice is heard praising God and she spoke about this child who would redeem God's people. She too recognized that Jesus fulfilled the promise of a Messiah. When the ceremony was completed according to the law of the Lord, Joseph and Mary returned to Nazareth and Jesus grew strong and he was filled with wisdom and God blessed him. The last episode Luke records of Jesus early life is the story of the 12-year-old Jesus going to the temple to celebrate Passover with his parents.

Simeon was grateful to God that he could leave this world in peace knowing that the Messiah had come to save and restore the people of God. I think Simeon is a fortunate man; we all wish to face death knowing all is well with our family and friends. When we have done our best to live out our faith, our journey into the next life is more peaceful. While none of us knows the day or the hour; we can prepare our hearts and use the time we have to reconcile our differences; speak words of love, appreciation, and gratitude to family and friends that have been left unsaid, we can get our affairs in order and be ready when the time comes. That's what Simeon did, day after day; year after year he went to the temple to be ready to welcome the Lord's Messiah. Anna too, she prayed without ceasing; offering her very life in sacrifice and praise. God kept his promises to Zechariah, to Mary and Joseph, to the shepherds and to Simeon and Anna. God will keep the promises born in Jesus Christ, savior of the world who brings peace to reign in our lives.

The old year is dying; it is time to reflect on 2017 and consider our faithfulness to promises we made on January 1. To focus your reflection, ask yourselves: did I demonstrate love in my relationships? Were words of kindness spoken in our homes, work, in our texts and tweets? Did I apologize or accept apologies for hurtful words and actions? How often did we begin and end

our day with praises to God? Did I speak for justice and did peace rule my heart? Did we at First Pres feed a child, share an hour with a lonely person, or offer a hand or a ride to someone in need? Were we faithful in our relationships and did we keep our commitments to others. Did we find joy in the simple things of life? I know it is impossible for any one of us to accomplish all these goals but as God's beloved community we are in this faith business together and with God's help we can be a light in the darkened world and hope for the future.

It is only hours away; a new day will dawn and 2018 will begin with God who continues to be in charge of our lives and the world God loves so much. We can be certain that God will be present in all the beginnings and endings of life. All those heroes of the Bible we have met this year are our witnesses that what God says God will do can be trusted. Each heroes' story gives us hope to continue the journey and each life is a testament to what God can do in and through us. As the old year passes away let us remember what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, saved us and made us whole through his life, death and resurrection. As we greet 2018 let us live in hope that God's light will warm the hearts of all humanity and each life will be touched with God's grace and peace will reign over all the earth.