

The First Sunday after Christmas  
St. Luke 2:22-40

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word:

For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,  
Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;  
A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.

What a man, that Simeon. Although it is assumed he was an old man, gray and wrinkled, his age is never explicitly stated. This prophet, as he was, had spent his life waiting for God's promised salvation. He had spent his life waiting for God's promise to him to be fulfilled—it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

And so it was, after Simeon's wait, it was time for Mary, the Mother of God, to perform the ritual of purification, required by the Law of Moses for all women, 40 days after they had given birth. He was also her firstborn son, so there was another law to keep: "Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord"—so it was that Mary and Joseph brought the infant Jesus to the temple to present Him to the Lord. Simeon was there; right away he recognized this ordinary-looking child as the fulfillment of God's promise.

The text makes it sound as if he swooped in, took the child in his arms from an unsuspecting Mary, and spoke, blessing God, and said what is sung today as the *Nunc Dimittis*—"Now Depart":

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word:

For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,  
Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;  
A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.

I would imagine Mary's initial reaction would have been one of shock and distress, concern and fear—some man she does not recognize (if he is old, she may have thought him senile and crazed) just snatched her Son from her arms. But, the text says that that reaction quickly subsided as Joseph and Mary marveled at the words Simeon spoke. They knew who this Child was—Gabriel had told them so; so did this man!

Now, the promise to Simeon was fulfilled. He had seen, even held, the salvation of the world. Now, he could die in peace, as was promised. God had kept His promise to Simeon in keeping His promise to Eve (and to all of her sons and daughters through all generations)—He had brought salvation into the world, even to the man in Jerusalem who has given the Church a beautiful liturgical song. "I am saved and holding my salvation," Simeon could have exclaimed, "What is the world to me? None else matters; my God reigns and saves! Death is nothing!"

Of course, Simeon didn't stop there. He had more to say. He had been given more to say: "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed... so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed." This should give you some perspective on this 12-day season of Christmas. To many people, Christmas is a joyous time filled with cookies and presents and mirth and "fa la la la la"s, and rightly so—though to the world, all of that ends on December 26. But these words of Simeon are a reminder that even in celebration, Christmas is not a time to lose sight of the reason for God putting on human flesh. For more perspective, listen to the days following Christmas Day according to the liturgical calendar:

- December 26 is St. Stephen's Day, a day commemorating that early deacon of the church who was stoned to death rather than turn from the one who was born King of kings and Lord of lords and wrapped in swaddling cloths.

- December 27, is St. John's Day, a day commemorating that evangelist who was not put to death for his faith, though he was made to drink poison, according to legend, and still survived. He did live a long life in exile for it—not exactly glamorous or glorious.
- December 28, yesterday, is the day set aside for the Holy Innocents, martyrs all—all the young male children executed by Herod in an attempt to slay the young boy Jesus because he feared for his throne. Joseph, by this time, had taken his family into Egypt to escape Herod's wrath.

“Behold, this child is...a sign that is opposed...that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.” As my dear seminary professor, Dr. Normal Nagel, once said, “Jesus, Simeon says, is one in response to whom people show if they have received or rejected God.” Simeon called Jesus a sign. A sign contains and conveys something that God is doing and giving, but signs also hide under what often appears to be its opposite. A sign is intended, one could say, to sort the wheat from the chaff. A sign can only be recognized for what it is by the Word of God, “which requires hearing and receiving,” or faith.

Elizabeth greeted Mary as the mother of her Lord. Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, blessed God for fulfilling His promise. The shepherds who watched their flocks by night rushed to greet the infant King born in a stable. Simeon rejoiced to hold his salvation. Anna, the prophetess, saw Jesus in the temple, too, and gave thanks and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem. These all received God. These all, by faith, recognized the sign of salvation hidden in the form of an insignificant-looking baby.

The Sanhedrin took up stones against Stephen as he spoke to them about the Holy One of Israel, Jesus the Christ. Those in authority rebelled against John's preaching and exiled him to the island of Patmos. Herod had young boys slain because he feared that Jesus would assume the throne from him. These all lacked faith and rejected God, and so could not recognize the sign of salvation hidden in the form of an insignificant-looking baby and the uncomely and calloused carpenter and teacher he grew up to be.

For Elizabeth, Zechariah, the shepherds, Simeon, and Anna; for Stephen, John the Baptist, and John the Evangelist, Jesus was a sign for falling and rising. They all would be mocked, ridiculed, scorned, exiled, rejected, and killed because of the Infant Whose birth is celebrated here. Indeed, they all dealt with times of doubt and maybe faithlessness; times when they sinned against their God. But, as God dealt with them, their sins were revealed, confessed, and forgiven, and they were raised up and restored to faithfulness. They would all be raised up by Him, because they all could depart in peace, like Simeon, because He was their salvation...because, by faith, they received the sign!

Even for Mary, her Son was a sign for falling and rising. Simeon told her, “a sword will pierce through your own soul also.” She had to endure, first of all, the pangs and pains of birthing the Savior of the world. She had to endure, lastly, the pangs of pains of seeing her Son suffer and die on the cross. In between, there was the constant marveling at her Son, but also the rebuke from her Son when she misunderstood what He was. But she, like Elizabeth through John the Evangelist (and many others not mentioned), would be raised up by Him; she, too, could depart in peace, because her Son was also her Salvation...because, by faith, she received the sign.

But for the Sanhedrin, for those in authority against John the evangelist, for Herod, and for many, many others Jesus was a sign for falling only. While they certainly had power and authority for a while, by the sign of the infant, carpenter, and teacher (who was really God incarnate and the salvation of the world) the thoughts of their hearts were revealed—they were revealed for who they really were. They lacked faith and rejected God, and so they fell away from Him, unless they turned and repented.

And so it has been throughout the ages and to today as well. Through the sign of God incarnate in an ordinary-looking, even uncomely, infant, carpenter, and teacher, the thoughts of hearts are revealed. Now, you can cling to those thoughts—insisting on your ways and means—and remain

under judgment. And many do, from those insisting God do things their way to those calling the signs, words, and symbols of Christmas and Christendom offensive—they reject God and remain fallen. Or, when you are shown for who you are, you can “come clean in repentance” and there receive the gifts of salvation that raise you up.

These gifts also come in signs. There is, of course, the sign of the infant in the arms of Simeon. There is the sign of the Man beaten and dying on the cross. There is the sign of bread and wine. “We fall in repentance; we are raised by forgiveness and quickened,” as Dr. Nagel once said. And so, in this lowly sign of bread and wine, you receive the very body and blood of this Infant whose birth is celebrated. And remember, a sign is not merely a symbol, but is a means by which God contains and conveys what He is doing and giving! To quote Dr. Nagel again: “God’s messengers disclosed what was hidden in Mary’s baby. Christ’s own words disclose what is hidden in the bread and wine.” In the sign of bread and wine there is hidden salvation in the reception of the very body and blood of Christ, your Savior!

And, after gazing upon, even holding and consuming, the salvation of the world you repeat the words first uttered by Simeon:

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word:

For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,

Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;

A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.

Now, you can depart in peace. God had kept His promise to you because He has kept His promise to Eve, and you are all her sons and daughters—He had brought salvation into the world, and here has given it to you in the simple sign of water and word and bread and wine. Like Simeon, you can exclaim, “I am saved. What is the world to me? None else matters; my God reigns and saves! Death is nothing!” In sin you have fallen, but in the words of absolution and the Sacrament you are raised, having been joined closely with Christ and share in His life, won in His death on the cross. Therefore, you are forgiven for all of your sins!

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.