



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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JANUARY 1, 1017
THE SECOND SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS

Blessing for a New Beginning Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 2:21-32

When we were caroling a few weeks ago, we sang for the residents at Brookdale while they finished their evening meal. As we prepared to leave, Duffy Ward, not yet two years old, wriggled down from her mother's arms and toddled through the dining room. Everybody watched her and, as she passed one table, the gentleman sitting there smiled and reached out for her. Babies and small children are like animated magnets that draw us to these little packages of energy, innocence, and delight. The attraction only grows stronger as we get older. We even depict the new year as a baby, fresh, eager, and innocent, the ideal symbol for a new beginning.

It is no surprise that Simeon noticed the young couple entering the temple with a baby in arms. We know little about this man except that he was devout and elderly, someone who was expecting the Messiah during his lifetime. In fact, one of the few things we are told about Simeon is that he was promised by God that he would see the Messiah before he died.

Six week old Jesus caught his eye. At that point, a newborn is doing little more than moving around, testing out arms and legs, making funny faces and sounds. We cannot help but be pulled toward a baby and Simeon was drawn to Jesus and his parents.

I can't help but wonder if Simeon hung out at the temple day after day, stopping new parents as they went about their purification rituals, constantly on the lookout for God's Messiah. He could never do that today. He would be arrested or at least shooed away. In that time and culture, however, Simeon was clearly seen as someone who cared, who was interested in other people, who believed God was still active in the lives of his people. We wonder if he could merely look at a newborn and know immediately whether or not she was the Messiah? Was there some aura around the child that gave away the fact that he was God's long-awaited One? We don't know.

Simeon was an old man. He had lived a long time and had many dreams and hopes. He had seen a lot of things happen and had experienced many disappointments. Like every other Jew he knew, Simeon had prayed

for God's Messiah. But why this child? This couple? There were no special events taking place that would have been ideal for the birth of their Savior. Perhaps he had seen the star in the sky that had attracted the curiosity of so many other people. A month or more earlier, he might have heard people talk about the strange things a group of shepherds over toward Bethlehem claimed to have seen and heard while keeping their sheep one night. We don't know. The magi were still two years away and there is no reason to think that it was anything but an ordinary day at the temple. People were constantly going back and forth to pray, to give alms, and to make sacrifice for a variety of reasons. Why would Simeon zero in on this young family? We don't know.

No doubt Mary and Joseph were excited and nervous. They were used to coming to the temple every year, but never alone. Always before they were with family and friends from their village. And they had never been here for this reason. All Hebrew women underwent a period of purification after giving birth. Mary was anxious to find the merchants selling the doves and pigeons so they could make sacrifice and then be on their way home to Nazareth. She and Joseph were both anxious to be back in familiar surroundings among family. They were hurrying along to take care of their religious duties when this elderly man stopped them and offered strange words of blessing.

I think it may have been the parents who caught Simeon's attention. He had seen hundreds of new parents walk through the courtyard of the temple, but this pair of young people was different. Perhaps it was their optimism and awe surrounding the usual excitement and nervousness that caught his attention. They were about a business that was different from all of the other young couples in the courtyard. Simeon noticed and approached. When he saw the baby, somehow he knew Jesus was the Messiah and he understood that the parents of the Messiah needed blessing as well. He took the infant in his arms and prayed:

"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."

What relief it must have been to Mary and Joseph to know that someone else shared their secret. Someone else understood the burden and delight they carried wrapped in a swaddling cloth. Someone else recognized that God was present and at work in their lives!

Simeon's praise to God was a blessing to the young parents. His acknowledgment of who Jesus was relieved the stress of wondering if they had imagined it all, if they had understood correctly what was going on in their otherwise ordinary lives. Simeon's prayer of gratitude was a blessing of understanding and allowed the young parents to exhale and appreciate the moment.

Simeon himself was already living into the work that Jesus would do later in his life. He stated quite simply Jesus' purpose in coming into our lives--to be a blessing to the Jews and a light of revelation to the Gentiles. As it turned out, Jesus was a light of revelation to all people for even the Jews had to be enlightened about the true character of God. Jesus had come so that we might know who God is and share the light of that revelation with one another. We are to reveal God to the world. Simeon was the first to share that light.

On this Second Sunday of Christmas, the first day of the New Year, one of our resolutions might be to become a Simeon who, in word and action, reveals God to other people. Through our interest and affirmation of other people, we can be a blessing to them and reveal what God is doing in our midst. A few suggestions that are Simeon-like and reflect the character of God revealed in Jesus:

Live with kindness. We encounter people every day who hear nothing but complaints, orders, and criticism. A kind word or gesture reminds another person that they are special and worthy of goodness. We think of the time when Jesus encountered a group of lepers who were exiled from family and community because of their illness. Jesus approached them, healed them, and offered wholeness to them. Our kindness can bring such healing as well.

Listen with interest. We do not know all of Simeon's story, but surely Mary and Joseph told him all of the things that had happened concerning their baby. He listened and affirmed what God was doing in their lives. Jesus himself took time to listen to others and get to know them. When he met a Samaritan woman by Jacob's well, he listened to her story and invited her into his story as well. Sometimes getting to know another person better is the best gift we can give.

Speak with compassion. Simeon could have made a spectacle of this visit to the temple without regard for the needs of this young family, but he did not. His interest in God's Messiah did not supercede the need for Mary and

Joseph to go about their business calmly and quietly. Jesus was always attuned to the needs of other people. When a woman anointed his head with expensive perfume and washed his feet with her tears, He recognized the deep pain she felt and the risk she had taken to express her gratitude for him. He spoke to her and about her with compassion to let his rude host know that her expression of love superceded his lack of courtesy. Compassion is a gift that should be offered to all people.

Respond with generosity. Simeon offered blessing to God, to the baby Jesus, and to his parents. He blessed the people of the world. He declared the generosity of God for each and every one of us. Time and time again, Jesus himself reminded his followers that it was their responsibility to take care of one another. When crowds who walked long distances to hear him teach became hungry, Jesus would not allow his disciples to send them away. "You feed them!" he said and taught them the miracle of generosity when everyone does their part to care for one another.

Act with respect. Simeon honored Mary and Joseph and their baby by understanding their role in God's involvement in the world. Jesus learned firsthand how easily we criticize one another without critiquing ourselves. When religious leaders stirred up a crowd and were about to stone a woman because of her sin, Jesus challenged them to examine their own lives and then consider the appropriate punishment. When they left, he treated the accused woman with respect, encouraged her to sin no more, and offered her the dignity that had been stripped from her in many ways. Honoring the presence of God in one another is an important way to invite one another to live as God wants us to live.

Simeon was looking for God's involvement in the world. He recognized God's presence in the baby Jesus and with his parents. As he offered blessing to them, he offered blessing to us as well. He prayed for the light of God's presence to shine upon and within us, leading to salvation for the world. It is all about having the mind of Christ, as Paul reminds us, so that we think highly of one another and seek to serve one another.

Let us all choose to be more like Simeon who first reflected the light of Christ. In a world that desperately needs blessing, let us live with kindness, listen with interest, speak with compassion, respond with generosity, and act with respect. It will be a true blessing for a new beginning. Amen.

January 1, 2017

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We realize, O God, that a moment to you is like a thousand years to us, but we also know that each moment of our lives is precious to you. So as a new year for us begins today, we offer thanksgiving for all of the goodness that came our way during the twelve months just past.

For many people, it was a difficult year, O God. Illness, grief, financial challenges, job changes, political brutality, worldwide cruelty, and a growing bitterness toward one another bruised and battered many of us. For every time you calmed our fears, soothed our spirits, and healed our wounds, we are grateful. We thank you for each and every good gift you brought our way: family blessings, career enhancements, school successes, community achievements, church ministries, and personal well-being. For all of these blessings and many more, we are grateful.

Now, as we turn the page to another year, grant us renewed strength and courage to make our world better. Help us learn to love one another in genuine and creative ways. Guide us to be better people than we have been before and to encourage others as they journey the path they have chosen. Bless our community and nation with renewed respect for one another and an appreciation for what we all bring to the goodwill of the whole. Temper our criticism so that constructive suggestions are offered instead of hurtful insults. Cool our hatred toward others so that we recognize brothers and sisters in the people we so vehemently oppose. Warm our spirits to the goodness that you have placed within each of us so that in whatever we do, others are blessed.

Above all, O God, grant us the courage to follow Jesus in the way he walks, to the places he goes, and for the people he loves. Teach us to love ourselves so that we might better love one another and to love others so that we might learn to love ourselves. Grant us your grace, we pray, to live the life you have offered to us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.