

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, December 17, 2023

Friends, on this third Sunday of Advent, we continue in our worship series that we've called a Weary World Rejoices. We're going to read today from The Gospel according to Luke, the second chapter, starting in the 25th verse. There's an interesting thing that the folks who came up with the Narrative Lectionary—the gift that they've given us today. So this story that we're going to read is actually from after Jesus's birth, okay? What we know about the Advent season is that this is a season of waiting, and the waiting that we often think of is the waiting for the birth of the Christ Child. But one of the other things as people of faith that we claim in this season and that is that Christ will come again. And so there's a sort of preparation and waiting that we are all engaged in right now. And so this story from Luke, I think, reminds us that there are things after Christ is born that help us to prepare for Christ coming in our midst.

We're going to read from the Gospel of Luke, but before we do, let us join our hearts in prayer. Let's pray together.

Let your spirit move amongst us once again this morning, oh God. Let it bring with it a deep sense of peace. Let it fall fresh and quiet us, that we might hear your word for us this day. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

So, beginning in the 25th verse of the second chapter of the Gospel according to Luke—

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon]came into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

*“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.”*

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

Tell me you're from South Carolina without telling me you're from South Carolina. I know the day that I bought my first full-size pickup truck—April 6, 2014. I'd been looking for it about 6

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months. It was a GMC. It was a 2012, only had about 29,000 miles on it, and I found it for a song. They had traded into a Lexus dealership, who didn't know what to do with a pickup truck; and so I'd found it online. I preached the sermon in Madison, Georgia, and I got in my Blazer, and I made my way down to pick it up. I'd done one of those things on cars.com, where you spend 100 bucks, it reserves the car for you. Right after I got done with worship, I got a call from my father, who told me, "You need to come to Clemson as soon as you can." So my grandparents had retired to Lake Hartwell there in the mid 70s. My grandmother had already passed away. My grandfather was my only surviving grandparent. It had been grace that they had not shared with me that he, um, had not been doing well, to the extent that he was in hospice care. And so I said, "Sure, I'll...I'll come. I need to go...I need to drive down and grab this new car, but then I'll come up." And my dad said, "Come as quick as you can. He's waiting for you." So I made my way, and I got the new truck, and I drove it up to Clemson. And when I got there, all the family was in the room. We have a small nuclear family, but everybody was there; and my grandfather kind of motioned for everybody to leave. My grandfather and I were, uh, I wouldn't say too close. I can't remember deep conversations that we had had. I've talked about them here before, but what it turned out was that he needed to share some things with me, in his final moments of life, that were incredibly important for him. In fact, he'd been pretty restless all day waiting for me to get there. So we spent time together, just a few minutes by ourselves in that room. What he said to me, it's not important for y'all to know, but what's important for you to know is that when he was done speaking, I could see in his body that he was being released from something. What he had shared with me had, what he had confessed was...a weight had been lifted with that, right?

Maybe you've had final moments with somebody that you deeply love. Maybe there were words spoken, maybe not, but what I witnessed that day was an overwhelming sense of peace fall over my grandfather. And I went outside and talked with the family, and it wasn't an hour later that he passed away. An old man needing to say a word to his grandson, a word that brought for him a deep sense of peace.

We find Simeon, another old man, who's been waiting. He, a faithful man, scripture says. Devout is the description. You can imagine that Simeon was one who came to worship every week at the temple, observed Sabbath, was righteous before God and his neighbors; and he'd been waiting, waiting for the work of God in his life, in the community that he loved, and in the world. And it turns out that in Simeon's waiting we have something to learn. I think it's a beautiful thing that the Narrative Lectionary composers have gifted us with—this lesson of an old faithful person waiting for, expectantly, the kingdom of God to come. In his waiting we learn a few things. The first that we read in scripture is that the Holy Spirit was present in Simeon's waiting. That's really interesting. Many of you have read of this day as a celebration of this Christmas season that we're moving into, right? Still Advent, but we'll get there, right? We wear red another day of the year. That's on Pentecost. I'm not sure about you. I don't think a whole lot about the Holy Spirit when I think about Advent. I think about it, out several months from now during Pentecost, but scripture tells us that the Holy Spirit of God was present here with Simeon. Don't miss that. Scripture says that the Holy Spirit rested on him, that the Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he

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would see the Messiah of the Lord, and that on that fateful morning the Holy Spirit guided him. Simeon had been going to the temple over and over and over again, even with this knowledge that something was going to be revealed to him; but every single Sabbath day he had made his way back home, and it had not happened. But then on that particular day he makes his way to the temple. It happens to be 33 days after the birth of Jesus. If you read a little bit more in the text, you realize that this ritual that Mary and Joseph and Jesus were going to take part in was a ritual of...of cleansing, of preparation to re-enter the community and the temple; not cleansing from sin, not at all, but cleansing and preparation to join in worship. And we get to witness this seasoned man, we get to witness his waiting coming to an end. We get to see him make his way to the temple, and then we see this couple. You can imagine he might have seen them far off. They came up, and the second he saw this child, he grabbed this child in his arms and held him. In order for a mother or a father to allow that to happen, you...you have to imagine that Simeon was one of those men, one of those people at the church that loved children, that cared for them and nurtured them, maybe was a baptism buddy, right? What we see is—he scoops up Jesus, and in that moment he knows exactly what it is that he is experiencing.” 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. This child, a light of revelation to the Gentiles, for glory for the people Israel.” Simeon knows in the moment what he is experiencing, but he doesn't actually know it fully, does he? He knows that he is experiencing the salvation of God here. What I love about this moment is how he begins it. “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace.” What we learn in Simeon's waiting is that he has given a gift that allows him to let go. He has given a movement of the spirit of God in Christ that allows him to take a deep breath and be at peace. This is the key that we get to witness.

And, here's the thing, Simeon's not going to get to live to see the rest of the story. He's not going to live to see this small child that he's taken in his arms to grow up and to show up as an early teen in the temple and start reading scripture before everyone. He's not going to get lost in the church, right? And then show up and read scripture in front of everyone, right? He's not going to get to see three years of ministry, and, thank God, he's not going to have to see what happens on Calvary. But what he does see in that moment, he knows to be the salvation of God. What I love is that all Simeon needs is just a glimpse of a child, and yet for him, it is enough to let go. Letting go, it turns out, Beloved, is all about trust. Letting go and being at peace is trusting that God is at work in what you are navigating, and what we are navigating together. I love how Craig Coaster, a professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary puts it. He says, “Simeon trusts that he has had an encounter with God, and he trusts that God will carry the story forward. He does not know how, but he knows it will happen.” So by placing the story of Simeon for us here on this third Sunday of Advent, the authors of the Narrative Lectionary, they frame an opportunity for each of us in this season as well. We are invited, yay encouraged, yay called to examine the things that we are waiting for, and then to imagine what it would look like to hold those with an open hand and let them go. Much easier said than done. You can imagine Simeon had made his way over and over and over again to that place. He might have even told a few friends what the spirit had revealed to him, and every time he came home, they'd call him and say, “Did it happen? Didn't happen.” Imagine it had to be tiring, exhausting, to go back over and over, even

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though he was faithful and devout. But the hope that he had continued to carry him to that place, for Simeon in this moment when he says, "Your peace has fallen upon me. You are dismissing me with Your blessing." When he says this, the act of letting go is not an act of despair. It is an act of gratitude to God for what has been revealed. It is Simeon's way of being faithful.

What are you waiting for in this Advent season? What are you expectant of?

Does it have to do with your friendship, or your marriage?

Does it have to do with work, or your faith?

What have you decided you know, what have you decided that you are sure you know the outcome of? Right? Are you holding it open before God or clutching it tightly?

What might it look like to trust that the spirit of God is moving?

What might it look like to be attentive with eyes open to the small, maybe even seemingly insignificant, Divine nudge, and then to trust that that's enough?

Easier said than done, I know.

But here's the thing. We practice it every week. You leave this place, and one of us preaches for 15 or 20 or 25 minutes, and maybe you catch one word. Maybe the Spirit gives you one word in that. Or you show up on Friday, or you listen to our choir on Sunday. And there is one note that pierces your soul, brings tears to your eyes. Maybe a prayer is lifted, and it connects with you in a way you didn't know it was going to connect with you. Or someone greets you with a smile or a hug when you are grieving, and it's just that one little thing that's enough. We're practiced in this...this act that Simeon is practicing of taking the small experience of the Divine and allowing it to bring us peace. We do it at the communion table. You don't eat a whole loaf or drink a whole cup. You get a small morsel and just a bit of the juice, and what we claim together is that that is enough for the journey ahead.

Simeon is a righteous and faithful person showing up over and over and over again. What we learn from him in this season is that the Spirit is indeed at work even now, resting, revealing, and leading you and us. So my prayer for us in this Advent is that we might receive a measure of the peace that Simeon claims, that when you leave this place your shoulders might be lowered, your breath a little slower. You might trust and believe that God is indeed at work. May we receive this story. May we let go what we need to let go.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all.
Amen.