

An Advent Prayer

“Israel’s Strength and Consolation, Hope of All the Earth Thou Art: Away in the Temple — The Only Place for the Messiah”

Luke 2:22-32

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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.” (Luke 2:22-32, ESV)*

We are coming to the end of our Advent season and sermons. It is three days before Christmas. We have been following the hymn, “Come Thou Long Expected Jesus,” to set up this sermon series. The themes of hope, freedom, and fear have been preached as we recall the first advent and anticipate the final coming of our Lord. Today we will approach the reality that Jesus is the consolation of His people, both Jews and Gentiles. We will look at an interesting story in Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus to better perceive the reality of Jesus and His advent for the world. Let me give you a brief overview of the context of our passage in Luke and in the larger Biblical story.

1. The symbols of Christmas

Where’s the temple in the plays? I am sure that we have all been to a Christmas play and seen the renditions of the Christmas story. You know – the usual props used to bring the story to life. Not in any particular order, we see shepherds in the field with staffs and maybe sheep of some sort. We also see angels in the sky somewhere praising God. A manger is necessary to set the stage well (even though most of us have never seen a manger except at Christmas, we know what it is). There may also be a star, a donkey, maybe some magi (wise men) who actually were not at the manger but came maybe a year after Jesus’ birth, and probably other characters.

In light of the context of our text in Luke this morning, I want to proclaim that we need to add another prop to our plays of Christmas. We need to add a temple. The temple was huge in Luke's account. Luke starts with a story of Zechariah, who was a priest, and his wife, Elizabeth, who was a relative of Mary. Zechariah was assigned temple duty in chapter 1. In chapter 2 of Luke, the usual Christmas characters come on the scene—Herod, Mary, Joseph, manger, swaddling clothes, shepherds, sheep, angels, etc. Our text picks up the story in verse 22 by going back to the temple and telling of Simeon and Anna, both temple people. So we should add the temple to our Christmas plays.

2. The significance of the temple

You may not think the temple seems very Christmas-like. It does not make for a fun story. It does, however, have a great history that very much helps us to see Christmas in its full glory. The key to the temple is simply that it is the place of the presence of God in His creation. It signifies presence. Where the temple is, there is God. Obviously God is everywhere present (good theological point), but He has chosen to have His presence localized as His people worship Him.

Here is a bullet point survey of some of the temple highlights in the Bible:

- Eden was God's first temple (Gen. 1 & 2)—God's presence was clearly in the garden
- The tabernacle was the mobile location of God's presence—Ex. 40:34
- Solomon's temple was the permanent location of God's presence—2 Chron. 7:1
- The second temple was built by Zerubbabel and renovated by Herod—Ezra 6:14
- Jesus says He is the temple (the presence of God in the flesh)—Jn. 1:14 (dwelt or tabernacle among us)
- The church is His body, indwelt by the Holy Spirit and called His temple—I Cor. 3:16
- In the final new earth—there will be no temple—God is there and His presence fills all the earth—Rev. 21:22

The Christmas story is full of temple significance. The temple, in Jesus' time, did not have the fullness of the presence of God, and the people knew it (mostly). God's presence comes to the world in Jesus, the Son of God. His presence is here, and His own received it not. In this account of Luke, we will see the concept of the presence of Messiah come to reality as Simon sees Jesus.

Luke 2 helps us to see three steps to the reality of being the temple of God today

I. Serious obedience is necessary to be the temple of God today—Luke 2:22-24

Verse 22—The “time came for their purification” according to the Law of Moses. Mary was a devout follower of the LORD and His Law. She was well taught in the law and knew the stipulations. The law for purification for a new mother was that she was unclean for seven days with a son and waited 33 days to offer a sacrifice to complete the purification (see Lev. 12). From our perspective that seems a bit strange, but God wanted His people to be aware of His grace in the forgiving of His children, the transmission of sin, and the need for purification in all areas of life.

Mary, who may have been a bit humiliated by the unusual circumstances of the conception, still followed God's law and went up to Jerusalem with two purposes—to offer her sacrifice for purification and to present her first born son to the Lord.

Verse 23—Luke inserts a parenthetical statement concerning the Law of the Lord (notice that the Law of the Lord and the Law of Moses are the same thing, meaning that Moses wrote the very words of God). In Exodus 13:2,12 Moses says that all firstborn sons were to be set apart to the LORD, and Num. 18:16 says the redemption cost of the firstborn was five silver shekels. Think of the irony of this in light of the whole story of Jesus. He is the one who comes to redeem the lives of His people, and He has to be redeemed for money. It is also ironic that pagans were known for offering their firstborn sons as a death sacrifice to the gods (like their animals), but Israel uses a substitute (silver) to redeem their firstborn sons.

Verse 24—Mary now offers the sacrifice of a poor person, which is four birds. She did this as it was stated in the Lord's law. She was obedient. I think Mary had all the reasons in the world to not obey that law. She lived out of town, in Galilee, and no one would know if she did the sacrifice or not. Some already thought she was immoral and that her son was a product of that immorality, so what does she gain by following this law? She could say that she had given birth to the Messiah and that everyone should be giving her (or Him) sacrifices and money. Besides, it is a funny law, and who cares anyway? Disobedience to the Lord is easy to justify if we do not desire to draw near to the reality of God.

Application

1. Do not expect to know the presence of the Lord and to be His temple unless you are willing to obey Him.
2. The beginning of obedience to the Lord is to throw off our self-effort and to trust in Him for salvation. If you have not trusted Jesus today, come to Him in faith and trust in Him for salvation.
3. We who call ourselves Christians this Christmas need to be obeying Him. We need to live out His presence, as we are His temple. For some of us, that may mean to stop sinning. Some probably think the law of the Lord in regards to the permanence of marriage is outdated. Some may think that their fear is not disobedience. Some may consider that their lack of sharing their faith is no big deal. Being the temple of God will mean that we obey God with our lives.

II. Patient perseverance is necessary to be the temple of God today—Lk. 2:25-27

Verse 25—A new character, whose name is Simeon, is introduced. His location is still in the temple (like the story of Luke 1). There are three statements on his resume in this text. First, he was "righteous and devout" as a good Hebrew who was committed to the Lord and His covenant. Second, he was patient, as he was "waiting for the consolation of Israel." This description means that he was looking for the Deliverer, the Messiah who would redeem Israel and set up His

kingdom. Third, he was one on whom the Holy Spirit of God dwelt. That is an astounding statement since it was well before Pentecost (Acts 2), yet the Holy Spirit was very active and was upon Simeon. I think we could say he was filled with the Holy Spirit. He was close to God so that the he was led by and belonged to the Holy Spirit. What a resume for any person in Israel (or today).

Verse 26—The Holy Spirit promised to Simeon that he would stay alive long enough to see the Messiah of the Lord. The term Messiah has great Old Testament implications. The Messiah would be the anointed Son of David who would rule on His throne forever. He would be the strength of Israel and the hope of all the world. To see the Lord's Messiah would be to see all that matters in the world. By faith, he trusted for all these years that the Holy Spirit would be correct and he would see the Messiah. It is obvious to him that if he wanted to see the Messiah, he would go to the temple to see this one. That is where God resides. He probably had come to the temple hundreds, and maybe thousands, of times looking to see if this was the day. He was following his normal routine, and this day changes everything.

Application

1. Be the temple of God today we need to be patient as God does His work. That is hard but necessary as we wait for His final coming.
2. Sometime the days seem long—long-term illness, repeated and relentless temptations to sin, fear of the unknown, etc. We cry with the martyrs under the throne in Revelation: "How Long O Lord."
3. We must persevere with a "Long obedience in the same direction." Be ready for His return.
4. Trust in the persevering strength of the Holy Spirit. Do not give up this Christmas. The Lord is faithful.

III. To live as the temple of God, we must live like Jesus is not just a concept but is reality – Luke 2:28-32

Verse 28—Faith becomes sight, sort of . . . Simeon saw the Messiah and held Him in his arms. Most would not think you could hold a Messiah in your arms. He would be too big, like a massive warrior who will defeat all the foes—not a little baby. Simeon exercised his eyes of faith so well that he could see what others missed. He saw in Jesus the promise of the ages and the hope of every heart. For Simeon, the concept of Messiah turns into reality—he holds His Creator and Redeemer.

The story we have looked at today is the story of an old man named Simeon. He is not one of the most famous Christmas figures (I hope that changes this morning), but he is important. He is one who experienced the move from "concept to reality." What does that mean? He had a concept of the Messiah that moved to reality in one short experience. It is a wonderful thing when something moves from a concept to a reality. Here are a few illustrations. Tim Keller preached a sermon on Is.

6 where Isaiah sees the Lord in the temple and is blown away with His majesty. Isaiah says “woe is me” and wants to crawl into a hole. Then he is cleansed of his sin, and when asked, says—“I will go to serve you, Lord.” His world had been rocked by the Lord, and the concept of God was now reality for him.

I remember at Christmas time wanting a Johnny Unitas football uniform. I dreamed of it, and on Christmas day, I got the uniform, and the concept turned into reality (except the number on the jersey was 12 not 19). This last summer Cathy and I went to Israel, and Bethlehem turned from a concept to a reality, as did the shepherd’s field, Jerusalem, Galilee, etc. You can think of experiences where a concept turns into reality. I think that many of us come to Christmas 2013 with a concept of Jesus, but there is no reality to it. It does not change our lives much. Look at the verses of Simeon’s praise and see how it affected him.

Verses 29-32—There are three key words in the blessing of Simeon that help us to see the change from concept to reality:

a. “Peace”—If God is real, it will result in peace. Peace for Simeon made death okay for him. Peace is the assurance that it is well with my soul. It is the Hebrew word “Shalom,” and it is the hopeful word that God is fixing this world and that His Messiah (Jesus) will provide the world with hope for all to be made right. There was still fighting in the world of Simeon, but he knew the peace that is real only in Jesus.

b. “Salvation”—If God is real, He will have a means to be near to Him. This is a well known Hebrew concept. The Messiah would save the Jews from their oppressors. Simeon realized the oppressors of Israel were bigger than the Romans. It was the forces of evil in the world. This Messiah had come for the salvation of God’s people. Not only would He make the world right (Peace), but He would save those who were in captivity to the world system. Messiah would go after His people and bring them to Himself. Simeon saw this reality in the face of the baby Jesus.

c. “Presence of all the peoples”—If God is real, that changes everything in the world. God’s Messiah has a mission. Those who know the reality and presence of God want to join in the mission. It is to all peoples. It is for Israel, and for the Gentiles. It is what a real God would do—save the world.

Conclusion: So how can I come to see Jesus as reality and not just as a nice concept?

1. Become a child of God by faith in Jesus. Here is the call of Christmas and Simeon. Do not live any longer as an admirer of the concept of Jesus. Jump into his life, or better, have Him jump into your life. Today, repent of your sin (thinking of Jesus as a concept), and trust in Him as your Savior, committing your life to Jesus (because He is real).

2. Get into the Word of God. If He is real—read His Word like it is real. There are so many great places to start. Find a partner with whom to read the Bible. Cathy and I read it daily and love it. Do short sections if needed, but do it, realizing the reality of the author and His desire for you. We should only talk to real people—and if God is real—talk to Him.

3. Worship the Lord corporately—If He is real, we would worship Him together as His people, with passion and fervor.

4. Suffer, knowing that God is real and is touched with the feeling of our infirmities. He is a man of sorrow – really.

5. Get behind the mission of God. He is out to have His glory cover the world as the water covers the sea. It seems to me that if God is only a concept, the idea of missions is overkill. It is way too extreme. Spending thousands of dollars to translate the Word is a waste. BUT if He is real, we must be active to share in His mission of being a light for the Gentiles and the glory for Israel.

This Christmas, may you and yours know the reality of the presence of God in Jesus through His Holy Spirit. May He not just be another cute concept, but may He be so real that we experience Him in His temple, which is His church, like never before. It will change your life and it will change our church.

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