

**The Cliffhanger**

New Year's Eve

No AtG

December 31, 2023

**Scripture: Luke 2:22-40**

<sup>22</sup> 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 <sup>23</sup> (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), <sup>24</sup> and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

<sup>25</sup> 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. <sup>26</sup> It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. <sup>27</sup> 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, <sup>28</sup> Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

<sup>29</sup> “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; <sup>30</sup> for my eyes have seen your salvation, <sup>31</sup> which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, <sup>32</sup> a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

<sup>33</sup> And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.

<sup>34</sup> Then Simeon 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 <sup>35</sup> so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed — and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

<sup>36</sup> There was also a prophet, Anna 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, <sup>37</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup> At that moment she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.*

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

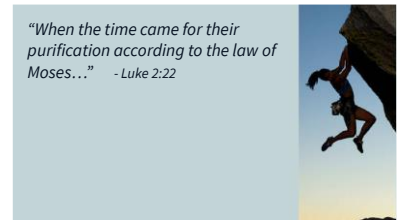


Well, the holiday frenzy is almost over. Some of you may go out tonight to celebrate New Year's. At my house we'll try and stay up at least to 9 pm. At that time you can ring in the New Year with Greenland and much of South America. Whoo-hoo.

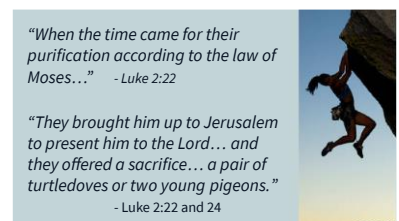
In today's scripture we get a glimpse into the early childhood of Jesus. But here and now we are in that in-between time of Christmas and the beginning a new year. In our church, in the new year we are undertaking a wonderful project – reading through the whole Bible in a year. This may even be a New Year's resolution for some of us. Maybe the resolution as you start a new year. If so, welcome to my club.

In Christmas we celebrate a miracle – God incarnate coming into the world. Once we receive this gift, it changes our life forever. In this in-between time of the year, though, we move from the miracle into focusing on the new year with reflection and resolution. We take time to look back on 2023 and we try to resolve our regrets for the new year that begins tomorrow. Today, later in worship, we will commit ourselves to a renewed journey of faith for 2024. As we prepare for this time together, let us pray...

Turn with me to Luke 2 as we walk with Mary and Joseph and Jesus through his first significant church experience. Our passage begins with these words: *“When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses...”* Mary and Joseph were devout Jews who sought to love God and to follow the law of Moses. This is, again, precisely why God selected this couple as the earthly parents of Jesus. The Law of Moses prescribed a 40-day period of ritual purification after childbirth. When the 40 days were over, a couple would bring their firstborn child to the temple to give an offering to redeem their child. According to the law as originally written, every firstborn male, whether human or animal, was to be offered to the Lord.



In Numbers 3, God provides a way to redeem the firstborn instead of giving them to the Lord. In this chapter, God declares that the Levites, the descendants of Aaron, will serve as priests in the temple, alleviating the need for the firstborn sons to serve. Traveling to Jerusalem, we read that *“they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord... and they offered a sacrifice... a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”* This was the sacrifice prescribed for the poor. During this trip, Jesus would also officially be named, and he would be circumcised, both according to the traditions and rituals spelled out in the law.

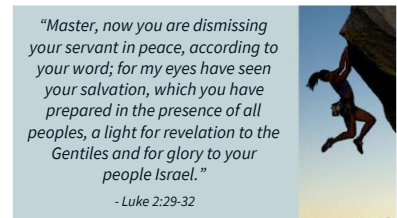


If the story were to end here, with redeeming done and the naming and circumcising soon to follow, it might feel like a neat and tidy close to Jesus' birth narrative. But the story does not end here. There are loose ends left hanging.

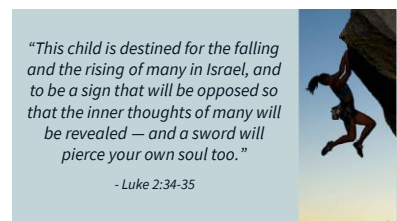


In the stories of Simeon and Anna we are left with a cliffhanger, with a hint that the story has really just begun. As we continue in the text we are introduced to Simeon. Like Elizabeth and Zechariah, Simeon was devout. These three represent part of the righteous remnant of Israel that yet truly awaits the Messiah and God's salvation. We read that he was *"looking forward to the consolation of Israel"* – Simeon was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel. So devout and dedicated was Simeon to seeing God's promises fulfilled, it is said that the Holy Spirit rested upon him. It is the Spirit that guides Simeon to the temple just as Jesus is brought by Mary and Joseph.

I can see Simeon swooping Jesus up in his arms as he joyfully proclaims, *"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."* Simeon can now depart this world in peace, knowing that the Messiah has come – not just to the Jews, but to all peoples, even to include the Gentiles.



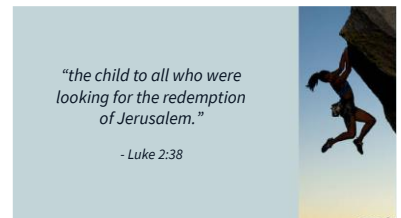
Before leaving the temple, Simeon blessed Jesus and then he speaks these words over Mary and Jesus: *"This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed — and a sword will pierce your own soul too."* These words speak of the Israelites who will fall because they will reject Jesus as the Messiah.



They speak of inner thoughts revealed – of whether Israel’s true heart is for God or against God. They speak of a group of religious leaders who will betray Jesus unto death. And these words speak of Mary’s time before the cross of Jesus, where her heart will be pierced with great pain as she witnessed her son’s rejection, persecution, and death on the cross.

These are words that still apply to our lives today. While the rising and falling is far beyond the reaches of Israel, each day people make the decision to reject or to follow Jesus. Each day the Spirit continues to whisper and nudge, to convict and to guide, revealing the deepest, innermost thoughts of us all. Some reject the movements of the Spirit; others choose to listen and to follow. And the sword of truth continues to pierce hearts and souls, drawing some closer to Christ, deepening the divide in others. In his words, Simeon proclaimed that Jesus was sent to walk down a prophetic path, fulfilling the ancient prophecies and demonstrating the faithfulness and love of God to God’s people and to the world. My brothers and sisters in Christ, we too are called to walk this path as we seek to follow Jesus.

Anna the prophet also echoes the words of Simeon. In verses 36 and 37 we learn that she has long lived in the temple, fasting and praying both day and night. Seemingly as Simeon releases Jesus back to Mary and Joseph, Anna comes and praises God for the gift of Jesus, as she too speaks about *“the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.”* As Mary and Joseph finish the requirements of the law and depart for home, there is no question about who or what Jesus is or will be.



Returning home, our passage closes by telling us that Jesus grew strong, was filled with wisdom, and had the favor of God upon him. He lives into what Simeon and Anna both spoke over and about him.



As we draw to a close of the Christmas season, we acknowledge that the whole Christmas story names and claims the process in which we are to live out our faith. We sit today with something stirring inside of us, knowing in our hearts that the story of Christ is not over – it has only just begun. As the credits roll on this Advent season, we feel as if we await the new thing that God has for us in our lives.

In our world, maybe now more than ever, people need to hear of and experience hope, joy, peace, and love. Now more than ever people need to hear of and receive mercy, grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Now more than ever, people need to be drawn into a faith community, where they can experience belonging, where they can find meaning and purpose and contentment. Brothers and sisters in Christ, as we walk in Jesus' footsteps, surrounded by God's guidance and by the Holy Spirit's power, may we be grounded in a real faith, may we strive to live an active faith, and may our obedient faith lead us to play our role in Jesus' unfolding story of love. May it be so for you and for me. Alleluia and amen.

**GPS – Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow*. As we lean into 2024, what new or expanded role might God have for you in Jesus' unfolding story? What might help you step into that role?
- 2) *Pray*. As you reflect on 2023, what faith commitments do you wish you kept better? Offer prayers of repentance and for God's strength to lead in 2024.
- 3) *Study*. Read the "Introduction" section in your Bible. If there is not one there, read this one at <https://www.christianbiblereference.org/summary.htm>