

December 31, 2017 New Year's Eve / First Sunday of Christmas
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Luke 2:22-40

A Glimpse and an Embrace

December 31st, New Year's Eve -- it's a holiday, or almost one, and not a particularly religious one. I did not expect to see too many people here this morning—not to mention this awful cold! It's good to see you here this morning!

In our cultural imagination, one of the images that comes to mind with this holiday is an infant, the new year's baby. There's an infant in today's gospel reading—but it's not the new year's baby, it's baby Jesus, of course. A week ago we celebrated Jesus' birth, hearing that familiar story from Luke two with the manger and the shepherds. Today we hear a story that is probably less familiar, even though it follows directly after that, the story of Jesus' "Presentation," when Mary and Joseph bring baby Jesus to the Temple. This presentation is a Jewish religious rite that goes all the way back to the Exodus, to Passover, when Israel's firstborn sons were protected by God. That memory became a ritual, recorded and prescribed in the book of Leviticus. That Mary and Joseph observe this rite shows that they are religiously observant. That you are here in church this morning, suggests that you are, too.

There may not have been many people at the Temple that morning, maybe as few as five, if we go with the ones Luke mentions by name: Mary and Joseph and Jesus, and then two other people who are only mentioned in Luke and only here in this chapter. Since you came to church today, you get to hear their story, the story of a woman named Anna, and a man named Simeon.

Anna and Simeon are as old as Jesus is young. Luke tells us that Anna is eighty-four, which is incredible, if you consider the average life expectancy back then. It can't have been much past forty, if that. And Anna is more than twice that. Even more incredible, she's spent most of it in the Temple. Luke says, "She never left it, night and day." There are people in this congregation who could be described like that, even if their name isn't Anna. God bless them, those people who come by our holy places at all odd hours, worshiping God with all the things they do: setting up for the service, straightening out the library, balancing the checkbook, tending the church garden and surrounding grounds, organizing the Sunday School, hosting coffee hour, cleaning up the kitchen, these and all kinds of other things. God bless these Annas who worship God, and help others worship God, by what they do in this holy place.

An old man named Simeon was also there that day, Luke says, but Luke doesn't say exactly how old Simeon is. Instead of a number, Luke offers this vivid description of age: Simeon is just hanging on to see one last thing before he dies. With this in mind, we could think of Simeon's life span in terms of a year—which would make Simeon's age the same as today's date, December 31st, but even later in the day than now, just before midnight, 11:59 pm—because Simeon is just hanging on for one more minute, for one more thing: to see the Messiah.

Maybe Luke describes Simeon's age like that for dramatic effect—or maybe it's because Luke didn't know Simeon's age. Maybe Simeon himself doesn't know his age. And maybe Simeon also didn't know he was just that close to seeing the Messiah. Maybe Simeon got up that morning, feeling cold and creaky, feeling kind of old. Maybe Simeon wasn't sure that he would go to the Temple that day but then he thought, well, I might as well. Maybe it had just become his habit, didn't matter if it was sort of a holiday. Maybe he was supposed to be the reader that day, or communion assistant, or a greeter. The Bible says that it was the Holy Spirit that told Simeon to go, but sometimes that's how the Holy Spirit speaks, by putting you on the schedule to help out with worship. So Simeon gets up and goes, he stands at the doorway of the sanctuary, wearing his name tag, (we do know his name, after all). Simeon smiles at the people who are coming in for worship. There may not have been a lot of people that day, but Simeon thinks to himself, he's glad he came. He thinks, even if it's only a couple people, I'll let them know I'm glad they came, too.

And then this couple comes in, a couple with a baby—and it's the one Simeon has been waiting his whole life to see. Simeon drops the stack of bulletins he's been holding and takes the baby into his arms. Simeon holds the baby Jesus, and everything is new. Simeon says: "Now I've seen it. I have seen the Lord's salvation for all people.

It's a wonderful pronouncement, practically floats melodically off the page. It's an incredible pronouncement—especially when you consider all that Simeon doesn't see. Simeon doesn't see Jesus as a grown man--Simeon would have been long dead by then. Simeon never would have heard Jesus preach, and teach. Simeon doesn't see Jesus healing, or casting out demons. Simeon doesn't watch Jesus break down barriers, eat with outcasts and sinners, bless children. And Simeon doesn't witness Jesus' death and resurrection. Simeon doesn't see any of that. All Simeon gets is a glimpse, a glimpse of a baby, but still Simeon says, "Now I've seen it." And not just that, Simeon says, "Now I can die." With just a glimpse, how can Simeon make such a claim?

It's a question not just for Simeon, but for us. We don't get much more than a glimpse, either. We've got some accounts of who Jesus was, and what he did, but they're pretty old. Can you trust anything that's so last year, so last millenium? Christian faith itself can seem pretty dated. We could discount it in that way—in the way that the old are so often discounted. Or we could discriminate against it in another way: for its meagerness, for how abbreviated the Biblical account is, and for how little we do with it. How very small it seems in the face of everything, so very small. Not much bigger than a baby. We could pass right over it. We could pass over this story of the presentation, and others too. What point is there to religion, anyway? Isn't just something for the very old, or the very young? Why bother with the rites? Why go to church?

We could say that, or we could do what Anna does: we could worship God, day and night, we could live in such a way that that same thing is said about us, that we are prophets, who praise God, who tell others of God's redemption. We could live our whole life long as worship, and make it possible for other people to do that, too. That's what Annas do. And we could do what Simeon does. We could keep coming to our holy places, not knowing what we'll see there, but knowing that the Spirit is sending us there. Like Simeon we could keep on living, not knowing when but knowing that salvation is coming. That is what it means to live in faith, not knowing when, but knowing that. We, like Simeon, could hold on to that—and hold on to the baby, too, like Simeon. Simeon holds the baby. It is a tender and moving and even surprising detail in this wonderfully important story that we get to hear today. Considering the time and culture in which this story was recorded, it is a wonderfully tender surprise that it is the old man who takes and cradles the baby in his arms. Simeon reaches out and takes into his arms baby Jesus, the newborn neck and back still weak, the skin so soft and tender, tissue thin. Simeon holds the baby and as he does so he sees something else, too. Simeon has a premonition of that back against a beam, of that skin being pierced—and Mary's heart, too. Simeon knows this vision is true; Simeon is too old to pretend that life progresses without pain. Nor will salvation. We too could hold that truth, as Simeon does. We could hold that truth, as we hold the body of the Savior at holy communion, as we remember the death he died, the love he gave, the new life he offers.

That's why we come here, at every age. We come to see and hold Christ. We come so we can say, as Simeon does, "Now I've seen it, God's salvation, for all people." We come to sing those words. We often sing them right after communion, but we're singing it after the sermon today, the song Simeon, often referred to by its Latin name, the Nunc Dimitis – which translated means "Now release," or, more bluntly, "Now I can die," or to put it yet another way: "This is what I've been living for." Let this be our song, our new life, this new year, "This is what I live for."