

Year B First Sunday after Christmas 2023 The March of Time Luke 2 vv22 to 40

Tonight at midnight, many people – perhaps some of *us*, the ones who can stay awake – will be ringing in the new calendar year of 2024. One familiar symbol used at New Year is the image of Father Time. Father Time usually holds a new born baby – the baby year about to begin. Father Time is an old man, with a long white beard, stooped over with age, carrying an hour glass and a scythe. The scythe is a farming tool – a long, curved blade on a wooden handle – used to cut down whatever crop stands before you needing to be cut down. In the hands of Father Time, the scythe is meant to represent the relentless march of time – cutting down whatever stands before it. Endings are inevitable says Father Time. Death is an inevitable conclusion to all life. Even that new born baby in his arms will die. It will be a new baby in his arms next year. What we may call the natural circle of life...the birth...growth...and death of people, of nature, of institutions, and even societies...is the source of hopelessness for many, the breeding ground of despair for many. It is often the excuse for “living it up” and the reason for taking risks because, why not? We’re all going to die anyway.

Today, Luke presents us with a very different portrait of a white-bearded old man holding up a new born baby. For us, in contrast to the defeat felt in the face of the relentless march of time, for us this portrait – of Simeon holding the baby Jesus – is the source of joy and hope. Let’s explore why this is so.

We begin with Mary and Joseph – the new, very happy but also likely very exhausted parents of the new born, Jesus. They have made the journey from Nazareth to the temple in Jerusalem because they are following the Jewish purity laws. Make no mistake, not every young Jewish couple with a new born made that

trip...it took time, it took energy, and it took resources. Luke wants us to realize that Mary and Joseph are dedicated followers of Jewish laws and customs and this will be the experience of Jesus, too, as he grows into adulthood. We know from our own experience, that what happens to us and around us as we grow, shapes us into the people we will become. Jesus is being shaped into a dedicated and knowledgeable follower of Jewish customs and traditions and law.

Luke also makes certain we are aware of the financial status of Mary and Joseph – and, therefore, of Jesus. They are poor – not destitute, but far from being wealthy. The offering they gave as they presented their first-born son to God, designated as holy according to the law, the offering they gave – of two doves – was the offering allowed for poor people, for those who could not afford to give a lamb (Lev.5:7 for example). They scraped together the resources to make the journey and they scraped together the money to buy two doves in the temple. Jesus' good news of God's arriving kingdom – a kingdom welcoming the poor and the marginalized – comes from a place of lived experience. This good news we will wait to hear from Jesus when he is grown. Today, we are assured that the good news is coming by the white-bearded old man, Simeon.

Luke tells us crucial details about Simeon in order to help us in our own journey in faith. He is someone we can turn to for inspiration in times of flagging hope. Simeon, we learn, is a leader of the Jewish people, a leader filled with the Holy Spirit, an old leader who had been faithfully awaiting the comfort of Israel for a long time. Simeon is "righteous and devout" – not only a leader of the people but a leader who actually leads by example, walking in the love of God that Jesus will show to us...a love of God and of neighbour, a love that serves others for the good

of all according to God's ways. Simeon, filled by the Holy Spirit, has the authority to speak on God's behalf to the people. He has been awaiting the arrival of the Messiah, the Rescuer, knowing that God would come good on his promise. The Holy Spirit assured Simeon that he would not die until he had seen this long-promised Messiah and, today, we witness the momentous occasion – the very moment when Simeon realizes his hopes and dreams have come true. Like someone holding the winning ticket for a multi-million dollar lottery jackpot, Simeon lifts the baby Jesus in his arms and rejoices. He praises God for the Salvation he is actually touching with his wrinkled and age-weakened hands, the Salvation he is seeing with eyes enlightened by the Spirit. While others may see “just a baby”, Simeon sees the light for the Gentiles, the glory of Israel.

What does all of this mean? Messiah, Salvation, light for the Gentiles...what does all of this mean in concrete terms? Why was this so exciting for Simeon? Why could he now contentedly die after beholding this little baby born of Mary and Joseph?

Luke will soon be spelling it out for us as Jesus reads the words of the prophet Isaiah in his hometown synagogue. Jesus has been sent by God to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners. The sweeping grandness of such statements may seem a little vague, leave us wondering how this will all come about and what it will look like when it's accomplished but, the response of the people tells us all we need to know and Isaiah has that covered as well: there will be gladness, praise, shouts of joy, laughter (Is.61:1-4, 8-11; Ps.126, etc.). This is what Simeon knows is coming with the arrival of the Messiah.

Just as importantly, Isaiah tells us what will disappear: robbery and wrongdoing; weeping, sorrow, sickness, even death will be banished. This is what Simeon knows will be rid from the world with the arrival of the Messiah. And he is holding that Messiah in his arms. Simeon raises his voice in rejoicing for all around to hear – for us to hear – God has been steadfast in love and true to his word: Salvation has come into the world.

The prophet, Anna, also bent with age, is one who hears Simeon's joyful praise and picks up where Simeon left off. She, too, has been waiting in sure and certain hope for the promised Messiah and she, too, raises her voice in praise of God and sets about telling all the fellow waiters and hoppers about this child: Redemption has come into the world.

Salvation, redemption, the healing wholeness of God's love, the removal of darkness and despair, the onset of equality and joy: this is what our white-bearded old man holds up for us today when he holds up the little baby Jesus. It is not the acknowledgment of the relentless march of time, the inevitable cycle of birth...growth...death...but, rather, the astounding realization that there is an end to the fruitlessness of this cycle, an end to the death march and we, with Simeon and Anna, have witnessed its disruption, the turning point, the beginning of the end of all brokenness. A new march has begun, a march leading us into wholeness, a march leading into life.

Simeon's declaration that he will now go in peace, having met Jesus, the Messiah, reminds us of the peace the great company of the heavenly host announced to the shepherds (2:14). Simeon's peace comes not from thinking that everything will be peaceful in light of Jesus' arrival—it will not be. Simeon's peace comes

from the deep awareness that Jesus will challenge the Empire that offered its own version of peace reserved for a select few. Simeon's peace comes from the assurance that everyone will benefit from that challenge to the empire, and from redemption (adapted from Raj Nadella at [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). True peace entered the world with Jesus and true peace will be opposed just as Simeon told us it would be. In order for the downtrodden to be lifted up, those doing the oppressing must fall and they will not go quietly.

We are in the midst of their noisy fall and their desperate clinging to power. While other societies held up – and still hold up – great gods and heroes that came conquering with strength found in military might and money, the God of the Jewish people, our God, the only true God, gave us a vulnerable child born into poverty who showed us the foolishness and futility of that sort of worldly power. The strongest and worst of the world's power – death itself – was shown to be no match for the love of God, the humble, serving power of God that brings actual peace.

Simeon didn't pull any punches. The path to true peace, following Jesus, was not going to be easy – it would not be easy for Jesus, butting heads with the people in power who wanted to keep their power. It would not be easy for Mary, rejoicing in the reversals brought into being by her son but pierced to the soul as she watched this result in his painful crucifixion. It is not easy for us, trying to live according to God's ways of mended wholeness in a world still broken by human greed and corruption. Even the best of us are still imperfect. Jesus brings peace and salvation but also resistance and, because of that resistance, violence. God's arriving

kingdom is good news for many but bad news to others. We find that it brings us both joyful news and challenging times.

But, we have the hope that Anna and Simeon had. The Salvation that Simeon, rejoicing, held in his arms, we hold within us – the power of the Holy Spirit, gifted to us by God who “has clothed [us] with the garments of salvation, he has covered [us] with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels (Is.61.10). The same Spirit who guided Simeon into the temple so long ago is the Spirit guiding us into worship together. What we do together matters. The light for the Gentiles, the glory of Israel, vindication shining out like the dawn, salvation like a burning torch (Is.62:1) is the light we shine for the world. In Advent, we heard John the Baptist echo more words of Isaiah, the resounding command, “make straight the way of the Lord” (see Is.40.3). The path of true peace that we have chosen, following Jesus, is not easy but we can – and do – make it a little straighter with our efforts to feed the hungry, clothe the poor, fight injustice, and, just as importantly, transform ourselves through worship and prayer and scripture study. God has disrupted the status quo. The turning point is behind us, the beginning of the end of all brokenness has occurred. A new march has begun, a march leading into wholeness, a march leading into life.