

The Song of Simeon

Like Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

Luke 2:25-35; Isaiah 40:1-2

December 27, 2020

“There was a man whose name was Simeon.” A man. Old, young? My guess is old, for death was on his mind. *“It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.”* Perhaps he sensed that time was running out for him, the window of opportunity closing.

“It had been revealed to him. . . .” How? How does that sort of thing happen? In a dream? Did God speak to him in a dream, or did he dream God spoke to him? I bet he wondered that sometime.

One day he was in the temple. Anna, whose story is told in the verses that follow, *“never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day.”* (Luke 2:37) We don’t know that Simeon worshipped in the temple daily; maybe he just happened to be there that day. That would make his story even more dramatic.

“When (Mary and Joseph) brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law,” that is, to have him circumcised, *“Simeon took (the baby) in his arms and” . . .* quoted Isaiah. *“All the nations shall see the salvation of our God.”* (Isaiah 52:10) *“I will give you as a light to the nations (the Gentiles), that my salvation shall reach to the ends of the earth.”* (Isaiah 49:6) Even Luke’s description of Simeon as a righteous and devout man who looked *“forward to the consolation of Israel”* recalls Isaiah 40:1-2.

I don’t think that was a coincidence. I think Simeon found a theological soulmate in Isaiah because of the similarities in the tragic historical circumstances of their people, though the two men were separated by 500 years.

Isaiah lived and did his prophetic work at a critical point in his nation’s history. Three hundred and fifty years earlier – 900 BCE -- the nation of Israel had divided into two countries, north and south. Two hundred years after that – 700 BCE -- the northern kingdom was annihilated by Assyrian armies, and one hundred years after that – 597 BCE -- the southern kingdom, which was all that was left of David’s once mighty kingdom and Solomon’s, was conquered and its leaders taken into exile.

Now, in Isaiah’s time, the exiles were preparing to return to a city whose ruins – the walls, the temple -- lay where they fell decades before. More importantly, they prepared to return to a land that was no longer theirs. Ancient Israel was now only a tiny sliver in the vast Persian Empire.

Isaiah’s commission was:

*Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.*

Isaiah's words of consolation, comfort and hope to the returning exiles became the lyrics to Simeon's song. In the half-millennium that separated Simeon from the ancient prophet Israel had known only one hundred years of independence, and just forty years before Simeon's day even that was taken away by the invading and occupying Roman troops. Once more the fiercely proud people were without a nation of their own. They were angry, frightened, and confused. They were looking for a sign.

To be sure America's circumstance at the close of this awful year does not compare with that of Israel in Isaiah's time or Simeon's. But none of us could have imagined at this time last year what 2020 held for us.

So calamitous has the year been that it comes as a bit of a surprise to recall that the dark days began not with escalating infections and deaths due to a worldwide pandemic but with the shooting of unarmed Black men and women by police. Their names have become part of the history of our time: Ahmad Arbery, February 23; Breonna Taylor, March 13; George Floyd, May 25; Rayshard Brooks, June 12. An unprecedented number of Americans, variously estimated between 15-25 million, took to America's streets to protest police violence. By mid-summer chants that had echoed from coast to coast and beyond were familiar to us all: "I can't breath." "Say their names. . . ."

Racial unrest that rocked the nation for months could be knocked off the front page and from top story of the hour only by the terrifyingly rapid spread of covid-19 and the accompanying economic devastation.

Did I mention the wildfires that burned forests the size of New Hampshire in Western states?

And how can we describe the year in politics? Frustrating, disappointing, maddening, exhausting, frightening, anxiety-producing, infuriating, and how many times have we said, I can't believe this is happening in America?

Like people in Simeon's day, we are looking for a sign, a reason to hope. A new administration is on its way. Maybe that's a sign. The vaccines are here or on their way. Maybe that's a sign. Maybe.

Simeon saw a sign that day in the temple. But it wasn't a sign anyone would have expected. If he had pointed out a young, superpatriotic zealot who was recruiting a paramilitary army to engage Roman troops or a politician who promised to form an alliance of small nations against Rome, everyone would have agreed that was a sign that things were about to change, that there was reason to hope.

But that isn't the sign Simeon saw. "*Simeon took (the baby) in his arms 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 . . .'*" The baby was the sign. Not the zealot, not the disastrous rebellion seventy years later that left thousands dead, Jerusalem in ruins, and the temple destroyed; not the politician. The baby was the sign. "*This shall be a sign unto you: you shall find the baby . . . wrapped in swaddling clothes.*"

We understand that – the sign of the baby -- in our family. Last summer when racial unrest spilled into the streets and infections and deaths raced upward, we received word that one of Nikki's daughters, Claire, was pregnant with her second child, due before the end of the year. Our twelfth grandchild. I don't think you can have too many grandchildren. I'll let you know.

The announcement was not a diversion, a distraction that momentarily took our attention away from the “real world.” It was a redirection of our total being toward that which is ultimately, finally, really real. In a world of injustice and suffering and anger and bitterness and sickness and death, this was about love and beauty and simplicity. This was about life. It was a transcendent moment, for it allowed us to rise above the messiness, the sometimes ugliness of our time.

If someone had asked Simeon, What does this baby have to do with Rome and national ambition? He probably would have said, Nothing. That’s the point. You see, the zealot can’t be the sign, nor can the politician, because they are part of the historical process. The fallible human process. Historical processes can fail and disappoint. And do, as often as not. That doesn’t mean they’re not valuable and important and worth the effort and worthy of our participation and support, but our hope, if it is to sustain us, must be grounded in something that transcends the historical process.

The baby was the sign, a reminder that God has not given up on what sometimes seems all the world like a failed cosmic experiment. A reminder that God did not come to earth in Bethlehem; God never left. A reminder that God did not become Immanuel on the night the star hung over a stable in Galilee; God is and always has been Immanuel – God with us.

That is why, two thousand years later, at the end of as tumultuous year as we ever want to see, we continue to celebrate the sign, the baby that Simeon held in his arms.

If you still want or need a sign, a Christmas gift two days late, I have one for you.

Unto us a child is born
Unto us a son is given
6 pounds 11 ounces
And his name shall be called Avery Pax Gerstenlauer
Born Christmas Day at the end of the awful year 2020
Mother Claire and father Eli doing fine

This has been a sign unto us. May it be so unto you as well.