



Liturgical Day: The First Sunday of Christmas

Date: December 28, 2008

Sermon Title: Seekers of God's Word and Will

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Today I'd like to tell you three stories, and hold them up side by side. The first is the story of Simeon and Anna. Simeon was a righteous man and a devout man: filled with the Holy Spirit, and waiting for the "consolation" of Israel. Simeon had received a vision from God. It told him that he would not die before he saw the Messiah. Simeon was a faithful man, and so he believed the vision. Day after day he remembered that vision; praying, studying, waiting for the Messiah.

One day, Simeon had an undeniable urge to visit the temple. St. Luke tells us it was the Holy Spirit that moved him to do so. He awoke early, carefully dressed himself, and made his way to the temple, where he sat down and waited.

Anna, St. Luke tells us, was also in the temple. She became a widow after seven years of marriage, and dedicated the rest of her eighty-four years to serving God in the temple. She could be found in the temple day and night — fasting and praying and, like Simeon, filled with God's spirit. She was a familiar sight to all who worshipped in the temple. Old and stooped with age, leaning heavily on a cane. Every day she would come out of her quarters, walk into the midst of the people, and join in the singing of the Psalms and the services of public prayer. The people believed that she had a special understanding of God's presence in the world. They called her a prophetess. She too made an appearance in the temple that day — and was, no doubt, somewhere in the building praying and singing Psalms.

As these two saints went about their business, Mary and Joseph brought their baby boy to the temple, according to custom, to dedicate him to the Lord. They too were devout Jews, and since the law of Moses required that every first-born child be brought to the temple for this ceremony, they did so. It was while they were there that these strange events took place. First it was Simeon: when he saw Mary and Joseph come in with their baby, he immediately went over to them. He took the baby from the mother's arms, and held him high so all the people could see. Then he began to sing aloud: "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."

You might imagine that Mary and Joseph, simple country folk doing their religious duties, were rather surprised when they were noticed by this devout elderly Jew. Joseph must have been embarrassed. After all, they only had a couple of doves to offer; not a lamb. It meant they were very poor — and probably wished people wouldn't notice. St. Luke tells us that they were immediately "amazed."

It wasn't the end of the day, though. Because no sooner had Simeon completed his song, than Anna came over. She too began to praise God, singing songs of great joy, when she saw the child. She told all who were there that this child was the one for whom they had been waiting. This child was the anointed one of God — the Christ. He would be the one to bring redemption to Israel.

Two saints in Jerusalem. Two saints who were devout, religious Jews. These two were the first ones to understand just who this young Jesus from Nazareth truly was. There was much going on in the temple that day. People were

FIRST LESSON

ISAIAH 61:10-62:3

PSALM

PSALM 148

SECOND LESSON

GALATIANS 4:4-7

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. LUKE 2:22-40

PRAYER OF THE DAY

PRAYER OF THE DAY:

**ALMIGHTY GOD, YOU
WONDERFULLY CREATED THE
DIGNITY OF HUMAN NATURE
AND YET MORE
WONDERFULLY RESTORED IT.
IN YOUR MERCY, LET US
SHARE THE DIVINE LIFE OF
THE ONE WHO CAME TO
SHARE OUR HUMANITY,
JESUS CHRIST, YOUR SON,
OUR LORD, WHO LIVES AND
REIGNS WITH YOU AND THE
HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD,
NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.**

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offering sacrifices. Children were being dedicated. Arguments were being resolved. Scripture lessons were being taught. But in the midst of all the commotion, Simeon and Anna picked out the arrival of the Savior. They had waited, prayed, hoped, and prepared themselves for that day. They had studied the Scriptures, and sought to understand them as best they could... so they would know what to look for when the Messiah arrived. And when the day came — when the Messiah did arrive — they were ready.

The second story is about a young man who had committed a crime, and had been sentenced to die. He had exhausted all of his legal options, and his only hope of escaping death was a pardon from the state's governor. The young man's mother begged the governor to visit her son, talk with him, and then make his decision as to a pardon. "Just do this," she said, "And then I will accept whatever decision you should make." The governor, touched by the mother's plea, decided to pay a visit to the young man. He went to the prison, and asked to talk to the boy. When the prison guard told him that he had a visitor, the bitter young man followed the guard to the visiting room. The governor walked in. The young man didn't recognize him, and he refused to talk with the stranger. The governor, knowing how angry and frustrated inmates can be, didn't want to aggravate him any further, and left. After the governor had left, the guard walked the young man back to his cell. As they walked back, the guard said, "How did your visit with the governor go?" "The governor?" shouted the prisoner. "That was the governor?" He became hysterical, realizing that he had turned away the only person who could save him.

The third story, of course, takes place this morning, since we have the privilege of celebrating with Hannah Boyd as she receives the promises of God through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism at our second service. This is an important story, because it reminds us that our Lord's birth is not just something that took place a long time ago in history. It is something that continues to take place today. The Babe who was born in Bethlehem grew up and became the man who walked to Golgotha, was raised from death by God, and is now seeking to gain a place in our lives.

None of us yet knows how the story of Hannah's life will go. But we, along with her parents and sponsors, can have some influence on this story, as we teach her to look at her world through eyes of faith; as we help her to understand how important it is to spend time in worship and prayer and study; and as we work with her to continually sharpen our own spiritual senses, and seek to be more aware of God's movement in our world today. We can help her to be, as Simeon and Anna were (and as that young prisoner should have been), the kind of person who knows the presence of God in our world. That's the task of church: the task God has given to you and me, that together with Hannah and all the baptized, we might follow the example of Simeon and Anna, and be seekers of God's word and will in the world.

This past week we once again celebrated the birth of Christ. Not everybody in his day understood that he was the king. Some, like the innkeeper, never imagined that this poor child laying in a manger could possibly be a king. Some, like King Herod, heard the message that he was a king, and actively opposed him. Like the young man on death row who turned away the governor, by refusing to believe that Jesus was the Christ, they turned away the only one who could have saved them. But others, like Simeon and Anna, knew who he was. They knew because they had searched the Scriptures diligently. They had fine-tuned their senses to be aware of when and how God was present in their world, and they were rewarded for their diligence with the opportunity to meet the Savior.

I hope that the story of Simeon and Anna and the baby Jesus will encourage us by their faithfulness. I hope that we, like them, will seek to grow in faith day by day. And when our Lord Jesus comes to visit, I hope that we will be among those who see him – with eyes that are open to the ways he would lead us in faith and in faithfulness. Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (January 2, 2009)

Gospel Lesson (English Text) ⁱ

²² 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 firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), ²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated 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; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. ²⁷ 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, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, ²⁹ “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” ³³ And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴ 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 ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

³⁶ 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, ³⁷ 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. ³⁸ 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. ³⁹ When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him. ⁱⁱ

Gospel Lesson (Greek Text):

²² Καὶ τε ἐπλήσθησαν αἱ ἡμέραι τοῦ καθαρισμοῦ αὐτῶν κατὰ τὸν νόμον Μωϋσέως, ἀνήγαγον αὐτὸν εἰς Ἱεροσόλυμα παραστήσαι τῷ κυρίῳ, ²³ καθὼς γέγραπται ἐν νόμῳ κυρίου τι πᾶν ρσεν διανοίγον μήτραν γιον τῷ κυρίῳ κληθήσεται, ²⁴ καὶ τοῦ δοῦναι θυσίαν κατὰ τὸ εἰρημένον ἐν τῷ νόμῳ κυρίου, ζεύγος τρυγόνων δύο νοσσοὺς περιστερῶν. ²⁵ Καὶ ἰδοὺ νθρωπος ἦν ἐν Ἱερουσαλήμ ᾧ νομα Συμεὼν καὶ ὁ νθρωπος οὗτος δίκαιος καὶ εὐλάβης προσδεχόμενος παρὰ κλησιν τοῦ Ἰσραήλ, καὶ πνεῦμα ἦν γιον ἐπ’ αὐτὸν ²⁶ καὶ ἦν αὐτῷ κεχρηματισμένον ὑπὸ τοῦ πνεύματος τοῦ ἁγίου μὴ ἰδεῖν θάνατον πρὶν [ἢ] ἂν δη τὸν χριστὸν κυρίου. ²⁷ καὶ ἦλθεν ἐν τῷ πνεύματι εἰς τὸ ἱερόν καὶ ἐν τῷ εἰσαγαγεῖν τοὺς γονεῖς τὸ παιδίον Ἰησοῦν τοῦ ποιῆσαι αὐτοὺς κατὰ τὸ εἰθισμένον τοῦ νόμου περὶ αὐτοῦ ²⁸ καὶ αὐτὸς ἐδέξατο αὐτὸ εἰς τὰς ἀγκάλας καὶ εὐλόγησεν τὸν θεὸν καὶ εἶπεν ²⁹ νῦν ἀπολύεις τὸν δούλον σου, δέσποτα, κατὰ τὸ ῥῆμα σου ἐν εἰρήνῃ ³⁰ ὅτι εἶδον οἱ ὀφθαλμοί μου τὸ σωτήριον σου, ³¹ ὁ ἠτοίμασας κατὰ πρόσωπον πάντων τῶν λαῶν, ³² φῶς εἰς ἀποκάλυψιν ἐθνῶν καὶ δόξαν λαοῦ σου Ἰσραήλ. ³³ καὶ ἦν ὁ πατὴρ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἡ μήτηρ θαυμάζοντες ἐπὶ τοῖς λαλουμένοις περὶ αὐτοῦ. ³⁴ καὶ εὐλόγησεν αὐτοὺς Συμεὼν καὶ εἶπεν πρὸς Μαριάμ τὴν μητέρα αὐτοῦ ἰδοὺ οὗτος κείται εἰς πτώσιν καὶ ἀνάστασιν πολλῶν ἐν τῷ Ἰσραήλ καὶ εἰς σημεῖον ἀντιλεγόμενον – ³⁵ καὶ σοῦ [δὲ] αὐτῆς τὴν ψυχὴν διελεύσεται ῥομφαία– πως ν ἀποκαλυφθῶσιν ἐκ πολλῶν καρδιῶν διαλογισμοί. ³⁶ Καὶ ἦν Ἄννα προφῆτις, θυγάτηρ Φανουήλ, ἐκ φυλῆς Ἀσήρ αατη προβεβηκυῖα ἐν ἡμέραις πολλαῖς, ζήσασα μετὰ ἀνδρὸς τη ἑπτὰ ἀπὸ τῆς παρθενίας αὐτῆς ³⁷ καὶ αὐτὴ χήρα ως ἐτῶν ὀγδοήκοντα τεσσάρων, ἣ οὐκ ἀφίστατο τοῦ ἱεροῦ νηστείας καὶ δεήσεσιν λατρεύουσα νύκτα καὶ ἡμέραν. ³⁸ καὶ αὐτῇ τῇ ρα ἐπιστάσα ἀνθρωμολογεῖτο τῷ θεῷ καὶ ἐλάλει περὶ αὐτοῦ πᾶσιν τοῖς προσδεχομένοις λῦτρωσιν Ἱερουσαλήμ. ³⁹ Καὶ ὡς ἐτέλεσαν πάντα τὰ κατὰ τὸν νόμον κυρίου, ἐπέστρεψαν εἰς τὴν Γαλιλαίαν εἰς πόλιν ἑαυτῶν Ναζαρέθ. ⁴⁰ Τὸ δὲ παιδίον ἡύξανεν καὶ ἐκραταιοῦτο πληροῦμενον σοφία, καὶ χάρις θεοῦ ἦν ἐπ’ αὐτό. ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at www.elca.org/worship/church_year.

ⁱⁱ St. Luke 2:22-40, *New Revised Version Bible* (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

ⁱⁱⁱ St. Luke 2:22-40, *The Greek New Testament*, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).