

THE OLD MAN'S TORCH GLOWED

Luke 2:22-40

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on January 1, 2012, on the First Sunday After Christmas, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria.

Focus Passage

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 (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'

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. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. 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, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

*'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.'*

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. 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 so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

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 for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. 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.

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

Let us pray: *Come Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove; come kindle the flame of sacred love; in these always-starting-afresh hearts of ours. Amen.*

The story of Simeon has captivated me since I first became aware of it in seminary, though I believe this is the first time I have ever ventured forth to preach on it.

- Simeon is, you will recall, part of the elderly pair (with Anna) who are in the Temple in Jerusalem when Mary and Joseph bring the infant Jesus to present him to the Lord forty days after his birth according to the Law of Moses.¹
- Luke tells us: “It had been revealed to [Simeon] by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death until he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.”
- When Mary and Joseph arrive, Simeon takes the infant into his arms and says, “Lettest now thy servant depart in peace...” In Latin the words are *nunc dimittis* (Now let depart...). Over the centuries, artists, musicians, and poets have depicted this moment, as Simeon, having seen the child, dies in peace.

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My initial captivation with this story came through a copy of a sermon I received that had been given at Riverside Church in New York on a first Sunday after Christmas in the mid 1970s. The sermon was by Dr. Paul Sherry, then President of the United Church of Christ. I did not hear the

¹ These details are outlined in Leviticus 12:1-8.

sermon but received a copy, and for years kept it in a file folder that has long since disappeared with the advent of electronic filing. The sermon wove the story of Simeon as Luke presents him with the story of Simeon as W. H. Auden presents him in the long, narrative Christmas oratorio Auden wrote entitled “For the Time Being.” More than anything else, it was the title of Paul Sherry’s sermon that intrigued me: “Exit Simeon, With Imagination.”

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That captivation increased when, a few years later, I was exposed more directly to Auden’s oratorio. Auden, who was British, had close ties to the seminary I attended. The drama department at the seminary often presented the piece during Advent; when they presented the piece, it was even more stunning than what I had read of it in the sermon; I have come to read it myself, often, to observe Advent.

Two brief sections from “The Meditation of Simeon” in the oratorio stand out for me. To quote them:

By the event of this birth the true significance of all other events is defined, for of every other occasion it can be said that it could have been different, but of this birth it is the case that it could in no way be other than it is. And by the existence of this Child, the proper value of all other existences is given, for of every other creature it can be said that it has extrinsic importance but of this Child it is the case that He is in no sense a symbol.²

Then, a few paragraphs later:

...because of [Christ’s] visitation, we may no longer desire God as if He were lacking: our redemption is no longer a question of pursuit but of surrender to Him
who is always and everywhere present. Therefore, at everyone moment we pray that, following Him, we may depart from our anxiety into His peace.³

Exit Simeon, in peace.

² W. H. Auden, “For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio,” in *Collected Longer Poems* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 181.

³ Auden 183-184.

If Paul Sherry has Simeon pass away with imagination, Luke has Simeon depart in peace. Both are terrific ways to depart, and both are terrific ways to interpret and remember this Biblical figure.

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My third exposure to Simeon came this Christmas. In planning the 8:00 p.m. Christmas Eve service, I wanted something to read after the singing of “Silent Night” and before the breaking out of “Joy to the World.” Often at that point in the service we have read the Prologue to John’s Gospel: “In the beginning was the word and the word was with God....”⁴ But this year, I wanted to move the story out of the timeless beauty of the manger into the world and into time.

At the very last minute, as the printing presses were warming up to print the bulletins, Paul and I landed on reading the story of Simeon and Anna, with me walking down the aisle after all the candles had been extinguished and before we lifted our voices in “Joy to the World.” It was a really neat experience for me, one in which I was actually able to worship while leading worship, to be both priest and parishioner at the same time.

Exit Simeon, in peace. Exit Simeon, with imagination. Exit Simeon, with worship.

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My final exposure to Simeon bridges the end of the summer when I decided to preach on Simeon today, the First Sunday after Christmas, and the first Sunday of 2012.

Among the poems of Joseph Brodsky I have revisited this year one focuses on Simeon and Anna. It is a poem that points to the future particularly in its final three of eighteen stanzas. After Simeon holds the Child in his arms, Brodsky describes Simeon’s actions:

[Simeon] went forth to die. It was not the loud din
of streets that he faced when he flung the door wide,

⁴ John 1:1.

but rather the deaf-and-dumb fields of death's kingdom.
He strode through a space that was no longer solid.

The rustle of time ebbed away in his ears.
And Simeon's soul held the form of the Child --
its feathery crown now enveloped in glory --
aloft, like a torch, pressing back the black shadows,

to light up the path that leads into death's realm,
where never before until this present hour
had any man managed to lighten his pathway.

The old man's torch glowed and the pathway grew wider.⁵

Having seen the promised Messiah, Simeon “[lights] up the path that leads unto death.” Even though it is death Simeon faces in the future, Simeon faces the future fulfilled. He “lighten[s] his pathway” to the future because the future is in the hands of the Child he has held. “The old man’s torch [glows] and the pathway [grows] wider.”

- Exit Simeon, with imagination.
- Exit Simeon, in peace.
- Exit Simeon, with worship.
- Exit Simeon, pointing to the future, lighting the way for us.

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As Christmas approached this year, I became aware that more than normal, I acknowledged in preaching our shared concern about the state of our nation and world.

- The economy that seems ever so slowly to recover.
- The divisions that leave good people on both sides of our government almost utterly unable to govern.

⁵ Joseph Brodsky, “Nunc Dimittis,” in *Collected Poems in English* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 2000), 61-63.

- The number of people in the church – not to say beyond our congregation’s walls – who search for work but cannot seem to find it in the right form or in any form at all.

But reading the story of Simeon on Christmas Eve – and preparing to preach it today – has helped refocus me on the highest truth about the future.

It is not that anything about the economy, or our ability to govern ourselves, or the employment fortunes of people in our congregation has changed over the past week.

It is simply that Simeon is one of so many people within the Bible who remind us that in Christian faith, pointing to the future is always pointing in a positive direction.

- In Christian faith, the future always looks good, because it is good, whether we are walking into it, or whether it is approaching us.
- In Christian faith, the future is always good because of the One in whose hands it is held.
- In Christian faith, the future is always good because, as Auden says, “by the existence of this Child the proper value of all other existences is given.”

Even as Simeon marches into the future and toward his own death, he holds “the form of the Child...aloft, like a torch, pressing back the black shadows.”

The future is always good because, as it comes to us, as we march into it, we hold “the form of the Child...aloft.” With his form held “like a torch,” we “press back the shadows.”

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This year, Maggie and I had members of our family with us in different shifts from December 20th until yesterday. They ranged in age from eight to 91, and for several nights as many as six of us were sleeping in the eleven hundred square feet we call home. In addition, we invited three friends for Christmas dinner, and one of our family members invited what turned out to

be five additional family members from the area who came for dinner unexpectedly.

By the time Maggie and I put Christmas dinner on the plates (we didn't have a table large enough to hold them all!), we had, between us, led six worship services in the span of seventeen hours in the two churches we serve in two separate states.

One of the people we had invited was a minister who had not been responsible for leading worship on Christmas Eve. So before dinner, I took aside and told him (I didn't ask, I told him) that he was giving the prayer, because, I said, God had heard enough from my wife and me.

With all of us standing around the living room holding hands, he gave a prayer that was just the right length and just the right tone with just the right eloquence for the occasion. And he ended it with a pause, and then these words: "Lord, we give thanks for the future."

Now in all my years of listening to prayer and of praying – publicly and privately – I have heard and said many prayers *for* the future. But I don't think I had ever heard anyone "*give thanks* for the future."

"Lord, we *give thanks* for the future."

Exit Simeon, in peace.

Exit Simeon, with imagination.

Exit Simeon, with worship.

Exit Simeon, giving thanks for the future,
giving thanks...for what is to come.

"Lord, we give thanks for the future."

Amen.