**Advent SERIES: witnesses - encounters with the new born king**

**The Gift At Last - Luke 2:21-35**

**Introduction** Let’s take our minds back to the days of the Temple, the Temple built by Herod to replace the Temple that was ruined in the Exile.

Look, over there, in the midst of all the busyness, a man stands deep in thought. Do you hear what he’s saying?

– “Baruch ata Adonai Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam…”

“ *Bless art thou, King of the Universe…”*

This is how most prayers begin in Hebrew, as they would at the temple in this day we are imagining or at the Western Wall in Jerusalem today.

 What are his thoughts, this man, Simeon, as he seeks the Lord, I wonder?

“I have been waiting so long for the gift that Adonai has promised. I was even told that I would see Him before I die. Oh, I have been waiting for so long. But today, the Lord has given me the impression that I will see Him, the Consolation of Israel today” Can it be really true?”

 Let’s step back to the broader scene for a moment. The season of preparation is over. For Mary and Joseph, the months of waiting are finished. Amazing things have certainly happened. There was the announcement by the Angel to Mary and to Joseph. There were the days of hard journeying, then the birth. After all of that even more spectacular things occurred. Shepherds make their visit speaking of an angel Host proclaiming the news of a baby born in Bethlehem. The gift had come for them in a remarkable, glorious fashion.

Now, for the time being the excitement is over. It is time to do the Housekeeping things. Time to do what is required by law, to wrap things up as we see in Verses 21-25 – circumcision, naming, purification, dedication to Lord, and redemption of firstborn. It’s time to get on with life.

Today it is the same for us. Christmas Day and Boxing Day are done. We have given and received the gifts, and had the Turkey and devoured the treats, while playing with our new gadgets. It is just time for clean-up and the sending of Thank you notes and warranty cards; Time to make the turkey soup from the left over bones. Kind of sad, eh? It is a frequent feeling for me at the end of Christmas Day that we are missing something. Is that all there is?

 Maybe there is a sense that all is not done quite yet. One of the things that we find is that when you have family a long distance away, the delivery plans do not always work out. We had a gift exchange among the adult family members of our tribe. Delivery schedules did not help in some case, and a couple of us did not get our gift exchange gifts on Christmas day. Thankfully, one of the ones to “miss out” temporarily was me! So, although two of us did not get gifts, we know they are coming, but when, we do not know. One day, soon, at last, the gift will be here.

A sense of having, as it were, one more gift behind the tree to give remains for the two of us. Maybe for you, a sense of not having all your dreams fulfilled, all your hopes assuaged, settles on you and somewhere in your mind you as, “Is there more?”

One of our main goals as a church is to help people encounter Jesus. We want them to encounter Him in His word as well as through us, His redeemed and transformed people, who continue to be changed by our encounters with Him. But what happens once those people have encountered Jesus? What happens when we do?

 As we have reflected on the birth of Christ this Advent, we wanted to look at what happened to some of the first people to encounter Jesus. Just like us, each of them were individuals, with different personalities, experiences and reactions - but all of them were changed by the encounter. During Advent, we looked to the witnesses of Jesus’ birth and, as we did, we learned from their encounters with the new-born King.

As we complete our series on “The Witnesses” we remember that we have heard the testimony of:

 Shepherds, Wise men, Herod, Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph to the Advent of the “Christ the Lord”. All in their various ways have to the Witness Stand to give testimony to the coming of the King of the Jews, the Saviour who is Christ the Lord.

 Each witness is necessary, in their own way, to bear witness to the amazing fact of the coming of God’s answer for the world. Now the evidence taking by Luke and Matthew is nearly complete, except for one more person.

There is one more man, Simeon, Saying his prayers in the Temple, waiting for his gift.

If you have closed your bibles, please return to Matthew 2:21ff (Pew Bible page ) and we will start looking at this gift seeker and the coming of the gift, at long last. Let’s look at verses 25-26 to begin with.

**I. One still seeks the Gift Vv. 25-27a**

We only really know Simeon from the comments made in these verses:

*“25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 26 And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. 27 Having been moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple grounds…”*

So what do we see here? Simeon was a resident of Jerusalem, according to Jewish law, he was seen to be a keeper of the law. When folks saw him, they could tell he took his faith seriously (devout) and he, unlike so many of his day, was “waiting for the Consolation of Israel” – the one who would comfort and care for the people of God, encouraging them and strengthening them after all they had faced in decline, abuse, exile and oppression. A ‘Paraclete’, the Greek says, to “come alongside to help” A “comforter”, a “Helper”. Many of his day, already, had given up hope. The promise of the Comfort of Isaiah 40: 1-2 (Comfort ye, comfort ye my people says the Lord…) were just notations on the page. This was not true in Simeon’s case.

**He was just an ordinary, religious, upright man who really looked forward to God’s gift.** (Even if tradition says that he was a priest and was serving in the temple, we have no evidence of that)

Notice the last part of v.25. “… the Holy Spirit was upon him.” Now, for the days before Pentecost, that was unusual. IN the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit filled or dwelt with people for specific reasons and for specific purposes, often only for a specific period of time. You did not even need to be devout, righteous or godly (Samson, Saul, for instance). The prophets were often filled with the Holy Spirit for a time, so that they could powerfully proclaim the “Word of the Lord” to the people for whom God had a message. Those messages would be conveyed directly by words, by dreams or by visions. Not many, like Samuel or Elijah/Elisha had the Holy Spirit upon them at all times. When they did receive Him, it was for a purpose. This ordinary man, Simeon, had, for his time, an extraordinary blessing; He was filled with the Holy Spirit.

 How did it manifest itself? By a message directly given to Simeon – “You shall not die until you see the Lord’s Christ.” In a special way, in a manner parallel to the Shepherds, to the Wiseman, to Elisabeth, to Mary and Joseph themselves – God gave a special revelation of himself so that Simeon could be a witness too. As he stood to pray in the Temple, this ordinary man, filled with God’s Spirit, was set to witness an extraordinary thing.

So, Lord, you have me here. You do know how much I long to see your Messiah, the Anointed one from your hand. The one who would fulfill the ancient prophecies.”

Maybe he meditated on Isa. 9:6-7:

*6 For to us a child is born,*

*to us a son is given;*

*and the government shall be upon his shoulder,*

*and his name shall be called*

*Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,*

*Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

*7 Of the increase of his government and of peace*

*)there will be no end,*

*on the throne of David and over his kingdom,*

*to establish it and to uphold it*

*with justice and with righteousness*

*from this time forth and forevermore.*

*The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

Or Isa. 7:14:

*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.*

I believe you Lord, you are the one who keeps his word, and you have brought me here. Oh, when will I see the gift you have for Israel? **Here is an ordinary man, waiting for the gift to come, at last.**

And then, it came- the impressions that the Holy Spirit had been laying on Simeon’s heart were pinpointed on the young poor couple (we know they were poor because of the offering they were going to give for purification – a pair of doves or two young pigeons. They could not afford lamb or cattle). Either because of his job in the temple or because he had respect in the temple for his piety and just living, the second part of verse 27 and 28 tells us this:

*“When the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for Him what the Custom of the law required (see verses 22-24), Simeon took him in his arms…”*

 At last! The gift I have yearned for all my life is here. Taking the little 40 day infant into his arms he fairly shouts his response!

*“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,*

 *according to your word;*

*30 for my eyes have seen your salvation*

*31 that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,*

*32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles,*

 *and for glory to your people Israel.”*

**II. The Gift At last vv. 27b-32**

This cry of Simeon has been remembered and chanted in the liturgies of Roman Catholic, Anglican and Orthodox churches down through the years. The Latin name of this Lukan Psalm is the “Nunc Dimittis” or in English “Now Depart”. It is as though the religious world has recognized a cry of joy that resounds down through the years. The gift that has been awaited for so long has been delivered. The thing that was missing in my life has come to fill the enormous hole I felt, even at Christmas time.

His cri de Coeur is not just for himself. Look at what all he sees in this little one whom we holds in his arms.

A) **I, your servant am being allowed to depart in peace** – not a slave but a joyfully serving bondservant of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, have received sight of your promised Christ. I no longer need to plow the furrows of this veil of woes any more – I can come home, to you. It is not my pushing my way into that reward but you have completed the terms of my work on your behalf. You are blessing me with the furlough of my service her. I am all done. You have kept your word – Thank you, Thank you, Thank you.

When the gift of the Baby Christ is received into the heart of people , the heart will gladly desire to serve him and one day will gladly give up the tasks to be with the Lord for ever. All of our lives we will see the Lord as a promise keeping God but the end of our days will write the truth of these words large on our life – **A) I, your servant am being allowed to depart in peace.**

That he’s start with the departing – except that is where the final and best gift is – in glory with our dear lord forevermore. This is the ultimate “Future Grace” that we look forward to, an eternity forever before the face of our dear King, Jesus.

B) **My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all the people** – the way you are going to carry out the deliverance of your people, the True Israel of God, is by the work of this little boy. He was prophesied of by the Prophets and leaders and kings of Israel and Judah. The rulers of the world often had foretastes of who and what he was. There are folk like me who believed and there are Jews who like Anna who is also here(36-38), have waited all their lives for this day. The shepherds can’t miss it, the devout can’t miss it, the kings who despise God can’t miss it (Matt. 2) certainly the Magi can’t miss it. If they will but “see” with the heart of faith they would see what God has done and rejoice, worship and give their hearts to Him.

 C) **A light for revelation to the nations** – How many of us ever think about the fact that the Messiah, the Christ, in the minds of the Jewish nation, was for Jews only? Yes there are broad hints of the offer of the “light to the Gentiles” but the nation of Israel tended to not really think about deliverance “for” us, it was usually deliverance “from” us. But praise be to God that the project to save a people for God’s name was envisioned to take in dirty Anglo-Saxons, and Germans, and Italians, and Malaysians, and Chinese of every variety along with people from “every tribe and tongue and nation”. The best United Nations one could ever envision is wrapped up in this gift at has come at long last. Without this baby, it would not have been ours (unless you are Jewish by heritage this morning). What wondrous grace that the remnant of the people of God included us, all who trust Jesus by faith.

D) **And a glory to your people Israel –** The people of God have been trampled down for so long. Now the vindication of your people begins. The Name of the Ones who trust and rely upon Yahweh will not be ground down any longer. What does it mean for the People of Israel to have glory? They will have a huge (yuge???) value, weightiness and reputation that is high and vaunted. They will stand, these people of God, His bride, with head held high and shoulders back, for the honour of being a part of what God is doing in the world through this baby boy.

The gift, that Simeon has waited for all his life has come:

 “**I can happily go to God for He has kept all his promises**

**I have seen His plans for salvation, as anyone with eyes to see have also seen**

**I have been given a glimpse of God’s world delivering plan**

**I see now how God intends to give glory from Himself to His dear people.”**

And Simeon couldn’t be happier. If it were me a round of Amens and Praise the Lords would ring the temple. Simeon would have to make do with this wonderful exclamation. This is the positive testimony that Simeon brings. The Gift, I have been waiting for it, and God has delivered!

 Verse 33 tells us that the Mother and Father “*marveled at what was said about Him.”*

How do you respond to the excitement that this gift must surely invite? Does this somewhere in you thrill your heart? Mary and Joseph, so caught up in the whirlwind of the excitement of all that took place are unable to follow along in Simeon’s explosion of Joy – but they marveled. All that had happened and all that they heard had been, as the passage earlier says “was treasured in Her (Mary’s) heart. Their response was a quiet “Wow, what is all of this!”

 I know that not everyone is like me – I am told that very few are like me, as excited about things as I am – But if this praise song does not fire some kind of internal response of the glowing embers of joy and wonder, even deep in your being – cry out to God for his joy to fill you so that that Godly contentment will overtake some part of you. This is a big deal!!

Sadly, there are not all happy things to contemplate as the gift is considered. This man, filled with the Holy Spirit has seen another side of the gift.

**III. Gift – Not all positive Vv. 33-35** *(Can’t have II without III)*

*“Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed 35 (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”*

Yes, the gift has come, and I have witnessed that for which I have been waiting all my life. I am so uproariously happy and ready to go to be with my God, but let me say something to you both.

This Baby is going to have what some will think is a bad influence on the world.

 He will knock some who think they are something off their pedestals (Pharisees???). He will take some who are little appreciated (the 12 apostles???) and raise them up. That will make some folk very angry. As we know **humiliation of the mighty and the elevation of the dispossessed does not sit well. It even often makes us angry.**

More than that, this one will be a sign spoken against. There will be a time when this answer, this gift from God will be spoken of as from the devil. **He will not be just questioned, but hated**. The **ones with evil intent will be revealed for who they are** – as is everyone who is brought face to face with the Messiah. And you, Mary, who is so caught up with and enamoured with this miraculous baby, of revelation and of signs, which you are treasuring in your heart. **You will be so hurt by the awful things that will happen to and because of this boy.** They will be so awful that it will be like you have bend thrust through with a sword.

**The gift that has come, at last as amazing as he will be, and the answer to the needs of all humankind that he is, before God, will NOT BE UNIVERSALLY APPRECIATED BUT REVILED AND HATED.**

But we so long for the gift that would come, that gift that would come at last. In the big scheme of things, the joy of His reception far outweighs the His rejection by evil and dismissive folk.

**IV – The gift – what are you seeking?**

We began with telling the story of how two of my family, including me, missed out on a Christmas gift because of delivery problems from long distance. For the two of us there is a sense of having, as it were, one more gift behind the tree. I broached the comment “Maybe for you, a sense of not having all your dreams fulfilled, all your hopes assuaged, settles on you and somewhere in your mind you as, “Is there more?” “

Our final witness sought and received his longed for Gift, At Long Last – the gift of the sight of God’s Messiah – the baby Jesus. His response, in the Nunc Dimittis and in his blessing to Mary and Jesus in Luke 2:25-35 are a true testimony to joy pone receives when they receive God’s answer, a person, jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God.

 What is it you seek?

 Do you seek to go happily on your way, imbibing in Christmas and fitting in with the fun, but not too much with the joy. Is there an ache because the present has not yet arrived for you and you have never trusted in God’s Answer for your separation from the God who has rightful claim upon your life because you have never seen that both have sinned against him and must answer to him for your eternal destiny?

 Simeon longed for his Gift, was assured that he would receive his gift, and on that day, in the crowded Temple, some 40 days after the events of Luke 2:1-7 At long last, the Gift came. And the joy he showed and the common sense he expressed testifies to how great a gift it was even to this day.

Simeon received his gift, at long last!

**Conclusion with the witnesses Lord’s Supper – Receiving the Gift**