

“A CHILD CHANGES EVERYTHING”

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Luke 2:22-40

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They're about 20 inches long and weigh about 7½ pounds at birth, give or take an inch and a pound or two. Babies aren't the biggest things in the world but we all know, particularly parents, that a child changes everything. I've seen friends who I never imagined as having the maturity or instinct, become the best parents, the most committed, compassionate, dedicated parents I know. I know people who have traded in their two-seater sports cars for more sensible minivans and who take holidays to places they never would have ever imagined. I remember years ago taking my family on a holiday to Disneyland in California. Disneyland is referred to as the happiest place on earth. And it may be for a 5 year old, but I assure you that in no way is that an accurate description for a fully grown adult. And children change the way you see the world. Think about childproofing a house. Suddenly stairs aren't just a means of going up or down, they are a falling hazard. Those electrical sockets you never gave any thought to, well, they have to be covered up with those plastic inserts because now they're possible electrocution points. Table corners get soft bumpers installed, cabinets that just used to be there now have plastic tie locks so that baby doesn't accidentally open them and get into the household cleaners and bleach. I remember when Jacob was just a one year old, we were on holidays and there was a glass topped coffee table in the living room. I looked at the edges and thought that the table was just the right height that if Jacob fell, being a one year old who wasn't all that steady on his feet, it could pose a danger risk. Well sure enough he did fall, right onto the edge of that glass table, just along his eyebrow and for the rest of the vacation we had a one year old with a black eye. I'm sure everyone we met thought we were the worst parents ever.

But a child changes the way you see the world in other ways than just baby proofing. You start thinking about the world in ways you never did before. When the child is old enough, that first snowfall of the winter becomes more than just a reminder to put on snow tires. It's a wonder, it's a beautiful sight, the snow falling from the sky, each flake different from every other flake. That first summer rain sounds more intense, feels more close when you're showing it to a child for the first time. The world becomes new again, the same old places become places of possibilities for new adventures, new experiences, new meaning. And for some, nature, the environment, something once taken for granted, becomes something to preserve, to protect, to steward so that future generations can also enjoy and experience the world in all its glory. A child changes us.

And it was no different for Mary and Joseph with the baby Jesus. According to Luke's gospel account, after Jesus had been born in Bethlehem, he was duly circumcised on the 8th day, according to Jewish custom and he was given the name Jesus, as the angel had instructed.

Now, 40 days after giving birth, Mary and Joseph went to the temple for the purification ritual and also to present Jesus to the Lord, as again was the custom with every firstborn male. What the text tells us is that Mary and Joseph were devout, observant Jews, they were faithful. They didn't stray from what their traditions would have taught them, not even with the news that they held closely in their hearts about who this baby was and what the angels and shepherds had told them. They were confused and perplexed about what had happened to them but they trusted that God was at work in events they had experienced. And like parents today when they bring children for baptism, Mary and Joseph lived within a covenant community and they sought to fulfill vows they had made as well as to introduce their son into that covenant community. The baby had changed their lives and they wanted to do what was best for their child, which makes them no different from just about every other set of parents who have ever lived.

Now as Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple, there was in Jerusalem a man named Simeon, righteous and devout, upon whom the Holy Spirit rested. He was old but he had also been told by the Spirit that he would not die without having seen the Messiah. The day Jesus was brought to the temple, the Spirit also led Simeon there and he took the child in his arms and praised God. The words Simeon says are part of what is known as the Nunc Dimittis, Latin for, "Now you dismiss," and it's sung as part of the evening prayers in some Christian traditions. Master, you are now 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.

Simeon knows he has seen the Messiah and he is at peace. He knows he can now rest, even longs for death, for he knows he has seen the child that will change everything. Simeon says this child is God's salvation, a light of revelation for the Gentiles and for glory to Israel. So here, in the earliest of stories about baby Jesus, we are given a glimpse of the change that Jesus, the Messiah, will usher in. All of the story has been grounded in Jewish understanding and tradition. The Messiah had long been promised within Jewish religious understanding. Mary and Joseph, being devout, practicing Jews, did everything as according to their tradition and understanding, from circumcision to ritual purification and the presentation of Jesus as the first born. But from this Jewish context, we hear the words of Simeon, that Jesus will be a light of revelation for the Gentiles, as well as glory to Israel.

When did the Gentiles all of a sudden figure into God's salvation? That would have been new and unexpected for the Jews. And yet that's what Simeon sees in Jesus. He knows that this little child, this little baby, 40 days old, this unassuming little bundle of joy, will change everything. He has seen what was promised and now he's ready for whatever's next. Dismiss your servant in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation...

Over the years the Nunc Dimittis has been recited when people have experienced moments of what they believe are God's salvation. Lauren Winner, who teaches at Duke Divinity School, recalls one very public example, the US Republican National Convention in Chicago in 1860. During the tense third ballot, The state of Ohio switched four votes from Salmon P. Chase to Abraham Lincoln, thereby giving the lawyer from Illinois the nomination for the presidency. At Ohio's announcement, one man started crying and another old man started quoting scripture, at the top of his lungs: "Now Lord, let thou thy servant depart in peace for these eyes of mine have seen your salvation..."

How very striking, notes Winner, that at this climactic political moment, this moment that set the American nation on the course to liberate 4 million slaves, an old Republican man reached for those words of an earlier old man—as though the convention attendee in Chicago had a premonition of the redemption that Lincoln's election would eventually help bring about. In both cases, these men looked at an unlikely source and saw God at work, and announced the salvation they saw for all to hear.¹

In this season of Christmas, when people are busy returning gifts, how do we acknowledge and celebrate the gift of the Christ Child, the gift of Emmanuel, God with us? Shouldn't we share the same joy as Simeon, and later on Anna, a prophet of great wisdom and insight, who also praised God for Jesus? Shouldn't we also know that in Jesus, God is wanting us to change what we think we know about the world? You think about the context within which Simeon and Anna proclaimed what they said. Israel was under occupation by the Romans. Jerusalem was not free, the people were not free. Oppression, injustice, war, hardship, all these things and more form the context from which these wise elders of the nation proclaimed that through this child, God was changing everything. The gift of the child gave them new eyes with which to see the world. Things are not what they seem, what you see isn't what really is.

From within our context this Christmas, could we as the church also proclaim with confidence along with Anna and Simeon, that the child of God changes everything? Can we give thanks for Emmanuel, for God with us, who gives us new eyes with which to the world? Because of Jesus, because of the child of Bethlehem, can we look at the way the world is today and know that it will not be this way forever? Can we see the fear, the anger, the worry, the polarization about things like the pandemic, the ongoing restrictions, the hard choices that are continuing to be asked of us around staying away from people we love, about doing things that are meaningful to us, about getting vaccinated, can we see the continuing injustice, inequality, the pain and suffering of the world and be confident that these things will not last because God in Jesus Christ will bring vindication and cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations, because we are God's children and no longer slaves to the world but children of God, heirs of the promise? Can we know the grief of loss, the sorrow of suffering, the chaos of

¹ Lauren F. Winner, *Simeon's Faithful Proclamation*

doubt and the paralysis of fear and still be confident that there is more, that God is at work, that because of a child, there will be light in the darkness, a light that no darkness can ever overcome?

This is Christmas, the gift of a child that changes everything. This is Christmas, the gift of God's presence with us that says that no matter what things might look like now, this isn't the way things are going to finish. God has more in mind. Will this gift give us hope as the church and as children of God to see as Simeon did, to recognize God's redemption in unlikely bodies? Will we be on the lookout for those moments of God's redemption in the world around us, and like the man at the Chicago convention, when we do, will we have the faith to proclaim it? Can we cultivate the eyes of Simeon, to see the world with hope, with courage, with confident faith borne of faithful waiting? Simeon looked beyond the child Jesus as a baby, and saw the Christ, the Promised One. How will the gift of Emmanuel, the gift of the child of God, the gift of Christmas change the way we see? Wouldn't it be wonderful if we each of us could see the Christ in one another, and in every single person we meet? Wouldn't it transform our relationships, our churches, our families, our nation, the world, if we could see the potential in each person as a gift of God who has a role in the unfolding of God's promises and plan in our midst? Perhaps a baby resembles that unfolding of God's promises because we have no idea what will happen in the future, what and who a baby will grow up to be. Simeon, holding the baby Jesus that day in the temple, surely did not comprehend the mystery in his arms. But he allowed for the possibilities of God's power to unfold in ways he could not imagine but only hope for.²

And friends, in this season of Christmas, in this season of joy and love, in the receiving of the gift of Jesus, may we know that a child changes everything and live with the hope of a people who know God's salvation.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

² Kathryn Matthews (Huey), *Sermon Seeds*