

Christmas 1 (B)
December 31, 2023
Text: Luke 2:22-40

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During the past week, Melinda and I both have been packing lots of books and sorting through lots of files. And that has stirred up lots of feelings. For example sorting through old Sunday School and Confirmation files, and looking through a bunch of old Vacation Bible School pictures—it just made me smile. It brought back happy memories. It reminded me how I had the opportunity to do some creative, fun things to teach the Bible to our kids. The pictures just made me laugh, seeing all of the kids when they were so much younger, and I looked so much younger too. And then there was the job of sorting through all of my old funeral sermons. It was sad to remember of all of those beautiful, special people that I have had the privilege of commending into God's care over the years. I am truly blessed to have known them, and to accompany them on their last journey. It really is an amazing job being a pastor. The feeling I find coming back again and again is thankfulness. I am so thankful for these years we have been able to serve as your pastors. I am so thankful that we have been part of such a beautiful community, that we've shared the comfort and hope of Jesus together. I am deeply thankful for all of you.

And as luck would have it—or maybe it's the wisdom of the Spirit—it seems to me that our gospel reading for this morning is helpful for processing some of these feelings. Luke tells of Mary and Joseph going to the temple in Jerusalem to make a purification offering for Mary after childbirth, and an offering for the 8-day-old baby Jesus as a first-born child. And in the temple they meet an elderly man named Simeon, and an elderly woman named Anna, who had been waiting for the consolation of Israel. They had been praying faithfully for years, praying for the longings of a whole nation, longing for freedom from their oppressors, from fear, from suffering and poverty and disease. Luke tells us that God had told Simeon that he would not see death until he had seen the Messiah, the one who would bring God's promises to fulfillment. He had been waiting a long time, but when Joseph and Mary brought their eight-day old child to the temple, Simeon saw that his waiting and hoping were over. I can imagine him, with face glowing, maybe with tears streaming down his cheeks, saying, "Lord, now you let your servant go in peace, according to your word. My own eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared for your people." This is enough for me. I can leave this life in peace.

But what exactly did Simeon see? A child, eight days old. He doesn't see the child grow to maturity and complete his work. He doesn't see God's reign of peace arrive. He doesn't see an end to suffering or the human family made whole. But he says, "This is enough. I know that God keeps God's promises." Simeon is thankful, and he is content, because he has seen enough to trust the rest to God.

And I wonder if that's where most all of us might be right now. We are thankful for what we've shared together, and we are working on trusting the rest to God. I think that's where I am—

being thankful, and entrusting this community into God's care, trusting that God's Spirit will lead you into the next stage of First Immanuel's life together, and that you'll be listening for what the Spirit is saying about how this congregation can embody Jesus' way of love for a new time. We've been through it before—23 years ago when you called Pr Melinda and me to serve as your pastors, and 25 years before that, when Pr Chuck Haney came. In the 1960s, there's was Pr Llano Thelin, and in the 1940s there was Pr Sodergren. We people of First Immanuel have been doing this for 144 years, so we know it can be done, and that God will be with us through it all, and God's Spirit will lead and comfort and strengthen.

And it occurs to me that what we share with Simeon—trusting the rest to God—might be a really valuable way of gaining perspective on the whole of our lives. Like Simeon and Anna, we also long for God's reign of peace, for an end to suffering, an end to poverty and hunger. What have we seen? We have certainly seen more than Simeon. In the witness of the Gospel stories, we've seen the rest of Jesus' story. But with Simeon, we are still waiting for peace on earth and goodwill toward all. I'm wondering if we can say, with Simeon, "Lord, we have seen enough." We have seen enough to know that God has come to dwell with us, to make a home with us. In all of life, God is with us, through the highs and lows. We've seen enough to know that, as we share the Word, we can trust God to move through it to touch our lives and stir our spirits and make of us the work of beauty that God wishes us to become. And we've seen enough to know that, as we share bread and wine, we can trust Christ to be present, to forgive us and renew us and bless us with power and patience and wisdom.

Sometimes, though, it's really difficult—when there are reports of atrocities in Israel and Gaza; when war in Ukraine grinds on and on; when racists and haters in our country are emboldened to spread their lies and cause hurt to others. And there's always more. I believe that's what makes this community of faith so important, so essential. As a community together is where we hear good news, where we hear the promise of God, where we receive hope and strength to keep going. We know that there is a dark and tragic side to human life. Together, we hear—we need to hear—God's promise that the darkness does not have the last word. God is at work in our lives and in our world for life, for new life, to bring healing to our spirits, healing to our relationships, healing to our planet.

Like Simeon and Anna, we have seen God's promise come true in Jesus Christ. The world goes on much like before, but we have seen enough to know that God keeps God's promises. We have seen enough to give us strength and hope and courage. We have seen enough even to make our hearts sing with praise to Christ, the child on Mary's lap, the one who pleads mercy for us and who bears the cross for us, to Christ who is the only one able to hold all of our hopes. We have seen enough to be able to go in peace, holding in our hearts the peace that passes all understanding, the peace of Christ that guards our hearts and minds, the peace that will, in the end, rule over all. Amen