

Scriptures: Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:22-40

New Year's Resolutions

Here we are, at the end of the year. People often seem to come up with a list of resolutions for the new year – I've done that before, however – I'm not so great at keeping them. Usually I fall off the resolution band-wagon by January 10th or so. Perhaps you also make resolutions, which fall by the wayside before the end of January. So I'm not encouraging you to make resolutions today for the coming year – instead, I encourage you to live fully present in each moment, day-by-day, as faithful followers of Jesus Christ in the coming year.

In light of that challenge, this morning, I'd like to have you turn with me if you have your Bible or Bible app handy, to Luke 2:22-40, to read about a couple of the earliest followers of Jesus Christ. I'm reading from the NIV Bible today. **Read Luke 2:22-40.**

Luke, the author of this gospel and the book of Acts, was a Gentile. In fact, if you read the opening verses of his gospel, he writes it to one of his Gentile friends, named Theophilus – which in Greek means “friend of God.” I want you to keep this in mind – especially when we start talking about Simeon's statement a little later this morning. Luke opens our text today in this way:

When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons,” (Luke 2:22-24).

Importance of the Law

There are a couple interesting things which stand out in these opening verses about Jesus being presented in the temple. First, Luke mentions the Law – and in a few translations, including the NIV, “Law” is capitalized. I think this is an important thing to note. Later in the gospel accounts, we read about how Jesus butts heads with the Sadducees and Pharisees – two devout sects of Jews. What were they focused on? The law – they practically worship it. The law becomes an idol for them, and they really fuss and fume when Jesus doesn't hold to it the way they think He ought to.

The “Law,” is mentioned three times in these three verses, so we know following it is important to Mary and Joseph. That makes sense, since that was the system they were brought up in. Mary and Joseph are following the law, and show up at the temple at “the time for the purification rites.” This would have been roughly forty days after Jesus' birth. Women in those days were considered “unclean” for forty days after

having a baby. In order to be “ceremonially cleansed,” they had to offer a sacrifice of a young lamb or a pair of doves or young pigeons on Mary’s behalf.

Since they brought a pair of doves or two young pigeons with them, we know that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are poor. They can’t afford the lamb which is usually required for the sacrifice. One may wonder – especially in light of our traditional Christmas nativity scenes – what happened to the gold, frankincense, and myrrh the Magi brought? With those kinds of gifts, Mary and Joseph should have had plenty of money to afford a lamb. The thing we often get wrong at Christmas time is that the Magi came later – anywhere between a few months to two years after Jesus’ birth. We’ll talk a bit about them next week.

Another interesting thing about these verses which stand out is the comment Luke makes about the firstborn male being consecrated to God. This verse recorded by Luke indicates that Jesus is the firstborn – in other words, the oldest – son of Mary. If He were the only son of Mary, the writer wouldn’t have needed to put this detail into the text. It’s also worth noting that all the characters in this passage today share a single trait – piety – particularly a piety borne from their faith in the promises or messages they had heard from God previously. It’s not a works-piety, or works-righteousness type thing, rather it’s a hope-piety, a trust-piety, and a partnering-in-the-faith-piety.

Simeon

The next character Luke mentions is Simeon. Luke records:

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the Child Jesus to do for Him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took Him in his arms and praised God, saying: “Sovereign Lord, as You have promised, You may now dismiss Your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of Your people Israel,” (Luke 2:25-32).

Let’s pause there, and think through what’s going on with Simeon. He’s received a special gift from the Holy Spirit – knowledge that he wouldn’t die until he had seen with his own eyes the promised Messiah. While Simeon waited for the word’s fulfillment, he lived a pious life of action and contemplation. His statement to God at seeing Jesus, “You may now dismiss Your servant in peace,” was turned into a song by the Church – the Nunc Dimittis. It’s on page 225 in our hymnal. Simeon is described as having the Holy Spirit rest upon him even before the Spirit is promised to all of God’s people – that’s something remarkable!

Living in faith and faithfulness, Simeon was led by the Spirit to the temple as Jesus' little family makes their way there as well. Simeon's reward for listening to God the Spirit, was the fulfillment of God's promise to him. Because Simeon is so attuned to the Spirit, he senses the scope of the fulfillment – from its greatest accomplishment to its great cost. Holding the helpless Baby Jesus, who's only forty odd days old, Simeon celebrates the ending of his ministry – and presumably his life on this side of eternity – as he sees the life the Babe will have. By God's planning and preparation, Jesus will be for ALL people – not just the Jews, but also the Gentiles – Simeon even lists them first!

Notice how Simeon's blessing ends, with his words to Mary: "This Child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too," (verses 34-35). Simeon's able to recognize that even Mary will suffer pain because of her close relationship to Jesus Christ. Simeon's words ring like prophecy, describing promise and hope, grace and truth, but also woe and warning.

Anna

It was very likely that Simeon's words were affirmed – maybe even echoed – by another prophet present at the temple that day. As Luke often does in his gospel, he balances a male leader with a female one, underscoring the upside-down equality found in God's kingdom. Luke writes:

There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the Child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. (verses 36-38).

Anna also lived a life of faithful piety in partnership with God's calling, as displayed in her life's circumstances and choice to worship, fast, pray, and teach people about God's will for the world. She, Simeon – even Mary and Joseph – were waiting on the world to change. Many people are waiting on the world to change. In the summer of 2006, John Mayer even sang a song about it, that's since gone platinum. I want you to listen to it right now – pay attention to what he says (John Mayer *Waiting on the World to Change* at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oB1xScJ5r1Y>).

The primary difference here, is that Anna, Simeon, Joseph, Mary – and us – we see that the world isn't going to change. It needs redemption. Only God does that. Only Jesus does that. Anna recognizes that in Jesus is the redemption of God's people, symbolized by the city of Jerusalem. That city represents the covenant God made with His people – it was a place of shared presence. Jesus is the redemption of the

covenant – the Law – itself. Anna wants the people – the whole world – to know, that God had heard them, and He had provided.

Waiting on the World to Change?

Luke tells us after all the excitement at the temple, “When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the Child grew and became strong; He was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on Him,” (verses 39-40). Mary and Joseph were obedient – they did everything required of them. Jesus grew strong and wise – and through Him, God would eventually pour out redemption and grace on the cross. Many people – even some within the Church – are waiting on the world to change. Are you waiting on the world to change?

But see friends, the world’s not equipped to change itself. What the world needs is Jesus. What the Church needs is Jesus. Jesus isn’t Someone content with being put on a coffee table, book shelf, or on hold in perpetuity until we get ourselves sorted out and in a better, more responsive state to Him. He died on the cross to have relationship with us – He loves us that much! We can sit around, waiting for the world to change, or we can live piously, on watch and fully present in each moment, like Simeon and Anna, as faithful followers of Jesus Christ in the coming year.

Prayer: God of glory, You have given us a new name and robed us in salvation. May we like Anna find our home in Your presence, and like Simeon recognize Jesus as the Christ, so that, in joy and thanksgiving at becoming Your children, we may join with all creation to sing Your praise. Amen.