

Sermon for December 31, 2023 – First Sunday after Christmas
Luke 2:25-32 EHV

Theme: May the Holy Spirit . . .

- 1) Keep leading you to Christ,
- 2) That he always remains close to your heart.

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, waiting for the comfort of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. ²⁶ 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 Moved by the Spirit he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what was customary according to the law, ²⁸ Simeon took him into his arms and praised God. He said, ²⁹ Lord, you now dismiss your servant in peace, according to your word, ³⁰ because my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you have prepared before the face of all people, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.

As I look at how our world has changed this past year – how our society is drifting further away from Christ - I worry about the future. Why? Because I see how the devil is working: enticing people away from God with the thought, “You should be free to do whatever you want – answerable to no one but yourself.” And I get how appealing this thought is to everyone – not only because so many Christians are abandoning Christ to pursue this lie, but because my own sinful heart is drawn to it as well. That is why I worry – not only for myself but for everyone I love, including you.

Are you in danger of falling for the devil’s lie? “No, not me,” you might say to yourself, “I would never deny my LORD.” The apostle Peter once said the same thing, only to deny Jesus publicly with curses a few hours later. The truth is that no one is strong enough to fight the devil’s temptation on their own. We all have a sinful nature that desires what the devil promises. Therefore, we all need the Holy Spirit’s help to lead and keep us close to Christ.

Because this is true, I want to share my New Year’s prayer for you this morning: As the LORD did for Simeon in our sermon text, **may the Holy Spirit** 1) keep leading you to Christ, 2) so he always remains close to your heart.

Part One: May the Holy Spirit keep leading you to Christ.

Our sermon text takes place about 40 days after Jesus' birth, when, as we read later in our sermon text, Mary and Joseph *brought in the child Jesus to do for him what was customary according to the law.*ⁱ That is to say; they performed the purification and presentation rites God commanded his Old Testament people to keep.

The evangelist Luke writes: *Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon.*

Who was this Simeon? Many artists have painted him as an older man, wearing priestly clothes. But here's the truth: we really don't know much about him. The Bible neither mentions his age nor occupation. He could have been young, old or some age in the middle. His occupation could have been that of a priest, shepherd, or even a tax collector – we simply don't know. The point is that he could have been any of us – you and me – a wonderful thought I want you to keep in mind throughout the rest of the sermon.

However, there is one thing the Bible does say about Simeon: that *this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the comfort of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him.*

What kind of person do you picture when you hear the terms righteous and devout? Do you imagine an Old Testament Levite or Priest – someone whose whole occupation is dedicated to the LORD's work in the temple? To use modern terms, do you picture a pastor, missionary, or monk – someone whose outward appearances and actions seem to scream devotion to God?

Here's the truth about the term "righteous" used to describe Simeon: it is closely related to the word "justified." Jesus once told a parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector in the temple. In the eyes of men, the Pharisee looked righteous and devout as he pointed to all the works he did for God. In reality, however, the tax collector was the righteous one. How so? Because he humbled himself before the LORD – confessing his utter sinfulness and trusting in the LORD to show him mercy. Jesus said that he was the one who went home justified – having all his sins forgiven.

Keep this in mind as you read the epithet "righteous and devout" regarding Simeon. He was not righteous in and of himself. He was a sinner – every bit as much as you and me – deserving of God's holy anger and everlasting punishment in hell. The Holy Spirit used the Law to get Simeon to realize this – leading him to repent and ask God for mercy. Then, the Holy Spirit did something else: using the Gospel promises found throughout the Old Testament, he reassured Simeon of God's gracious love that would forgive all his sins and grant him everlasting life. The LORD promised Simeon a Saviour and, oh, how Simeon rejoiced in that promise. At the Spirit's prompting, Simeon set that promise as the cornerstone of his life as he waited for "the comfort of Israel" to be revealed: the Messiah whom the LORD would send to pay for everyone's sins and reconcile all people to God.

We read regarding Simeon that: ²⁶ *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 *Moved by the Spirit he went into the temple courts.*

The Bible doesn't tell us how the Holy Spirit revealed these things to Simeon. It's not for us to know. The important thing to note is that Simeon took the Spirit's promises to heart and acted on them. His greatest focus and goal was not wealth, fame, a comfortable life, or whatever else the world pursues. Simeon's greatest desire was to see the Saviour, which brought him to the temple.

What brought you to Church this morning? Was it because it's Sunday, and that's just the thing to do on a Sunday? Did you come to see me? I hope not. Instead, I pray that the Holy Spirit moved you here to find Jesus. Why? Because, like Simeon of old, you believe you desperately need Him. You need His righteousness to cover your unrighteousness. You need His sacrifice to pay for your

sins. You need his presence to guide and protect you through life. Yes, my enduring prayer is that you always come to Divine Word looking for Jesus. And if you do, you can be confident that the Holy Spirit will lead you to Him, just as he did for Simeon.

We read: *When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what was customary according to the law,* ²⁸ *Simeon took him into his arms and praised God.*

Imagine the scene: Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are surrounded by other people in the outer temple court. Nothing in their appearance would distinguish them from any other family. And yet there he was: the almighty Son of God himself veiled in human flesh. Sadly, almost everyone in the temple missed the opportunity to physically meet their God and Saviour. Why? Because they weren't looking for him.

And that brings me to my prayer for you this New Year's Eve: may the Holy Spirit always keep you looking for Jesus. Why do I pray that? Because I know how the devil works – how he tries to distract your thoughts at worship with other concerns, cares and worries to prevent you from looking for Jesus. I know this because he does it with me. How so? More often than I care to admit, I have walked away from a service, failing to hold Jesus in my heart. Why? Because I wasn't actively and prayerfully looking for Jesus. Instead, I allowed the cares and concerns of this world to distract me from taking His beautiful Gospel promises to heart even though they surrounded me.

That last point leads me to ask: Do you know where to find Jesus at Divine Word? You see him in every lesson read from the Bible and in the hymns and liturgy you sing. He is at the font of every Baptism. He is in the Bread and Wine of Holy Communion. The Gospel in Word and Sacraments are the means the Holy Spirit uses to bring you to Jesus. And whenever we gather around those means, Jesus is here with us. Don't be like the crowds in the temple that missed him. Like Simeon, understand your need for Jesus – desiring the spiritual comfort of forgiveness and peace with God that only he can grant you. Then follow the Holy Spirit's voice as he calls to us through God's Word and Sacraments. That is the only place He will lead you to recognize and hold Jesus as you cling to his promises in faith.

Part Two: That he always remains close to your heart.

What did Simeon do when he found Jesus? *Simeon took him into his arms and praised God.*

How do people hold very young infants? Not away from the body but cradled in the arms and close to the heart. This is how I picture Simeon holding Jesus. And I pray this is also how you hold Jesus: always close to your heart, smiling joyfully, and praising God.

[Simeon] said, ²⁹ *Lord, you now dismiss your servant in peace, according to your word . . .* I want to pause here to talk about this first statement of praise because there is more to it than meets the eye. The word translated as "Lord" is not the typical word used in the New Testament referring to God. A more nuanced translation would be "supreme master."

So, Simeon's prayer is this: "Supreme Master, release your slave in peace, according to your Word." By calling the LORD "Supreme Master," Simeon is humbly confessing his unworthiness of all of God's blessings. Regardless of how much the devil foolishly convinces our world to think otherwise, the LORD alone is God; we are not. We exist to glorify the LORD, not He us. We were created to serve the LORD, not He us. When you put these things in their proper perspective, the Christmas Gospel of God sending His Son to save us becomes even more impressive. We are totally unworthy of anything, yet the LORD loves us so much that he sends his Son to release us from our bondage to sin. He sent his Son to free us from our obligation to pay for all the unrighteous things we have done or will do. Jesus paid for them all. We are now at peace with God.

Trusting in the LORD's mercy and grace, Simeon asks the LORD to release him from all the fear, guilt, and doubt that disturbed him due to his sins. And why could Simeon hope that God would do this? He tells us: ³⁰ *because my eyes have seen your salvation,* ³¹ *which you have prepared before the face of all people,* ³² *a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.*

In Simeon's arms, there was Jesus for all the world to see. He is our salvation. He is a light of revelation to the Gentiles in the sense that to know Jesus is to know God and the great love he has for all humanity. He is the glory of Israel in the sense that God set Israel apart from all the people of the world for this very purpose: that his Saviour might be born into the world through them. Regardless of all the social, economic, and political problems that surrounded Simeon at that time – regardless of his own personal struggles with family, friends, and temptations he may have been experiencing - Simeon could be at peace. Why? Because the child lying close to his heart was his divine Saviour who, through his perfect life and innocent suffering and death, would reconcile all mankind to God.

My New Year's prayer for you, brothers and sisters in Christ, is that Jesus always remains close to your heart as He did for Simeon. And I do not just mean this in the emotional sense of "I love Jesus because he makes me feel good." Instead, I pray that, like Simeon, you let go of all the worries, doubts, and desires concerning your earthly life you are tempted to hold onto so that you are free to take Jesus up into your arms and have him lie close to your heart. I pray that you constantly look to Jesus in repentance, knowing He is your Saviour – born to release you from your sins. I pray that Simeon's joy becomes your joy – not just one day out of the year at Christmas, but every day as the Holy Spirit leads you to seek Jesus in His Word and hold him close to your heart in faith. Then, you do not need to worry about the trials the devil will tempt you with in the New Year. Why? Because your confidence is in Christ as you follow the Spirit's prompting to focus on him. Yes, Jesus will be your refuge from all evil; he will be your joy, confidence, freedom, and delight. Amen.

ⁱ Cf. Leviticus 12 and Number 18:15ff