



*New Year's Day
January 1, 2017
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Send Us Your Light: The Expectant

Luke 2:25-35

Happy New Year's Eve/Day! How many of you are hungover? I see that hand. I'm so glad you came to church.

You know, most holidays seem to have their traditions. Christmas, we open presents. At Thanksgiving, we bake a turkey, and so on. There's one tradition that we do at New Years, besides staying up to midnight, that I find particularly fascinating: making New Year's resolutions. I find it fascinating, because it's one of the few times in our culture when we are reflective. We look back over the year we just experienced, and it seems most of the time we regret things. Isn't that interesting? So then we look forward to the next year and we say, "I'm going to do things differently." Or we might say, "I'm going to do this thing I didn't do this past year." Most of the time that means we go on a diet or exercise, right? In any case, there's something about the calendar changing over to a new year that makes us look forward, to feel like the slate is clean and we can live in expectation for something different. Maybe even hope.

This holiday season, we've been living into Advent by talking and thinking about the ways God has sent his light into our darkness. We acknowledge that the Christmas season isn't so jolly for everyone, that actually this time of year can really bring out some hardships for people—loneliness, stress, anger, fear, family breakups, all that junk. So we talked about waiting and abandonment and depression, the places God needs to shine his light. But on Christmas Eve, we began to talk about those on whom God's light has shone. We talked about Joseph, the quiet one, and on Christmas day we talked about Mary, the joyful one. And today, on the verge of a new year expectant and hopeful, we talk about the expectant one, Simeon.

Simeon might not be a name you recognize as a Bible character. He's especially not someone you'd associate with the Christmas story. But I think he's absolutely part of the story of Jesus' first coming, as much as the wise men and the shepherds are. We find him coming on the scene of the story after Jesus was born, in Luke 2—exactly 41 days after actually. According to Jewish purification religious law, Jesus the baby was to be circumcised 8 days after he was born, then Mary was to rest for another 33 days, then as a firstborn son Jesus was to be presented at the temple in Jerusalem with a sacrifice. So Joseph and Mary make the 7-mile trek from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, probably a 2 or 3 hour journey, and they bring two little

turtledoves for the sacrifice—about all a poor family like theirs could afford to give. And as they make their way to the temple, they meet Simeon.

Luke 2:25-35

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. 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. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

*"Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation
that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel."*

And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. And 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 (and a sword will pierce through your
own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."*

This is the Word of the Lord.

In these 10 verses we see about as succinct a summary of Simeon's life as one could expect. I see three acts, three parts, to Simeon's story. Act 1 is Waiting. Act 2 is Expectation. And Act 3 is Fulfillment. In these three Acts I believe we will see in Simeon's life what Jesus' coming means for our own life, especially what Simeon can teach us about prayer.

But before I get ahead of myself, let's begin with Act 1 of Simeon's story, Waiting. But that's not the first thing we learn about Simeon. Luke tells us that Simeon is a "righteous and devout" man. Simeon is a good guy.

But all is not well with Simeon, because Simeon has been in a place of waiting. All of Israel had been given prophecies, some of them 700 years old by the time Simeon walks onto the scene. You might have heard one of these on Christmas eve. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone." Simeon, being a faithful, devout Jew, was waiting for light in his darkness. But this was not just some concept philosophical revolution he waited for, but a person. A child. "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."

It's easy to miss the depth of what waiting means for Simeon, but we see this through the word "consolation." What is consolation? Consolation is comfort after experiencing great pain or loss. So when Luke says Simeon is "righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel," he is, in effect, saying the Simeon is about as good a person as this world can expect, but he's been through some pain. And he's waiting to find comfort.

The Bible doesn't shy away from the reality of waiting and pain. As we began this sermon series, Pastor Mark preached a great sermon on this. And it's not hard to imagine Simeon being the kind of person who would cry the words of the Psalm Pastor Mark preached on, "How long, O Lord?" How long will oppression reign in Israel? For hundreds of years Simeon's country had experienced bloodshed, occupation, overthrow, a land of deep darkness. How long will his people be trampled on? How long will he be trampled on, suffer? We've all been in this place with Simeon, we've all been in a place of waiting.

I know I have. About two years ago this month, Pastor Megan, my wife, shared with all of you part of our journey through infertility in one of the hardest sermons she's ever had to preach. At that time, we'd had 4 years diagnosed with unexplained infertility. Nothing we'd tried seem to make any difference, and there was no guarantee that we would ever have a child. It was hard to talk about, but we both felt like we needed to say, "God is faithful" before our community, even if we didn't see the answer to our prayers. We could cry, "How long, O Lord?" with the Psalmist. We longed for a child, we longed for consolation. We were waiting. So as I was studying this passage, reading Simeon's story, I found that I could identify with him. I know the pain of waiting. Maybe you do too. What is the thing that you are waiting for? Maybe it's a child. Maybe it's reconciliation with a loved one. Maybe you're waiting to hear about a diagnosis. Whatever it is, you, with Simeon, are waiting for consolation.

Luke goes on, and he says, "the Holy Spirit was upon him. 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." In the midst of Simeon's waiting, God gave him a gift, a promise. In a way, God answered "how long?" with a "soon." So we come upon the second Act of Simeon's life: Expectation. Simeon's waiting had changed to something between waiting and fulfillment. He knew he would receive the consolation he had been hoping for, it was just a matter of when, not if. And it all hinged on a promise.

Expectations all hinge on a promise don't they? You've been told, or you believe, something is coming, so you expect it. But there is still waiting in the expectation. Expectation is waiting with hope. It's the "how long?" with an answer. And if we have to put up with waiting, as so often do, this is the best kind of waiting to do.

I realized that I understood this part of Simeon's story too. Before we shared our story of infertility with you all, we had been told three separate times by individuals

that they felt like God was telling us we were going to have a child. On two of those occasions, the individual didn't know we were dealing with infertility. One of those individuals was Pastor Bill.

A couple of weeks after he came on staff, he came up to Megan and I after a service and said, "Okay guys, are you keeping a secret," and he had this big grin on his face. And Megan and I looked at him kind of quizzically. And he went on and asked, "Are you guys pregnant?" There was a moment when Megan and I kind of looked at each other, and Megan turned to Bill and said, "Bill, we haven't told you yet, but we've been trying to have a child for 7 years and haven't been able to." And Bill, blessed Bill, he begins to choke up. And he tells us that as he was sitting in the pew and looking at Megan while she preached, he felt like the Lord was telling him, so clearly, that He was going to give us a child.

Let me advise you, be really careful when you do something like that. If you ever think God is telling you someone should expect a child, remember that you're going to be holding someone's heart in your hands. I think Pastor Bill was gentle about it, but hope is a dangerous thing. Hope, expectation, can be a scary thing. And though we didn't know for sure that we would have a child, encounters like the one we had with Pastor Bill made us believe we could. We became cautiously, dangerously expectant. It wasn't too long after we shared our story of infertility with you in December of 2015 that we found out that we were pregnant in February of 2016. God had given us a gift, a promise of new life. There's a reason why they call pregnant women, "expecting." Because pregnancy is waiting with hope, 9 months of waiting to be exact.

So maybe our story helps you get into Simeon's mind. You can imagine that he was "pregnant" with hope and expectation. He lived in this scary place of waiting with hope, fraught with emotion. Maybe he had doubts, but he had more hopes, because God had given him a promise.

What are the promises you're holding onto? The Bible is full of promises, so the Bible is full of expectation. Maybe you're in this place of worrying and you're just so full of doubt and fear. And you hear the promise of John 14:27, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." Could it really be? Could Jesus give me peace to replace my fear? Or maybe you're in a place of loneliness, and you are waiting for friendship and love. And you hear Romans 8:38, "For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Can it really be true? I am loved, no matter what? Maybe you are beleaguered and tired, and your soul is worn down. And you hear Matthew 11:28, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Could it really be? Could God really give me rest for my soul,

when I am so tired? Expectation is waiting with hope, and it is a scary place, but an oh so good place to be.

We are a people of hope. We are called to be expectant people, not hopeless. But we can only be a people of hope because we know we serve a faithful God. The Bible is not only full of promises, but of stories of God's faithfulness in fulfilling his promises. And Simeon's is one of those stories. As we read on, Luke tells us that Simeon is led by the Spirit into the temple. I can just imagine his eyes searching the crowd, looking for the one whom the Spirit said would come... hoping, expectant. And as his eyes graze across a couple with a young babe, holding onto two turtledoves, the Spirit says, "There is the consolation of Israel." Could it be? Could this baby be the hope of Israel, the hope of this whole world?

Once again, I tried to imagine the emotion of this moment, what it would feel like for Simeon to see the fulfillment of his hope. It had to be a moment so filled with emotion. I could only imagine the moment of my own son's birth. We'd been through a sleepless night of waiting for the Pitocin to kick in, and it finally did early in the morning. Hours of labor and an epidural later, finally this little wrinkly, screaming baby greets us. I have to tell you, I've never felt the emotional rush I did when I first saw this face. Tears and mucus were streaming out of my face. I couldn't say a word, I could only say, "Oh, oh, oh." over and over as I stared at his face. Here was the fulfillment of years of waiting, of expectation. In Megan's arms lay what we had hoped for, longed for... finally.

This is Simeon. Finally, years of waiting, hope and expectation, are embodied in a little baby. The rush of joy and relief Simeon must have felt would have been overwhelming. Both Simeon and I hoped for a child. Both of us found the fulfillment of our hope in a child. As Simeon grasps the child he utters these words of faith:

*"Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation
that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel."*

What do we find our fulfillment in? I have no doubt many of you could identify with me when I talked about waiting. Maybe some of you understood this scary place of expectation, of waiting with hope. But what fulfills our hope? Here is the beautiful answer that the story of Christmas gives us: Jesus fulfills our hopes. All of our hopes, all of our desires, all of our longings are met in Jesus.

When the Bible makes promises, when the Bible gives us expectation, all of those promises point to Jesus as their fulfillment, without exception. Do you want total and complete peace? Peace is found in Jesus. Do you want security and love? Only the love of Jesus will suffice. Where is true rest to be found? In Jesus. We will not

find lasting comfort, peace, and love outside of the person of Jesus. And when Simeon grasped that infant in his arms, he knew this deep in his soul.

We have been in a year of prayer, and Simeon's story in three Acts points us to the "why" of prayer. Why do we pray? Do we pray to get stuff? Do we pray to appease God? To inform God of something he doesn't know? There could be all sorts of reasons, but there's only one that really matters. We pray to grasp onto the living God, to meet him in whom we find all of our desires and hopes fulfilled.

When I welcomed my son into my life, I did not love him because he made me laugh, or brought me joy. Frankly, I was ready for whoever God gave me. I loved my son for himself, not for what he could give me. The important thing to grasp about this image of Simeon is that his prayers, his waiting, found their fulfillment in a person. Someone he could grasp and hold.

Our prayers, at root, are an acknowledgment of this, or they should be. Every time we intercede for someone, when we give thanks, when we confess a sin, when we simply praise God in prayer, when we listen, we do these things to grasp ahold of a person. We do not attain the answers to our prayers apart from that person.

This has been an emotional sermon for me to prepare, but I felt like I needed to get into Simeon's emotional space through my own story, because it helps me to orient myself when I pray. Do I pray out of duty, just to make sure I am doing the right thing by God. Do I pray just because I want something from God, without wanting God himself? Or do I expect to have the temple encounter that Simeon did? Do I know that all my hopes are met in him?

One last thing, Simeon's story would not have had its fulfillment without one very important character—the Holy Spirit. It was the Spirit of God that gave him the promise, and revealed to Simeon in whom that promise was fulfilled. The same is true for us. We must have the Holy Spirit work in our lives to know the great depth of joy, peace, and love in the person of Jesus Christ. I want to pray that for us now.