Messiah Moravian Church (Virtual Sermon)
First Sunday After Christmas Day
December 27, 2020
Taxt: Luka 2:22, 40

Text: Luke 2:22-40

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SIMEON'S CHRISTMAS CAROL

For some of my thoughts about today's Gospel passage, I am indebted to David Lose's commentary on Simeon.

One of the many things I have missed during this Covid Christmas season is not being able to sing favorite Christmas carols among fellow believers. I miss the majestic organ fanfare that bills to a crescendo for the opening note of "Joy To The World" when the congregation practically shouts "Joy." I miss singing "Angels We Have Heard On High" with others who improvise our own harmonies on the sliding notes of "Gloria" in the chorus. A few folks harmonize beautifully, while the rest of us, well, let's just say we are joyful.

But the good news is that there are still 10 days of Christmas left, according to the church calendar. We can still belt out those carols in the privacy of our homes! In our world of constant images and noise and incessant talk, it's easy to forget that sometimes, when words fail or become trite, all we can do is sing.

In today's Gospel lesson Simeon knows, as does Anna, that sometimes all we can do is sing. They know the power of song and prayer to create meaning and identity and courage in a way that words alone seldom can.

Before the fall of the Berlin wall on November 9, 1989, the citizens of the city of Leipzig peacefully protested week after week. Gathering every Monday evening by candlelight around St. Nikolai Church, the church were Bach composed so many of his cantatas, they sang. For two months their numbers grew from a little more than 1000 people to more than 300,000 protesters, over half the citizens of the city, singing songs of hope and protest and injustice. They sang until their songs shook the powers of the nation and changed the world.

Later, after the fall of the wall, a journalist asked one of the commanders of the East German secret police why they haven't crushed these protest like they had done so many others. He replied, "We had no contingency plans for songs."

I wonder how startled, perhaps even frightened, Mary and Joseph were when an unknown old man, face aglow in religious ecstasy, radiating confidence in his own personal revelation, suddenly approached them, took their precious infant and then began to sing or chant?

Eugene Peterson's translation of Luke captures the songlike quality of his outburst:

God, you can now release your servant;
release me in peace as you promised.
With my own eyes I've seen your salvation; it's
now out in the open for everyone to see: A God-revealing light
to the non-Jewish nations, and of glory for your people
Israel.

What an odd Christmas carol to offer to the holy family! Simeon does not sing about angels and mangers but rather about letting go, departing—dying, in fact. In the infant Jesus he sees the assurance that God has fulfilled his promise to the Israelites of old. Now Simeon is able to face and accept his own death with courage, confident of God's love for his people, *all* of his people.

After the praise and promise of the first stanza, the second stanza of Simeon's carol modulates into a minor key, offering a somber predication for Mary and foretelling a difficult future for her infant:

This child marks both the failure and the recovery of many in Israel, A figure misunderstood and contradicted—the pain of a sword-thrust through you—But the rejection will force honesty, as God reveals who they really are.

Simeon is certain that this child will draw people towards God. And it will not be just be his own Jewish community. Jesus will be a light of revelation to the Gentiles and a light of glory for the people of Israel. This is a far broader understanding of Messiahship than the Jewish community can imagine.

Not everyone is going to be excited about the ways that Jesus engages people outside his own religious community, Simeon cautions. Yet, even from the earliest days of his life, this appears to be what Jesus is called to do. Simeon blesses the family but also warns them: Jesus will be opposed but just because he is opposed doesn't mean that he's wrong.

The message that God's love abides among us is not just for Christmas. Our belief that salvation is at hand has to do with our daily life and the life of this world here and now. God's love comes to us daily in our ordinary lives just he first came to us as a child. As Paul Tillich writes, "Only those who can see power under weakness, the whole under the fragment, victory under defeat, glory under suffering, innocence under guilt, sanctity under sin, life under death, can say: 'Mine eyes have seen thy salvation.'"

It is just as outrageous for us as it was for Simeon and Anna to proclaim this message in these difficult days. But human history and our life together has always been hard, and it will often continue to be so. The gift of God's abiding presence will always remain mysterious, as mysterious as the Christ child. This child still tells us that even as the world around us seems set

upon its own destruction, God is at work and, we, his beloved children as well, cannot help but proclaim, along with Simeon, that salvation is near.

So let us rejoice with Simeon and his carol of praise, acknowledging that we have seen God's face in this small baby, sent for all people. Just as God was incarnated in Jesus long ago, so too is God embodied in each and every one of us right here and right now.

In these remaining ten days of Christmas, even if we cannot sing together as a congregation, let us sing to celebrate that Christ came for us so that we might have life and have it abundantly.

Let's sing carols of hope and joy! Let's sing loudly or softly, in the shower, at a

stoplight, on your morning walk, raking leaves in the yard—wherever and whenever you discern God's abiding love. Sing like no one—no one, not your family, friends or even strangers—sing like no one is listening because, sometimes, in God's presence, all we can do is sing.

CLOSING PRAYER:

Dear Lord,
Our lives flow on in endless songs.
Above earth's lamentation
We hear the real though far off hymn That hails a new creation.

Through all the tumult and the strife We hear that music ringing.
It finds an echo in our souls.
How can we keep from singing?

No storm can shake our inmost calm While to that Rock we're clinging.

Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, How can we keep from singing? Amen.

BENEDICTION:

We have seen the Savior.

Let us go now in peace.

May we be lights to illumine everyone we meet, And may our lives reflect the glory of God In the face of Jesus Christ. Amen.