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Luke 2:22-38

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FAITHFUL VIGIL ENDED

Today, the fourth and final Sunday of Advent, we come to the last of our series of three messages looking at the canticles or songs of Luke's infancy narrative. These canticles are a distinctive feature of Luke's account of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus. Three times someone praises God for fulfilling his promise. These praises, redolent in Old Testament imagery, were quickly incorporated into the worship of the church and remain in the daily worship of liturgical churches today.

For over a millennium the western church sang its praise in Latin, so these songs are known by their opening words in Latin. Mary's praise after her visitation to Elizabeth is the *Magnificat*, "My soul doth magnify the Lord" (1:46-55). Zechariah's praise after the birth of his son John and the restoration of his speech is the *Benedictus*, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel" (1:68-79). Simeon's praise when he takes the baby Jesus in his arms is the *Nunc Dimittis*, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace" (2:29-32).

It was our original intention that I take the *Magnificat*, John the *Benedictus*, and Brian the *Nunc Dimittis*. But four weeks ago my father died, so I returned to Scotland, where it was my honor to conduct his funeral service three weeks ago. Brian and I switched weeks, so that it falls to me to cover the *Nunc Dimittis*. This is rather poignant since this canticle is sometimes sung at funerals, with its line, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace."

My title today, "Faithful Vigil Ended," is drawn from the opening line of Timothy Dudley-Smith's hymn based on the *Nunc Dimittis*. In thinking about this text the past couple of weeks, my mind has been half on Simeon, half on my father. Of both it can be said: faithful vigil ended.

We pick up Luke's narrative forty days after the birth of Jesus:

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 TNIV)

The holy family went up to Jerusalem to perform two different ceremonies required by the Law: the purification of the mother (2:22a, 24) and the presentation of the firstborn (2:22b-23).

The regulations for the purification of the mother are given in Leviticus 12. After the birth of a son, a mother was ceremonially unclean for seven days until the baby's circumcision on the eighth day, then for another 33 days, for a total of forty. Thereupon she had to bring two offerings to the tabernacle or temple: a year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a bird for a sin offering. With these the priest made atonement for her, so that she became ceremonially clean. Special provision was made for the poor: they could bring a second bird instead of the lamb. Such was the case for Mary here.

The requirement to present every firstborn male to the Lord is given in Exodus 13:

"Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether human or animal." (Exod 13:2)

They were to consecrate every firstborn son because of their redemption from Israel, where God had required the life of the firstborn. The first generation of firstborn was exchanged for the Levites who were consecrated to the Lord's service (Num 3). Thereafter each firstborn son was to be redeemed for five shekels (Num 3:46-47; 18:16).

Though Luke makes no mention of this redemption price, he stresses, three times in as many verses, and twice more in the passage (2:27, 39), that Joseph and Mary did everything according to the Law of the Lord. He presents them as godly people, caring for the things of God, caring for the Law which the Lord had given his people, showing them how to live holy lives even as he is holy himself. This meant that Jesus, even as an infant, was fulfilling all the requirements of the Law, as he would indeed do his whole life. He was consecrated to the Lord, belonging to him.

Luke has so far presented two couples. Zechariah and Elizabeth are old; Joseph and Mary are young. Though they be at opposite ends of the age spectrum they share a heart for God and his ways. Each couple has been promised and received a son. The old couple's son John has prepared the way for the young couple's son Jesus. Fulfilled promises have prompted praise from the father of one and the mother of the other. Now Luke rounds out his story with another pair, Simeon and Anna. Though old like Zechariah and Elizabeth, they are not married. Their role is not to bear a son: the two significant sons have already been born. The role of Simeon and Anna is to see the second son and recognize his significance. With his arrival their waiting is over, their faithful vigil ended; they can depart in peace.

First we meet Simeon on his way to the temple courts:

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. (2:25-27a)

Already in the temple courts is the old woman Anna:

There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then had been a widow for eighty-four years. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. (2:36-37)

Luke presents Simeon and Anna as a pair, and they have much in common. Both are old: Anna is explicitly old; after seven years of marriage she has been widowed either for 84 years or until aged 84. Simeon is presumed old, since he has been promised he would not die till seeing the Lord's Messiah. Both are godly: Simeon is righteous and devout, and filled with the Holy Spirit. Anna worships God in his temple day and night, with fasting and prayer. Both have been waiting: Simeon for the consolation of Israel, Anna among those waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. They have been waiting a long time, as has Israel, whom they represent. We'll see that both praise God when they see Jesus.

Just as Luke had repeated three times in as many verses that Joseph and Mary acted according to the Law, so he repeats three times in as many verses that Simeon is impelled by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is upon him; it is the Spirit who has given him God's promise that he not die till he see the Lord's Messiah; and it is the Spirit who directs him to the temple. Here we are still in the Old Testament age, albeit near its close; God's Spirit is still poured out on an occasional basis for individuals to accomplish his purposes. But God pours out his Holy Spirit on most of the participants in this infancy narrative: on John, Mary, Elizabeth, Zechariah, and now Simeon. God is on the move working through these little people whom he fills with his Holy Spirit that they might do his will.

And so at the temple the young family, brought there by their faithfulness to the Law, meets the old man, brought there by the Spirit:

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.” (2:27b-32)**

Taking Jesus in his arms, Simeon praises God for the fulfilment of his promise. This has been the pattern for each of the canticles: promise, fulfilment, praise. Gabriel promised Mary that she would conceive; Elizabeth pronounced her and the child in her womb blessed, for she had “believed that the Lord would fulfil his promise to her.” Whereupon Mary burst into praise, “My soul doth magnify the Lord.” Gabriel had promised Zechariah that Elizabeth would bear a son, and that he, Zechariah, would be dumb till the son be named John. When this was fulfilled Zechariah's tongue was loosed and he burst into praise, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel.” Simeon had been promised that he would see the Lord's Christ ere he died. When this is fulfilled he, too, bursts into praise. God is to be praised for he has fulfilled his promises, he has kept his word.

Simeon and Anna were part of a circle of godly people that had been patiently waiting for God to fulfill his promises. They were hungry for God himself. This attitude of hoping expectantly in God is portrayed many times in the Psalter. For example, Psalm 130, one of the Songs of Ascent sung by pilgrims as they went up to Jerusalem:

**I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits,
and in his word I put my hope.
I wait for the Lord
more than watchmen wait for the morning,**

**Israel, put your hope in the LORD,
for with the LORD is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption.
He himself will redeem Israel
from all their sins. (Ps 130:5-8)**

Like the psalmist, Simeon and Anna are hungry people. They are hungry for God, knowing that God will satisfy them. Luke describes their waiting as an eager longing for the consolation of Israel and the redemption of Jerusalem. This is language from the second half of Isaiah, chapters 40-66. This opens with the wonderful proclamation from God, which we hear at this season in Handel's *Messiah*:

**Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and proclaim to her
that her hard service has been completed,
that her sin has been paid for,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins...
And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken. (Isa 40:1-2, 5)**

And later,

**Burst into songs of joy together,
you ruins of Jerusalem,
for the LORD has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.
The LORD will lay bare his holy arm
in the sight of all the nations,
and all the ends of the earth will see
the salvation of our God. (Isa 52:9-10)**

The audience Isaiah addressed was Israel in exile in Babylon while Jerusalem lay in ruins, bereft of God's glory, because of the sin of God's people. Forsaking the Lord God who had redeemed them, they had pursued false gods that were unable to save. Nevertheless, God announced that he would restore his people Israel and rebuild Zion. But it would be more than merely a return to previous conditions. The return of his glory would be seen not just by Israel but by all nations, as he would extend his salvation to Gentiles also. These themes of consolation for Israel, redemption and rebuilding for Jerusalem, and the revelation of God's glory to all nations are repeated throughout the last 27 chapters of Isaiah. As these chapters unfold it becomes apparent that central to God's purposes is the mysterious figure of a suffering servant. Initially this seems to be Israel, but it becomes increasingly evident that he suffers as one of Israel on behalf of Israel, even that he will be rejected and cut off by Israel.

At the end of the first century BC, all Israel was waiting in one way or another. The Pharisees, while waiting, strove to be more and more religious and to let everyone know it. The fledgling zealot movement, impatient of waiting, sought to overthrow Rome by force. The Sadducees, while waiting, grabbed as much power and money as they could; they preferred the waiting not end as they were doing quite nicely in the present. The Essenes had removed themselves from society to wait in monastic seclusion untainted by society. Luke ignores all of these and shows us some little people: Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, Simeon and Anna. They don't amount to much in society; they are not among the movers and shakers. They are representative of the “poor and needy.” Joseph and Mary were indeed poor, too poor to bring a lamb. But the “poor and needy” refers not

to those who were physically poor but to those who were hungry for God, longing for him, waiting with burning desire for him to come to fulfill his promises.

When Simeon and Anna see the baby Jesus they realize God has indeed come to fulfill his promises and has done so through this little babe born to a poor couple away from the circles of power. To see this little babe is to see God's salvation. To see this babe is to end the waiting.

This striking juxtaposition of the apparent weakness of the baby and the great salvation he would win is captured by Benjamin Britten in his *Ceremony of Carols*, sung as our offertory:

This little babe, so few days old
Is come to rifle Satan's fold.
All Hell doth at his presence quake
Though he himself for cold do shake.
For in this weak, unarmed wise
The gates of Hell he will surprise.

As Simeon gazes on this helpless babe but forty days old, he realizes that his faithful vigil is ended. And so he bursts into praise to God:

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,
according to thy word:
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,
which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;
To be a light to lighten the Gentiles,
and to be the glory of thy people Israel.¹

Simeon the faithful servant asks his Master to release him from his vigil. Now he can die in peace, in *shalom*, knowing that "all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."² The Lord has fulfilled his promises, both as given to Simeon, and as given to his people Israel through Isaiah, whom he quotes. Simeon's own eyes have seen God's salvation, but he knows that this salvation is for the Gentiles also. God has sent his light into the world, but this is not just for the Jews; it is to illumine all peoples. In the second volume of his history Luke will show how this salvation extends beyond Judea to Samaria and the ends of the earth, even to Caesar's palace in Rome.

It is no wonder, therefore, that

The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. (2:33)

Having blessed God in praise, Simeon blesses the family, then addresses a prophecy to the mother Mary:

Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "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." (2:34-35)

Simeon understands that not all will recognize and acknowledge this Jesus as the bearer of God's salvation as he has done. He sees that this child has been set in place as one might set a stone; indeed Simeon is probably referring to the imagery of God setting a stone. Through Isaiah the Lord announced that he had laid a stone in Zion (Isa 28:16). But response to the Lord's stone would be divided. Those who rejected it would stumble against it and fall; they would experience the stone as a stone of offense, as a stone of stumbling. But those who relied on it would find it to be a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation (Isa 8:14-15; 28:16; Ps 118:22). Simeon saw that this baby was that stone, who would provoke a divided reaction, causing

many to fall and many to rise. Though a sign of God's saving presence with his people he would be opposed, thereby revealing the innermost thoughts of many. This opposition would affect Mary also, as Simeon warned, "And a sword will pierce your own soul too," a premonition that the rejection of Jesus would extend to his death.

And so it has proven to be. This two-sided experience of Jesus the rock is presented most fully by Peter, quoting all three Old Testament texts that refer to the Lord setting a stone (Isa 28:16; Ps 118:22; Isa 8:14):

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by human beings but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says:

**"See, I lay a stone in Zion,
a chosen and precious cornerstone,
and the one who trusts in him
will never be put to shame."**

Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

**"The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone,"**

and,

**"A stone that causes people to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall."**

They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for. (1 Pet 2:4-8)

We proclaim this Jesus, the Lord's Christ, rejected by mankind, to be the stone set in place by God. He is simultaneously the stone that forms a sure cornerstone and the rock over which people stumble. "But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1:23), where the Greek word for stumbling block is *skandalon*. At the heart of the gospel is "the offense (*skandalon*) of the cross" (Gal 5:11). Simeon understood this as he gazed upon Jesus. The gospel when faithfully proclaimed will be an offense to many, to those who have been waiting, but not for God. It will cause them to stumble. But others, those who have been waiting for God, will find Christ to be their cornerstone, a sure foundation for a new life.

While Simeon still holds Jesus in his arms, along comes Anna and sees the baby for herself:

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. (2:38)

Just like Simeon when he saw the child, she bursts into praise to God. She, too, recognized that the waiting was over. And so she talked about the child to all who would listen. Those who would listen were those who were hungry for God, those looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem, even as God had promised through Isaiah.³

Luke's account of Simeon and Anna begins and ends on this theme of waiting. Advent is the season of waiting. But we don't like waiting. In our instant society we want everything now. If it's not happening now we make it happen now. Such thinking affects the church, so that we try to make things happen in our own strength. It is hard to wait upon God. But it is not waste time to wait upon

God. We no longer wait the coming of the Lord's Messiah to bring his salvation to all nations. Now we await the return of our Lord; this, too, we remember at this season of Advent. The Lord bids us to be watchful while we await his return.

This waiting upon God is not a recipe for passivity. It is no passive thing to still our hearts to wait upon God. Quite the opposite. Paul says that it is our expectant hope in the resurrection that motivates our current behavior. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul lays out a great exposition of the resurrection, first of the Lord Jesus Christ, then of all who follow him. I had a selection of these verses read at my father's funeral. Paul concludes 57 verses of theology with one verse of application:

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. (1 Cor 15:58)

I used this as the first half of the benediction at my father's funeral. It is because we have this certain expectation of the resurrection that we can be diligent in the present, that we can give ourselves fully to the Lord's work. The Lord will fulfill his promise; therefore our labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Simeon recognized that this forty-day old baby born to a poor couple was God's salvation. The Lord's Messiah had by-passed the corridors of power. Simeon also recognized that he would be a stumbling block to many. My parents saw this: they served as missionaries in Thailand for nearly forty years. When OMF started in central Thailand north of Bangkok in 1953 there were no known Christians and no history of gospel outreach. The Lord brought his salvation to that land but not to the high and mighty. In the first twenty years many of those who responded to the gospel of grace were lepers. They found Christ to be not a stumbling block but a corner-stone. Meanwhile much of the church, especially in the West, stumbles over Christ as many of its leaders seek to remove the offense of the cross from its message to make it more palatable. And so we have the irony of Christ being taken out of Christmas. Nowhere is this stumbling over Christ clearer to my eyes than the ongoing controversy within the Anglican Communion. What is the church waiting for? We who follow Simeon and Anna in recognizing Jesus know that the church is waiting for God's salvation in Christ. You can either stumble over that or find that to be your cornerstone.

A few days after my father's funeral I walked with my mother around the cemetery. It is said that the UK is a post-Christian country. Never was this more evident to me than in walking around that cemetery looking at headstones. I was surprised by how much was written on many of these stones, and by the secularity of the words. God and his word were almost completely absent. Instead, several of the stones featured the detailed crest of a football (soccer) club, mostly Hearts or Hibs, the two Edinburgh teams. What had such people been waiting for all their lives? Merely the next game?

As I brought my father's funeral service to a close I could with full assurance pronounce him blessed for he has a part in the first resurrection. We can proclaim the text that will be on his gravestone, "Blessed are those who die in the Lord" (Rev 14:13).

As we were committing my father's body to the grave, we sang the Twenty-third Psalm out of the *Scottish Psalter*:

**Yea, though I walk in death's dark vale,
Yet will I fear no ill;
For Thou art with me; and Thy rod
And staff me comfort still. (Ps 23:4)**

Blessed are those who die in the Lord, for they experience the comfort of God's presence through the grave and beyond. Simeon was waiting for the consolation of Israel. Seeing that God had brought comfort to his people through the baby Jesus, he yielded his life to God: "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation." For him the advent season of waiting was over. The Lord had come to be with his people as Immanuel. He knew that he would go in God's comfort. We, following in the footsteps of Simeon and Anna, await the Lord's return in yet greater glory. Meanwhile we see him spread his light and glory throughout the earth.

Simeon and Anna represent all those who are hungry for God. It was because my father had a large appetite for God that I could conduct his funeral with such confidence. He was the most God-focused man I've ever known. He waited upon the Lord, longing for him. Four weeks ago his waiting came to an end. What he saw before with the eye of faith he now sees in person. For him and for Simeon their faithful vigil is ended.

Let me close by reading Timothy Dudley-Smith's hymn.

Faithful vigil ended,
watching, waiting cease;
Master, grant your servant
his discharge in peace.
All the Spirit promised,
all the Father willed,
now these eyes behold it
perfectly fulfilled.
This your great deliverance
sets your people free;
Christ their light uplifted
all the nations see.
Christ, your people's glory!
Watching, doubting cease:
grant to us your servants
our discharge in peace.

May God give us, as he gave Simeon and Anna, a great appetite for himself, that it might be for him that we long. Amen.

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. (Jude 24-25)

1. *Book of Common Prayer*, 1662. This is the version usually set to music.
2. Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love* (ca. 1393).
3. Though obscured by TNIV, the verb "looking forward to" is the same as Simeon's "waiting for" the consolation of Israel.

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