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Luke 2:22-40

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# OUR DEEPEST LONGING

*SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE*

Two weeks ago my wife and I were at PBC Willow Glen for my newest grandchild's dedication. At the end of the service I was holding little Joshua in my arms and as I gazed into his face I was filled with wonder. Joshua was about the same age then as Jesus was when Mary and Joseph visited Jerusalem, forty days old. And because I was preparing for today's lesson, I couldn't help but think about Simeon and Anna and the incredible sense of wonder they experienced when they looked at the face of a child and beheld the salvation of the Lord.

Our text conveys a magical, mysterious moment. Rembrandt was so taken with this scene that he painted it eight times and used his own mother as the model for Anna.

Early in his life he painted with a macro lens, including the temple in the scene. But later in life he zoomed in on Simeon and Anna. At the time of his death, an unfinished portrait of Simeon was found in his studio. As I think about this meeting in the busy, crowded temple area of Jerusalem, it captures my imagination as well. It might be similar to having a spontaneous baby dedication at Valley Fair. Why was Rembrandt so captivated by this scene? What draws us into this encounter? Why were Simeon and Anna filled with such delight and praise?

## Joseph and Mary

**And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons." (Luke 2:22-24 ESV)**

The text begins with Joseph and Mary leaving Bethlehem and stopping in nearby Jerusalem, a distance of only 5 miles, before returning home to Galilee. The reason for the visit was threefold, marked by the mention of the word "Law" three times. First, there was the matter of purification. According to Leviticus 12, a woman giving birth to a son became ceremonially unclean for seven days after birth. On the eighth day the boy would be circumcised, as Luke records in verse 21, and then she would have to wait 33 days to be purified; forty days total. The pronoun "their" might imply that Joseph aided in the birth and therefore had to be purified as well.

Second, as required in Exodus 13, the firstborn was to be presented to the Lord as holy. This presentation was a reminder that, while Israel was in Egypt, Pharaoh's stubborn heart had led to the death of every firstborn male, human and animal, in Egypt except for those who had become holy or sanctified through a blood covering. The third reason for coming to Jerusalem was the dedication of the firstborn to the Lord as we see in the case of Samuel in 1 Sam. 1-2. The third ceremony is alluded to since Luke does not mention the ransom payment of five shekels mentioned in Num. 18:15-16. I doubt

Joseph and Mary had any idea as to the significance or extent of this dedication to God.

The sacrifice given by Joseph and Mary for purification was either two turtledoves or two pigeons, one bird for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering. This was the sacrifice of the poor. The wealthy would bring a lamb and either a dove or a pigeon.

What we see in these verses is that Joseph and Mary were pious, law-abiding Jews. They took both the Law and the Lord seriously. We might note the use of the word "Lord" four times. They probably even went beyond what the Law required since they didn't need to bring Jesus. They could have simply paid a ransom price of five shekels to buy him back from God. The point is that Jesus was a Jew born under the Law so that he could redeem those under the Law.

In Jerusalem Joseph and Mary have an encounter with Simeon and Anna. What are we told about them?

## Simeon

**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... (Luke 2:25-27)**

Simeon is a man from Jerusalem. He is a simple man, a layman and not a priest. His name means "God has heard." We are not told explicitly but we assume he is elderly since he states that he is free to die after seeing Jesus. Simeon is described as being "righteous" and "devout." Devout or pious in secular literature described an "ideal statesman who was conscientious and cautious." It "refers to the spiritually sensitive God-fearer, the faithful law-abider."<sup>1</sup> Simeon is a very godly man. But not only is Simeon a pious Jew, a man of the Law, but he is also a man of the Spirit. The threefold mention of the Spirit balances the threefold mention of the Law in verses 22-24. The Spirit was upon him, a very rare occasion prior to Pentecost. The Spirit revealed to him that he would not die before seeing the Messiah. And he was "in the Spirit," being guided by the Spirit, on the day of the fateful meeting.

We are told that Simeon was waiting for the consolation of Israel, meaning that he was hoping with eager expectation for the promised Messiah, the one who would redeem Israel and comfort his people. The word "consolation" refers to Isaiah 52:

**Break forth together into singing,  
you waste places of Jerusalem,  
for the LORD has comforted his people;  
he has redeemed Jerusalem. (Isaiah 52:9)**

Ever since the Babylonian captivity, the Jews had been waiting for a redeemer to set them free from the many nations that had ruled

over them. They continually hear the cry of Isaiah: “Comfort, O Comfort my people” (Is. 40:1).

## Anna

**And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. (Luke 2:36-37)**

Later in the story we are introduced to Anna. She had been married for seven years and then she was either a widow for 84 years, making her about 105, or a widow until age 84, meaning that she had been a widow for 65 years. The text is unclear but we can be certain she was advanced in years. Luke mentions her father's name and that she is from the tribe of Asher. We are told that Anna is a prophetess like Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah, meaning she is a vessel for revelation from God. Anna is very pious since she never leaves the temple but worships constantly night and day through fasting and prayer. We might say Anna is completely devoted to God; God is her whole life. Anna seems to follow in the pattern of Samuel's mother, Hannah, her namesake, and appropriately, Anna's name means, “grace.” I definitely have a picture of Mother Teresa in my mind.

Simeon and Anna are old and single. As T.S. Eliot writes in his poem “A Song for Simeon” they have “no tomorrow.” Their life is behind them. And yet Simeon and Anna join an amazing and surprising cast of characters in Luke's birth narrative. There are three pairs of people – Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, Simeon and Anna, whose lives bear greatly on the arrival of God's son. Of course we cannot forget the angels, shepherds, and animals, but these six people are front and center. They are young and old, single and married, men and women. An elderly couple begins and ends the narrative at the temple in Jerusalem. A baby boy born to a virgin occupies the middle of the story.

None of these people would have been on the Forbes list of the rich and famous that one might have expected for the arrival of the Messiah. None of these people were dignitaries, movie stars, or CEO's. Rather all three couples belonged to the obscure, poor, and ordinary strata of the world. What might that say about the value our society places on pursuing wealth, power, and fame? It seems that God has special purposes for “nobodies.” Our being used by God is not dependent on our status in society or how much money we have. It seems piety is much more important. All six people are devoted to the Lord and each is chosen for a special part.

Perhaps you think that you are unnoticed, overlooked, or left out. You might think that others are chosen or receive attention while you are unworthy of such interest. You might feel like you are just ordinary while others are special. But God notices and you are special to him and it seems that is the better part.

I would suggest that the two older couples, at least the childless Zechariah and Elizabeth and the widowed Anna, had seen their share of suffering. Simeon was simply waiting to die. Consider also the suffering of all of Israel at the hands of the Roman oppressors. What might that tell us about the working of God and the worship of God and devotion to God even in the midst of tragedy and sorrow? It means that despite lack of understanding, God is here, God is

working, and God is being faithful to his promises even though he often takes his time.

We often hear people say, “God doesn't care.” How could God allow such tragedy to happen such as what happened in Newtown, Connecticut, if he really cared? Every day people are dying and suffering as a result of war, injustice, and disease. But that doesn't mean that God doesn't care. He cares so much for each of us that he was silent when his own son died on a cross. That is how much God cares about us.

## Simeon Encounters Jesus

**... when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he (Simeon) 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. (Luke 2:27-33)**

The encounter that Simeon and Anna have with Joseph, Mary, and Jesus takes place in the temple area, most likely in the Court of Women or the Court of Gentiles since these were the only two areas where Mary could go.

When Simeon sees Jesus he takes him in his arms and he offers two blessings – one to God and the other to the Holy family. The blessing to God consists of the fourth song we have encountered in Luke, the *Nunc Dimittis*, a song that the choir sang for us this morning. In Latin “nunc dimittis,” means “now dismiss” or “now release,” the first two words of the song. Simeon blesses God because he can now be released from his vigil and die in peace since he has seen the salvation of the Lord. This is what the Lord had promised Simeon through the Spirit. That promise has been fulfilled and now praise is given to God. In fact Simeon is asking God to be released – “now release your servant.” Simeon's song has been part of the church's daily liturgy and prayers since the fourth century.

Simeon looks at the Christ child's face and sees God's salvation. He recognizes that this child is the fulfillment of the promised redeemer for which Israel had been waiting and hoping. But Simeon also possesses a deep understanding of both Scripture and the extent of this salvation because he knows that Jesus is not just for Israel but all for all peoples, all nations. This is what Isaiah wrote:

**Arise, shine, for your light has come,  
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.  
(For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,  
and thick darkness the peoples;  
but the LORD will arise upon you,  
and his glory will be seen upon you.)  
And nations shall come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your rising. (Isaiah 60:1-3)**

Light refers to God's salvation, which is a light of revelation for the Gentiles and glory of Israel. In the last couplet light and glory could be parallel, but more likely revelation and glory are parallel. In particular, the light is for revelation to the Gentiles, since the Gentiles are in darkness, outside of Israel. Light illuminates their darkness.

And this same light is for the glory of Israel because salvation for the nations comes through Israel. Light comes, revelation and glory result. The statement that Jesus is for all peoples brings amazement to Joseph and Mary, but this had always been God's plan.

**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." (Luke 2:34-35)**

Simeon's second blessing is for Joseph and Mary. We do not know the content of this blessing but we do know that it is a mixed bag because of the word given to Mary. Simeon says four things to Mary about the child. First, Jesus is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, meaning that he will be a source of division, a stumbling block. Some will believe and be raised or resurrected to life and some will reject him and fall. Second, Jesus will be a sign that will be opposed. He will be a sign of contesting. Humans will resist Jesus and oppose him and speak against him. Third, this opposition will cause the thoughts of many hearts to be revealed, which are hostile to God. Simeon praises God for his salvation, but he knows that not all will embrace it. Jesus comes and people either choose God's salvation and resurrection or suffer the consequences. Finally, a sword will pierce Mary's soul. Jesus will bring deep pain to his mother. This pain might be caused by Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. But it might also be the pain Mary experiences by Jesus creating a new family of disciples and a new set of priorities. This is what begins to happen in the very next section of Luke when Jesus is lost to his parents for three days.

### Anna Encounters Jesus

**And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. (Luke 2:38)**

At that moment Anna comes upon this encounter and joins the circle offering her own praise and thanksgiving. We are not told what she says and Luke doesn't make anything up. But we are told that on the spot Anna becomes an evangelist. She begins to share the news with others who have been waiting the arrival of God's salvation.

The phrase "redemption of Jerusalem" is parallel to "consolation of Israel" and the word "waiting" is the same word that was used to describe Simeon's eager anticipation.

### Deep Longings

**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. (Luke 2:25)**

**And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. (Luke 2:38)**

There are many different aspects to this story, but look again at the beginning and ending of the Simeon and Anna component of the narrative. What strikes me is the anticipation, eager waiting, and hope that Simeon and Anna had for the coming of the Lord's salvation, the consolation of Israel, the redemption of Jerusalem. The Simeon and Anna narrative is framed by this idea and I don't think it is accidental. These two people (along with others it seems) had been keeping a vigil, watching, waiting, observing, and expecting

to see the salvation of the Lord. This was their deepest longing and desire. This is what they lived for. The story invites us to ask, "What are your deepest longings and desires?"

We don't take the time to ask ourselves that question very much. We don't trust our desires for several reasons. One reason is that our desires have been frustrated and unmet and therefore they have become a source of pain. One of the primary functions of addiction is not just to numb pain, but also to numb our longings. Another reason we don't trust our longings is because we know our superficial desires are narcissistic, frivolous, and self-serving. Therefore, we assume that there is no common ground between what we desire and what God desires. In addition, we are taught by the church and others that our desires are selfish rather than spiritual. We have been seduced to think that desire is the enemy of the spiritual life. So we crucify desire and seek to obey God but without any inner desire or passion.

What are your deepest desires and longings? I spent several days thinking about this question while on vacation this last September. I discovered that the question has a way of starting on the surface and then burrowing deeper and deeper. Our initial response might be landing a new job, getting a new car, taking a vacation, having more money, buying a bigger house, moving to a place on the beach.

As we think longer we might land on things like being physically healthy, getting married, having a better marriage, being a more loving parent, wanting healthier relationships. None of these things are bad or wrong, but we might realize that the back might not get better, our spouse may not change, or my brother may always be confusing and distant. And so the question takes us to another level. What do I long for even if nothing in my life changes? We might start longing for peace, rest, friendship, acceptance – things that begin strangely to have a connection to God.

The source of all of our longings comes not from sin but from God and they are meant to lead us to him. Let me tell you how this happened in my life. A couple of weeks ago I alluded to a William Butler Yeats poem in the e-news entitled the "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." This poem was very significant to me during my searching years in college. Here is a sampling of lines:

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,  
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:  
And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping  
slow,  
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket  
sings;  
I will arise and go now, for always night and day  
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;  
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,  
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

At that time in life I would have described my deepest longings as wanting a dog and a woman. But this poem spoke to something much deeper, to my deep heart's core. I longed for a place, for a peace from my restless searching and wandering. And this is what eventually led me to read the Bible and find the salvation of the Lord. God used my longings to draw me to himself and find Innisfree in him. Augustine said that God's actions are through our desires. We are restless until we find our rest in God.

The deepest longing that most people have is the longing for love, to be loved and embraced for who you are, not for who you should be. Human love will never be enough. Underneath our longing for

human love is a deeper longing for the love of the one who created us. “Our desires, our wants, our longings, our outward and inward searching – when uncovered, expressed, and recognized – all lead to the Divine Beloved . . . All our desires ultimately lead us to God.”<sup>2</sup>

The deep longings we see in Simeon and Anna were crucial to their spiritual life and they are crucial to us. We meet God in our desire the same as Simeon and Anna. If there is no desire, then there is no deep spiritual journey and no fire in the belly. Loving God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength involves deep passion and desire. This is the kind of longing and desire we see in the Psalmist:

**O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;  
my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you,  
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.**

(Psalms 63:1 ESV)

**As a deer pants for flowing streams,  
so pants my soul for you, O God.  
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.”**

(Psalms 42:1-2 ESV)

It is essential to recognize that the key to desire and longing is not to discard them or to live in them superficially but to experience a transformation of our deepest desires and longings so that we desire what God desires. Our idolatrous desires are distorted. They will impair our spiritual journey and diminish our humanity. Therefore, we need a purification of our desires; a renewal of our longings, so that God’s desires become our desires, his heart becomes our heart.

This is what draws us to Simeon and Anna and why they were witnesses to the Christ child’s arrival. Their sole longing was to see God’s salvation, waiting for God and God alone, not settling on anything less. This is what put fire in their belly. This is what made Simeon a man of the Spirit and why Anna worshipped God night and day. This is why their hearts soared with praise and thanksgiving at the sight of the infant Jesus. They weren’t just thinking about God; they were living with God-formed desires. This is God’s desire for each and every one of us – to have in our hearts the desire of a Simeon or Anna.

Perhaps you are sitting here this morning and you have never realized that your deepest longing is a longing for Jesus, a longing for God’s salvation, a longing for God’s love and acceptance. Perhaps you have never been able to get past all the religious veneers you grew up with or the silly things Christians have told you. I would invite you to make this Christmas one you will never forget and take the infant Jesus into your arms like Simeon and receive him to yourself as your salvation. This is what Christmas is all about.

Our theme this morning is love. God’s love is a transforming love. We are going to close this morning by singing one of Charles Wesley’s most well known hymns, a hymn I grew up singing in the Methodist Church, *Love Divine, All Loves Excelling*. There are many versions of this hymn but we are going to sing a British version that to me is the most beautiful. Perhaps this can be your Christmas prayer. Perhaps you might ask God to make your desires the desires you see in the lyrics.

Love Divine, all love excelling,  
Joy of heaven, to earth come down,  
Fix in us Thy humble dwelling,  
All Thy faithful mercies crown.  
Jesus, Thou art all compassion,  
Pure, unbounded love Thou art;  
Visit us with Thy salvation,  
Enter every trembling heart.

*Almighty God, you have given your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and to be born of a pure virgin. Grant that we, who have been born again and made your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit, through Jesus Christ our Lord.*<sup>3</sup>

1. Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Volume 1*, (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 1994) 238.

2. David Benner, *Desiring God’s Will*, (IVP, Downers Grove, 2005) 82.

3. Adapted from Phyllis Tickle, *The Divine Hours, Prayers for Autumn and Wintertime*, (Doubleday, New York, 2000), 437.