

Simeon's Song

Luke 2:22-40 † First United Methodist Church, Des Moines

January 1, 2012

Simeon appears only in Luke's account of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Forty days after giving birth, Mary presented herself in the Temple as part of the purification ritual set out in Jewish law. Joseph and Mary also presented Jesus in the Temple to as a part of "the redemption of the firstborn" set out in the Law of Moses in the Old Testament book of Leviticus.

While carrying out those duties, Mary and Joseph encounter Simeon (and Anna, but she is another sermon!).

The story raises a host of questions for which it provides no answers: How many days, months, years had Simeon come to look for the Savior of Israel? How did God so assure Simeon that he kept returning to the Temple? How did he know this little child was the little child? Why did Mary and Joseph give him the baby? Did Simeon tell them his story and that convinced them to hand their baby over to him? Would you give him your 40-day-old baby?!

And there is one unasked question for which Luke provides an answer: Why is Simeon included in Luke's account of the Gospel of Christ? Luke wanted to reiterate what he no doubt believed deeply, that God keeps the promises God makes.

God promised Israel a Messiah, and God promised Simeon a chance to see that Messiah before his death.

God keeps the promises God makes. Overwhelmed with God's faithfulness, Simeon sings a song of praise to the promise-keeping God of Israel.

Before departing from the Temple and from Joseph and Mary, Simeon does something else which we should note. He reminds everyone that promise-keeping has a cost. Looking at Mary, he says: "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

To some, Simeon's words sound jarring. Why bring up the pain which is to come on such a happy occasion? When we read this story after an onslaught of Christmas cheer, it seems especially jarring. It sounds discordant even though we know Christmas cheer – always being giddily happy and jolly – is not real at all. We know life consists of a mix of joy and sorrow.

We value health because we know sickness. We rejoice at the light, because we have sat in darkness. We know the pain of grief and loss because we have loved deeply and well.

Simeon reminds his hearers (and us) of the cost of salvation to Israel, to Jesus, to Mary.

God keeps his promises, knowing full well the cost. We learn that keeping our promises to God also costs us.

Here, as in so many steps along the path of discipleship, we find Mary has walked ahead of us, showing us the way. She walks where we walk as she takes her six-week-old son back from Simeon, knowing the pain her son will bear – pain which she, as his mother, will bear as well.

She does not let the cost deter her nor convince her to try to deflect her son from his ministry. Knowing the pain her son will bear as he keeps his promises to God, she knows even more deeply the end her son's promise keeping will bring to all creation: God's salvation, a light to the Gentiles and the glory of the people of Israel.

She hears Simeon's song even as she feels the chill foreboding of her son's pain. Despite the chill, she chooses to keep her promise to God as well. She gathers her son and with Joseph she departs from the Temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem.

In three short decades, she will return to David's city and keep vigil outside Jerusalem's walls at a place called Golgotha. Where once Simeon lifted her son and held him in his arms to sing a song of praise to the promise-keeping God, Roman soldiers will lift her son on the arms of a cross. Surely Simeon's song echoed in her mind that day, as she felt her son's pain on the brutal instrument of Roman execution.

There is something real and human and powerful in Luke's combining this glorious song of Simeon with a clear-eyed understanding of the cost of keeping our promises to God.

Perhaps that is why, for centuries, all across the globe, before going to bed, many Christians sing Simeon's song as part of the last prayer of the day, Compline. Before going to sleep after another day of struggling to keep God's promises – after the humbling reminders each day of the cost of keeping the promises we have made to God – Christians sing Simeon's song as their own. Here are the words I say each night as Compline ends from the *Book of Common Prayer* of the Episcopal Church:

Lord, you now have set your servant free *
to go in peace as you have promised;

For these eyes of mine have seen the Savior, *
whom you have prepared for all the world to see:

A Light to enlighten the nations, *
and the glory of your people Israel.

By singing Simeon's song to end their day, Christians thank God for keeping his promises and then go to sleep prepared to awake the next day and, like Mary, to continue their journey of discipleship, striving to keep their promises to God.

In the name of the One God, Holy and Undivided Trinity. Amen.