

The Sign

St. Mark Lutheran
Three services

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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." 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." Luke 2:22-32 (It is also recommended that you read following verses 33-40.)

Back in January of 2008, a movie was released called "The Bucket List". It starred Morgan Freeman and Jack Nicholson. I didn't see the movie myself, but I have certainly heard a lot about "bucket lists" since then.

I have been told that in the film Jack Nicholson is a rich corporate executive and Morgan Freeman is a mechanic. They meet in the hospital where each has been diagnosed with a terminal illness. They begin to reflect on what they have done with their lives, and that leads to a discussion on what they would like to accomplish before they "kick the bucket" as some say. They wind up leaving their hospital room and setting out to accomplish whatever they can on their "bucket list" while there is still time.

Since the movie, a number of people seem to have picked up the idea and made a list of things they want to do before they die. Some of you probably have your own "bucket list".

Today we read an account in Luke of two interesting people in the infant life of Jesus Christ. There was a man named Simeon and a woman named Anna. These were two unrelated, common, ordinary people, who would not be expected to be recorded in history, but because of their great faith became central characters in this wonderful story about Jesus shortly after he had been born. It is very unlikely that they ever heard the term "bucket list", but just the same, they had something very important that they wanted to do before they died.

We don't know a lot about Simeon. Some have speculated that he was a priest, but the Bible doesn't record that. Most people think he was up in years, given the fact that he seemed to be ready to die. We are simply told, "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."

There are several things we might note here which are important. We are told that Simeon was "righteous and devout". This tells us much about Simeon's character. There are other people in Scripture that are described as "righteous", and that is fine, but we must be careful not to misunderstand this. They were still sinners; they were not perfect people. The righteousness was not of their own doing. The Apostle Paul explains this very well in Philippians 3, when he explains about his righteousness as "not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ..." (v.9). This is taught in the Old Testament as well. Isaiah speaks to us through Isaiah 61:10, "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness...". Isaiah goes on to say that God will cause "righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations". Now people in general may look at this in a different way, but we must be careful to understand the word and look at it in the way God teaches us.

The next thing we can look at is where the text says Simeon was "waiting for the consolation of Israel". I am not a Greek scholar, but I am told that the Greek word here for "consolation" can also be translated as "comfort". Dr. Arthur Just in his commentary on Luke 2, points out that the people of Israel had heard of this comfort in Isaiah 40:1 which says, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." This comfort became a reality through the coming of Jesus. And Simeon was told that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. What a promise! God has reached down so many times and used people that would normally be hardly noticed, to bring glory to his name.

There is another thing we should be careful to note about Simeon-our text says that "the Holy Spirit was upon him". Simeon was given a promise by the Holy Spirit and able to speak prophetic words because the Holy Spirit was working in him. We read that "he came in the Spirit into the temple" and because of the Holy Spirit's guidance Simeon happened to attend the temple at the proper time, and what's more, he recognizes the holy family and which infant is Jesus."

So why is the title of the message today "The Sign"? This sign is Jesus himself. God's people had waited for thousands of years for God to fulfill his promise, and here he was! This was God's sign that he keeps his promises and that he has made a total commitment to save us.

And how does Simeon respond to this miracle in his life? He says, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel." (Luke 2:29-32)

I hope this sounded familiar to you. If it did not, you need to know that it is Simeon's blessing to God and similar words are used in the Divine Service in our hymnal as the "Nunc Dimittis".

I don't want to forget about Anna here. There is less said about Anna, but we can learn something from her also. We are told she was a prophetess, so she had been gifted by God. She was of the Tribe of Asher, one of the ten scattered Tribes of Israel. That sort of made her a foreigner in Israel. She was up in years and had been a widow for a long time. Again, it's amazing who God sometimes chooses to use.

She did not depart from the temple. We are told she worshipped and fasted and prayed day and night! And at this very hour, it looks like the Holy Spirit guided her also to give thanks to God and to speak of God to all who were at the temple. What can we learn from Anna? She certainly set an example of faithfulness. She certainly had God as her priority in life. We would do well to follow her example.

So, where is the application for us in the message today? You have seen the response of Simeon and Anna to what God did for them in their life; what is your response to what God has done in your life? This is a good thing to think about as we enter 2018.

I could suggest all sorts of things, but I don't think that's necessary. I will tell you this. If we are grateful for the forgiveness we have from God through Jesus Christ, we should be doing something. We have been given the greatest gift of all, forgiveness of our sins, and offered eternal life. But just like Anna and Simeon, we need to be serving the Lord in some way. It is a big world with billions of people, and God wants every one of us to show our gratitude by sharing the greatest story ever told and doing kingdom work. What are your plans to serve the Lord in 2018? May God guide you and bless you in your service to him. Amen.

