

# The First Sunday Of Christmas

## December 27, 2020

### Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson

#### Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church

#### Pasadena, California

#### Gospel: Luke 2:22-40

<sup>22</sup>When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, [Joseph and Mary] brought [Jesus] up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord <sup>23</sup>(as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), <sup>24</sup>and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.” <sup>25</sup>Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. <sup>26</sup>It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. <sup>27</sup>Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, <sup>28</sup>Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, <sup>29</sup>“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; <sup>30</sup>for my eyes have seen your salvation, <sup>31</sup>which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, <sup>32</sup>a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” <sup>33</sup>And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. <sup>34</sup>Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed <sup>35</sup>so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” <sup>36</sup>There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, <sup>37</sup>then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. <sup>38</sup>At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. <sup>39</sup>When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. <sup>40</sup>The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

#### **SERMON by Pastor Zachary Johnson**

It is often around this time of year that we begin to reflect on the past year. It is the time of year when we can expect many news networks, sport shows, movie reviews, and other entities to run their annual year-in-review specials. Also, there are many of us who this time of year send our family and friends the annual Christmas letter highlighting the events that happened to our perspective families. Finally, this is the time of year when pastors, council presidents, church treasurers, and committee chairs are gearing



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up to write their annual reports for the congregation's annual meeting. Of course, those reports are another year end reflection and review.

I can only imagine how painful and difficult it must be for us to look back on the events that have occurred in 2020. For many of us 2020 was a year of loss, illness, and strife. The grief we have all felt over the loss of freedoms, health, jobs, businesses, homes, loved ones, and hope weighs so heavily on us that we feel exhausted, easily irritable, and depressed a lot of the time. Not only did 2020 bring with it a global pandemic, but also devastating wildfires in Australia and the western United States, including right here in California. There was the Derecho windstorm that utterly flattened east central Iowa back in August. Once again hurricanes ravaged the gulf coast this year. We watched in horror the violent rioting that took place back in May, overshadowing the peaceful protests for needed change. And who could forget how many of us could not wait for the 2020 elections to be over because of how toxic the political climate became in this country. The bottom line is that 2020 was not a great year.

Because of how the year 2020 has played out, my guess is that many of us are longing for a brighter tomorrow. We want the suffering to end. We want to see our families again. We want to gather in the sanctuary and worship together once again. We long for that moment when the pandemic comes to an end. We are hoping that the year 2021 will deliver these things to us.

As I reflected on our gospel text for today, I found it interesting that this would be the week that we hear the story of Simeon and Anna. Simeon and Anna were two elderly Jews who had spent their entire lives waiting on God to bring restoration to Israel. They endured many years of suffering due to foreign oppression, religious elitism, disease, and poverty, which ravaged their country and society. For many years they hoped and prayed that the suffering of their people would come to an end, that God would be faithful to the covenant promise. They too were longing for a brighter tomorrow.

So Simeon and Anna continued to remain faithful to God through fasting and prayer, hoping that they would live to see salvation come to Israel and Jerusalem. Enter the holy family of Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus. When Mary and Joseph brought their child to Simeon, he immediately recognized the child as the promised Savior of the world. Simeon begins to rejoice as he asks Mary if he can hold the child to which Mary obliges. He tells the family how the Holy Spirit revealed to him that he would not die until he saw salvation come to Israel and to the world. After he blesses the child, he recites a hymn stating that he can now die in peace, for he knows God has kept the promise and the world's salvation is at hand.

Shortly after this, the prophetess Anna meets Jesus as well. Immediately she begins to praise God and tell all who would hear that the restoration of Jerusalem was at hand. Anna too could now depart from this world in peace, knowing that Jesus was the means of God's redemption.

What I find quite illuminating about Simeon and Anna is that they knew, more than just trust, that the promise of salvation will be fulfilled even though they will never see it happen. They waited all these



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years for deliverance, suffering at the hands of many oppressive forces, and when the promise of peace finally comes, they will die before it comes into fruition. What amazing faith.

Simeon and Anna are two biblical figures whom we can turn to as we say goodbye to a painful and difficult year, uncertain of how the new year of 2021 will unfold. But, like Simeon and Anna, we too know that the promise of salvation is fulfilled, and therefore we can enter into the new year with hope. Unlike Simeon and Anna, we have gotten to see and hear how salvation has indeed come to all nations of the world, for we, through the proclamation of the word, have witnessed in our hearing Christ's death and resurrection.

Because we have gotten to witness these things, we can live in hope that the promises of Immanuel, the gift of Christmas, are still at work in the broken world. We can remain hopeful that life will get better, for Christ will continue to reconcile the world through healing, forgiving, casting out evil, and bringing peace.

The peace that Christ brings does not mean that all suffering will end for us while we still walk this earth. It does not mean an end to violence and war for the world, as wonderful as that would be. No, all of that will be accomplished on the great and glorious last day when God creates a new heaven and a new earth. But what it does mean is that we will have the peace of knowing that Christ is ever present with us in our lives. Our hearts will be at peace, knowing that Christ will never leave us.

In the annual tradition of making New Year's resolutions, what if one resolution we make this year is to free ourselves to live into the peace that Christ brings, the peace that Simeon and Anna ended their lives with, and the peace encourages us to remain hopeful because we are assured that Christ is at work in our lives to love us and protect us. How would we do this? Well, all it takes is devoting 20 minutes a day to be present with God. We can be present with God through worship, prayer, Bible study, devotions, or expressing gratitude. As we discipline ourselves to do these things, we then begin to discover the peace of Christ growing in our hearts. This peace soon becomes so wonderful and joyous that we end up wanting to spend more time with God. Before we know it, the peace of Christ is with us all the time!

The hymn that Simeon recites is known as the *Nunc Dimitis*. It is often sung after Communion on Sunday mornings and daily during Compline, or Night Prayer. As the uncertainty of night shrouds us in darkness, the *Song of Simeon* is there to remind us that we are safe in the loving embrace of Christ's peace, and that God's word has been fulfilled.

As we continue into the new year, knowing that while we are hopeful it will be much better than 2020, we still enter the new year shrouded in the darkness of the pandemic. The peace of Christ Jesus will continue to work in our lives to keep us hope-filled and faithful in the power of God's redemption.

Amen.

