

**First Sunday after Christmas (c)**  
**Isaiah 61:10—62:3 Galatians 4:4-7 Luke 2:22-40**  
**St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH**  
**December 27, 2020 (Traditional)**

Simeon and Anna play a brief but beautiful part in the gospel of Luke. These two people, who are now approaching the end of their long lives, represent the faith of Israel finally being fulfilled by Jesus. Everything God promised to Israel through the prophets...the Messiah, the new life, ultimate salvation...has finally come, and will now overflow to all the nations. Simeon and Anna represent faithful, patient Israel, who have finally received everything they were hoping for.

You know, if you and I visited Israel at the time of Jesus' birth, as outsiders we'd probably say "this nation is done. It'll barely be a footnote in history." Jewish religion would have looked like a quaint holdover from a bygone age. The country had been occupied for most of the last 500 years. But faithful Jews like Simeon and Anna had never stopped hoping in God's promise to David. And now, at the end of their lives, they are there on the scene when this young couple brings a baby to the Jerusalem temple, to dedicate him to God. And there, filled with the Spirit, both Simeon and Anna know that this child is the One. What a beautiful picture: Simeon holding the baby Jesus in his arms. All of their hopes have now been fulfilled. Everything had looked so dark for Israel. But now God has opened the future of the world up, with this baby. Now Simeon knows he can let go of it, and die in peace. Anna starts telling everyone the joyful news.

Think of it: these two have never stopped looking towards the future with expectation! They've had nothing but God's Word all those years to hold onto. But through the power of that Word, no matter how hopeless the world around them looked, they lived every day knowing that God was going to do something amazing and new. Even if they couldn't be part of it personally, even if they had died before they held the baby—they lived for that future every day of their lives. They were creatures of a world that was dying, but Simeon and Anna were not defined by that dying world. Their lives were shaped by God's promise to them. They knew something better was coming, and that beautiful future showed itself in their gratitude, worship, patience, faithfulness.

Sometimes, especially when the world is chaotic and dark, and things are changing real fast, we start trying to live in the past. We want to go back to the way things used to be in the good old days. Of course we want to learn from the past and treasure the beautiful gifts God gave us in the past. All those lessons and gifts are still shaping us today. But God doesn't want us to try to live there. Lately I've realized that the best times of my life were good because I was living fully in the moment at those times. I was looking forward. I was open to what God was giving me to work with at those times. And here's the truth: if we are not expecting God to do something amazing in our lives today, it won't stop God from doing what he's going to do, but it can stop *us* from *seeing* what he's doing, and from participating in it right now like he wants us to. Simeon and Anna are a great example in that respect: they teach us how to hope in God's Word and to always expect that God is going to open doors and send new, great gifts our way.

Sin keeps our hope firmly earthbound. Without our connection through Jesus to that beautiful future God has in store for us, we'll put our hope in worldly stuff: money and earthly success and status and worldly power and all that. .

Everyone puts their hope somewhere. But sin keeps our hopes earthbound. If my hope is fully invested in this world, it only follows that my hopes will die with this world. For example, think of the hopes typical parents have for their children. God builds us to have incredibly high hopes for our kids. But with God increasingly out of the picture in so many people's lives, look how the hope gets directed. We still do everything we can for them. Of course we do...we love them! We emphasize the sports, the academic performance, getting into the best schools. Wonderful stuff, of course. But earthbound. We ignore the transcendent nature of our children, even as Jesus reminds us: "Man does not live by bread alone." So we end up teaching our children how to perform in life without telling them where their life comes from! How utterly sad. But that's what the Enemy's trying to do. He wants us to put our faith in one temporary accomplishment after another, rather than directing our hope towards the relationship that lasts forever...the relationship through which everything else in our lives takes on its true value. Jesus came into our lives to release us from our bondage to earthbound hopes, to hopes that die.

Speaking of release. There was a young man in my first congregation who had leukemia. It was in remission when I first met him. And this young man in his 30s was a dynamo; he threw himself into the life of that congregation, an encourager and an organizer. But then the disease became active again. The first time I visited him at the hospital, I was trying to imagine how he must feel. Having six years of remission...and then this relapse. Devastating. And we were talking about that kind of stuff. But his attitude just shocked me. He is one of my heroes in the faith. He said basically that when he got his first diagnosis, six years previous...that's when he learned to put his hope completely in Christ crucified.

He told me, he had already put his life behind him. That's how he described it. His hope was not in this world anymore. He literally spoke of himself as a person who had already died. You think of Paul when he says "for me to live is Christ and to die is gain." [Phil 1.21] This young man said that for the past six years, he had known a freedom and a joy that he never imagined were possible in this world. Basically he said that he had never enjoyed this world more than when he was done with it. All of his hope was directed towards the One who died and rose to give him a new life. And once he was living in, and for, that relationship, he was released from this world, and all of his other relationships fell into place. Instead of desperately holding on to life in this world, he let go of it, and came to love life in this world—and the people in his life— better than ever.

That's what the Christ child was born into this world to give us. He came to be our salvation, our release from this dying world, and our future hope. Our lives are finished in Christ. We are complete. You see that with Simeon. At the end of his life, he holds Jesus in his arms, and he experiences the joy that God wants us to have every day of our

lives. Simeon knows that in Jesus, all of his hopes have been fulfilled. So now, what can he do? He can let go of his life. He can let go of this world. Those beautiful words: “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation.” You and I have been released. Set free from this world. Now we can turn around and freely, **freely**, pour ourselves out for it.