

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 2:21-40

*"Depart In Peace"*

No words about Jesus' coming are as loved, or as poignant, as *"Peace on earth to those on whom God's favor rests"* – a condition made possible by the promised arrival of Isaiah's *"Prince of Peace."* If there is anything we all long for, it's peace: peace in our world, peace in our nation, peace in our community, peace in our families, peace in our own hearts and minds. For a lot of people in our manic culture, especially mothers, peace is *all* they want after Christmas and the month-long preparations for it!

In the aftermath of the Nativity in Luke 2, when all the angels and heavenly hosts and even the shepherds have gone away, a quiet descends on Mary and Joseph and the baby until he is named and circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day, and they go up from Bethlehem to the Temple in Jerusalem to "present him to the Lord," as the Law said should be done with all first-born sons ( a tradition that went back to the Exodus, when the LORD had said "the Egyptians have paid with the lives of their first-born; now all Israel's first-born belong to me." By presenting their son, offering their sacrifice, and paying a Temple shekel, parents could "redeem" their first-born to remain heirs in their families).

Here, in the everyday activities of good, obedient, pious Jews of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, another scene in God's plan unfolds through the words of two elderly and pious members of the Temple community. Simeon and Anna

have been waiting for this child to come. The infant Jesus marks the fulfillment of God's promises to them and to Israel. Their Spirit-sustained long watch and wait is over. Now they, especially Simeon, can *"depart in peace."*

### 1) *Waiting On God's Promises*

That's a wonderful place to reach, the best epitaph you could have, the hope of a lifetime fulfilled. You can go now, in peace. What would it take to reach that place?

Resting in the promises of God. Being prompted by the Holy Spirit over a long period to rely on God's faithfulness, on the steadfastness of his love and purpose. To accept what each day brings, believing and trusting that the Father in heaven is at work shaping lives and circumstances to achieve his best plans for his people. Not despairing, not giving up, not blaming God for disappointments, not turning into God's accuser because this life can sometimes be very hard.

Anna the prophetess had evidently waited decades for the coming of the Lord's child. We're told she was "very old" and had been widowed after a seven-year marriage (probably in her teens and early twenties) until she was 84 (or possibly widowed for 84 years, which would make her about 105). Whether she was 84 or 105, her long widowhood stood as a symbol of her trust

and faith in God. Being a widow or a widower for a long time is no easy thing, as some of you know, and in the 1<sup>st</sup> century it was more than difficult. But Anna was sustained by her trust in God, no doubt by the support of her family, and explicitly by the community of faith in and around the Temple of which she was an active part.

How do you reach that place of peace? Whatever life brings you, trust God to work it together for your good and his glory, and remain an active, hopeful, prayerful part of the community of faith. Give thanks to God before anyone who will listen. Look forward to what God will do – even if that is not in your generation. You may at least be privileged to see the signs of it, like Moses on the mountain looking across Jordan to the land of milk and honey that he would not enter, but where the next generation that he had trained would flourish.

Simeon had also waited a long time. Somehow the Spirit had made clear to him that he would not die before “*seeing the Lord’s Christ.*” He knew this promise came from “the sovereign Lord” and that he Simeon was “his servant.” So his life was marked by obedience, by waiting, by faith, by trust. He was known as “righteous and devout,” and those are good things for old men to be known for! I don’t find in Scripture that as men age, we are expected to form local chapters of “the Grumpy Old Men’s Club”!

Simeon also knew his Bible. He was waiting for what Luke describes as “the consolation of Israel.” If you want to know what that means, what that feels like, read Isaiah chapters 40-66. Those words come from a man who is gripped with an image of God restoring the people among whom he dwells to greatness; to a life that would exceed all that had gone before; that would make Solomon’s Temple and palace and kingdom and riches seem small. God would “comfort”

Israel after her Exile, would pay for her sins, would lead her home, would make all nations flock to Mount Zion to see the wondrous things the LORD was doing in their midst. The desert would flower like a meadow, and streams of living water would flow!

That was what Simeon and others in the 1<sup>st</sup> century were desperately waiting for: God’s comfort, God’s consolation, the end of the Exile and the rule of pagan foreigners, the return of the *shekhan-glor*y of God’s presence to their midst. How long would they wait? Who was *the Servant of the LORD*, the true Israelite, who would deliver his people? What would be the signs of his coming?

Simeon waited, and believed the “word from the Lord” that he would see *the Anointed One* arrive. What a way to live! Obedient to God, obedient to a vision, obedient to a call. Waiting and doing what you had to do, day by day in the Temple of the LORD, until that surprising day when a young child appeared. How did he know this was the one? What had the LORD told him that day?

But here is Simeon, prophesying a new thing because he has seen the Christ. Israel would be divided over him, but the Gentiles would receive a revelation of God that even Isaiah did not foresee! And knowing that this would cost Mary dearly; that “*a sword would pierce her soul*” also.

## 2) *Seeing The Christ*

So now Simeon can say “*Lord, let me now depart in peace.. you have kept your promise..*” Now I can go; my work here is done. Now that is a fine ending for a life!

And to get there, Simeon had to “see the Christ” – for himself. I can’t think of a better recipe for a ripe old age than to have met Jesus the Christ in person. At the start of our

Service of Lessons and Carols on the Sunday before Christmas, I read the so-called "Bidding Prayer" used in the famous version of that service from the chapel of King's College, Cambridge. It was written in 1918 by Eric Milner-White, the Dean of King's; although a "high-church Anglican" in many ways, Milner-White had been a decorated Army Chaplain in the trenches of Europe in WWI, and his prayer shows his understanding of people's needs in the hard places in life. He prayed for "*the poor, the cold, the hungry, the oppressed; the sick and them that mourn; the lonely and the unloved, the aged and the little children; all those who know not the Lord Jesus, or who love him not, or who by sin have grieved his heart of love...*"

I can't think of a better place to be as an older man than someone who prays constantly for all the needy people that he has met in his life, for the heartaches that he knows about because he has been there himself; for the cold and hungry and lonely and scared, because he knows from a long life what those things are like. And he knows what it means that some people need prayer because "they know not the Lord Jesus, or love him not..." Simeon was old enough to know that to have met the Lord's Christ for himself was the fulfillment of his life, and he could now "depart in peace."

I pray that all the older men, and women; the widows and the widowers; and all of us who are "slightly past middle age" (!) will treasure the testimony of these two old Biblical saints, who waited on the Lord's promises, and when they had seen the Christ for themselves, were ready to speak about him to others, and so were able to live out the days God had allotted to them ready to depart in peace.

Let me leave you with this. There are "older" people in this congregation who are making a profound difference in the lives of others.

Behind the scenes, on weekends and evenings and before holidays and when no-one is looking, they work to provide help to the kind of people whom we should all be praying for - "the poor, the cold, the hungry, the lonely..." If you would like to join them, let me know and I will tell you ways you can help too.

Simeon and Anna praised God, and gave thanks that they had seen such wonders - only, they understood, in anticipation! It would be years before "the Prince of Peace" would begin his work; but they thanked God already for the new thing that he had clearly begun! If we want a peaceful second-half of life; if we want to be ready in God's good time to "depart in peace," then we must trust the Lord's promises, obey his word for today, do what needs to be done; and always look out for the new thing he is doing, ready to "see the Lord's salvation" with our own eyes when it is manifested to us.

May all our departures, from this year 2008, from our Christmas family gatherings, from our jobs through "retirement" voluntary or forced, from whatever people and places we have to say goodbye to in the coming year - may all our departures be "in peace," in hope and trust in the Lord.

Let us pray...