

Song of Simeon
Luke 2:22-35
December 31, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

Today is the seventh day of Christmas. In the church year, we celebrate Christmastide for twelve days, from Christmas Eve to Epiphany. That is why we are still singing Christmas carols this morning.

And so, today we get to read this beautiful passage from Luke, this story of Jesus' infancy. Jesus is about 40 days old, and his parents have come to the Temple in Jerusalem to do all the things that are expected when a first-born son arrives – purification rites for the mother and an offering on behalf of the son.

This story – and Jesus' whole life – are set in a particular time in the history of Israel, and that is crucial to understanding how he is received by the people around him. The exile in Babylon happened about 500 years before, but it is still a searing cultural memory. After the exile, the people have come home to Jerusalem. And they have rebuilt the Temple, sort of. It is much smaller and less grand than the original. More than that, the nation of Israel is occupied, first by Greeks, then by Romans. Things never really get back to the way they were before the exile, to that remembered place of rightness in the world that the people longed for. And some of the people of Israel looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, the one anointed by God to save God's people. They live in expectation.

So that is the scene, the setting for today's story, in which Jesus is presented at the Temple. We meet Simeon in this story, and we get to hear the beautiful Nunc Dimittis canticle, Simeon's song. God has promised Simeon that he will live to see the Messiah with his own eyes, and he has been waiting his whole life for this promise to be fulfilled. Let's meet Simeon.

Oh, hello there. I don't think I have met you before, have I? I've lived here a long time, and I think I would remember you, so you must not be from around here. We get a lot of travelers here in Jerusalem, of course, and you all look like you have come a long way to be here.

This is a crazy time, isn't it? I don't know what it's like where you are from, but it sure seems like things here are not right. I mean, it's not really our land any more, is it? The Romans are running our country, after all. We never really came home to our own place, to the place where God was in the Holy Temple and all was right with the world. The wrong people are running our land. Actually, people shouldn't be in charge at all. God should be in charge here, of all places. That's what I say. But I look around, and that's not what I see. It's a crazy world, I tell you.

I'm headed to the Temple, myself. Would you like to come along? It just seems really important for me to go to the Temple today. I go there a lot, but today it seems especially important. You see, God made a promise to me, and I'm waiting for someone. I'll know him when I see him. I've been waiting for him my whole life, actually, and that's a long time as you can see. Anyway, come along. We'll see what there is to see in the Temple today. I'll show you around.

Here we are! If you need to make an offering, the merchants are over there. They will sell you lambs, birds – whatever you need. And of course, there are all the pilgrims, like yourself. They come from all over. There's a couple now, for example. You can see they have a newborn. It must be a boy, because they have come to make the offering required for first-born sons. They seem to be doing all that the Law

requires of them, like good, upstanding people. Like most of the people here, actually. Excuse me, I just have to go speak to them for a moment.

Hello, my name is Simeon. I see you are not from around here. Welcome to Jerusalem! What a beautiful child! *Mazel Tov!* Would you mind if I hold him for just a moment? It's really important.... Thank you so much!

This is the one! This is the Messiah I have waited my whole life to see, the one who will set the world right again. This child will be a light to all the nations, and the glory of the people Israel! Oh, thanks be to God!

Thank you, Mother, for the honor of holding your son. He is destined to shake things up here, so that those on the bottom will rise and those on the top will fall. And oh, Mother, I'm sorry to tell you this, but loving him will break your heart.

What about you, you who are from some other time and place? Does your world seem wrong now, too, like mine? Does it feel like the wrong people are in charge, like what you see around you is not what God would want? This same child, this Messiah, will set your world right as well.

So, where will you find him? The world he ushered in is not like our world. The least important people come first – children, poor people, outcasts. And rich and powerful people come last in his world.

So, don't look for him in wealth, or in the approval of powerful people. Don't look for him in fine possessions. Instead, offer some food to someone who is hungry, and you will see him. Give fresh water to someone who thirsts, and he will be there. Welcome a stranger, and he will be present. Visit someone in prison and you will find him there. Sit with someone who is sick or lonely. Bring some chicken soup. Find your value in those things, he said; find love and joy and hope in those people, and you will see him. You will see him there.

Oh God, the time has finally come. You have kept your promise to me and to Israel, just as you said. I have waited so long to see this child, who is the light to the nations and the glory of the people Israel. I have seen Him. I can go now in peace.

*Now let your servant depart in peace.
According to your word.
My eyes have seen salvation dawning
This child so long foretold.*

Amen