

## Feast of the Presentation

February 2, 2020

Luke 2:22-40

*When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, the parents of Jesus brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated 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; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. 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, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,*

*"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."*

*And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. 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 so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed-- and a sword will pierce your own soul too."*

*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, 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. 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.*

*When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.*

Simeon was "looking forward to the consolation of Israel... It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus... Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

*"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation..."*

Now, because the Gospel text says that the Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would not see death before he had seen the Messiah, many people assume

that when Simeon says, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace...” it means that Simeon’s death is imminent. But I would suggest to you an alternative interpretation: when Simeon says that God is now “*dismissing* [this] servant in peace,” Simeon is *not* saying that he is now about to **die**. Rather, Simeon is saying that his God-appointed role of serving as a sentinel, keeping watch, constantly looking to the future for the “consolation of Israel” and for the Messiah – Simeon is saying that that role and responsibility as “watchman for the Messiah,” is now being discharged. For the Messiah has come; indeed, Simeon is holding the baby Messiah in his arms!

Therefore, Simeon’s role as “sentinel,” his identity as “Watchman for the Messiah,” no longer has any meaning or purpose. God is therefore dismissing him in peace from his sentinel duties, from his role as watchman.

Richard Rohr tells about the situation in Japan at the time of WW II. Young Japanese men were drafted into their nation’s army, and were indoctrinated into the identity of being a “loyal soldier.” We know that this identity of “loyal soldier” was so strong that some young Japanese pilots willingly offered to become self-sacrificing Kamikazes. After the war was over, however, and the young Japanese men returned home, they were lost. The only self-identity they had ever had as an adult was that of “loyal soldier” – and they had played that role very, very well. But who were they *now*, since they were no longer soldiers fighting a world war? What was their purpose in life *now*? How could they ever re-enter normal Japanese society?

Some Japanese communities devised a powerful and ingenious answer. They created a communal ritual whereby a soldier was publicly thanked and praised effusively for his service to the people. After this was done at great length, an elder would stand and announce with authority something to this effect: “The war is now over! The community needs you to let go of what has served you and served us well up to now. The community now needs you to return as a man, a citizen, and something other than a soldier.”

Richard Rohr calls this ritual “discharging your loyal soldier,” and he claims that “This kind of **closure** is much needed for most of us at the end of all major transitions in life.”<sup>1</sup> The role we have **previously** played in life, the focus that has absorbed us for years, becomes no longer appropriate. We realize that the way we have been living our life, or the way we have been looking at the world, is no longer working, or no longer seems right; and in light of this, the role we have been playing, and even, perhaps, our longstanding sense of purpose and self-identity, must *change*.

In W.H. Auden’s poem *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*, Auden imagines Simeon meditating on the Christ Child’s “visitation” to earth. In this poem, Simeon says, “And because of His visitation, we may no longer desire God as if He were lacking; our redemption is no longer a question of pursuit but of

*surrender* to Him who is always and everywhere present. Therefore, at every moment we pray that, following Him, we may depart from our anxiety into His peace.”

Commenting on Auden’s poem, Fr. John Shea writes: “The birth of Christ, ‘His visitation,’ changes the agenda of humans from *pursuing* a **missing** God to *surrendering* to an ‘always and everywhere present’ God.

“This is a landmark shift, and it changes the burden of responsibility. When God was missing, we could always take umbrage and ask questions that were incapable of being answered. I always like the ticked-off rhetorical question, ‘Where is God in all this, anyway?’ with its implied answer of ‘nowhere’... When God was missing, God could always be blamed. When **we** are missing [when **we** are not present], [God] cannot be a scapegoat.”<sup>2</sup>

My friends, many of us, myself included, have been taught, from an early age, that being a loyal Christian soldier meant seeking God “out there” and praying to God “up there.” But it is time to discharge **that** loyal soldier. For if, as Auden’s Simeon says, “our redemption is no longer a question of *pursuit* but of *surrender* to Him who is always and everywhere present,” then our task is to be always and everywhere present to our God who is always and everywhere present to us.

But while this *sounds* easy, it can be incredibly difficult, for our minds and our attention are always in 1000 different places. C.S. Lewis wrote: “It comes the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists simply in shoving them all back; in listening to that *other* voice, taking that *other* point of view, letting that other larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in. And so on, all day [long]. Standing back from all your natural fussings and frettings; coming in out of the wind.”<sup>3</sup> And Lewis wrote that in the early 1940’s, before television was common, and long before email, Facebook, and cell phones were constantly stealing away our attention. God is always and everywhere present, always wanting to pour his love, his grace, his Life *into* us and *through* us, but our minds and hearts and wills are not open to that divine flow, for they are being channeled in other directions, drawn away by a thousand preoccupations and distractions.

I recently read an analysis of the familiar 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, which begins, “The Lord is my shepherd...” What this author was focusing on was the very last phrase of that Psalm: “...and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” The author writes: “We tend to think of the future when we read this beautiful passage from the... twenty-third Psalm. That is because we are time-bound creatures, often lost in remembering the past or caught in anxieties or imagination about the future. We are rarely here, now, in the present. [Yet it is only in the present that we can ever meet God.]

“A more complete perspective [on this Psalm] emerges when we interpret

the Hebrew word here translated into English as ‘for ever’ in a less time bound way, and shift the meaning to an interior state of being: *I will dwell in the reality of God’s presence now and always.* [REPEAT] How is that possible? It is possible by shifting the direction of our attention. As we consent to God’s presence and action here and now, our attention will ‘dwell’ in the presence of God.”<sup>4</sup>

My friends, I think this relates directly to Simeon in today’s Gospel. Simeon’s attention **has** been focused upon looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and to the promised Messiah; and rightly so, for this was the purpose to which God had called him. But when he holds the baby Messiah in his arms, his lifelong focus and purpose up to that point is no longer appropriate. The Messiah is no longer “out there” or in the future; the Messiah is always and everywhere present.

And so, my friends, I think that Simeon is asking us to do 2 things. First, to reassess our life’s current direction and purpose. Simeon asks: “Is what you have been focusing your life on still appropriate? Is the way you have been living your life, or the way you have been looking at the world, no longer working, or does it no longer seem right? Is it time to discharge the loyal soldier in you who has served you well in the past, but who now must find a new purpose?

The second thing that I think Simeon is asking us is: Do you recognize that God is present with you, here and now? Or are life’s distractions and anxieties and fixed mindsets keeping you from seeing God present here and everywhere, keeping you from surrendering to his life, love, and grace?

Because the Messiah is now present, Simeon’s life must change. What about your life, and mine?

AMEN

<sup>1</sup> Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: a Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011, p. 43f.

<sup>2</sup> John Shea, *Following Love into Mystery*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010, pp. 20-21

<sup>3</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, © (1943, 1945, 1952) 1960 The Macmillan Company. p. 168.

<sup>4</sup> Source lost