

“Child of Peace”

First Sunday of Christmas

Luke 2:27-39, Isaiah 9:6-7

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We are on Day #3 of the Twelve Days of Christmas that lasts until Epiphany, January 6, when we celebrate the star guiding the wise men to Bethlehem. In a few days it will also be 2026. You know the popular picture of long-bearded Grandfather Time giving way to the New Year baby? Luke allows us to witness the infant Jesus being faithfully brought into the temple by his parents for blessing; and who should hold him but Simeon, an old man who knew he himself was not far from death? Alongside a widow named Anna, Simeon had been in the temple awaiting this child.

Simeon's praising God for this child is called "The Song of Simeon" or the *Nunc Dimittus*, a Latin phrase taken from his first words and means, "*Now you dismiss.*" Simeon thanked God for "*dismissing your servant in peace,*" for he beheld God's salvation. Simeon could now die contented, "complete," or, as he said, "in peace."

Have you known a Simeon? I've met one, myself. In December of 1997, I made a pastoral visit to a dear older man from my home church who was in the Veteran's Hospital receiving chemo treatments for a cancer that had returned. Art was a humble man, and was ever helping others. That summer he and his wife had made over 100 hand-lettered scrolls for children in the vacation bible school at our church. For over a decade, he had tenderly cared for his frail, blind wife. When Art said he'd do something, he meant it and followed through, a trustworthy, godly man. In his hospital room he spoke freely to me about his experiences, telling me of life as a young soldier in WWII, "wet behind the ears," he said of himself. He talked about disappointments and frustrations with health over the years, and his own ailing body, and of his love for his wife.

Surprising even myself, I did something I think the Spirit prompted me to do: I asked him to pray. Art's prayer moved me deeply: "*It's this old man again, Lord. It's been a tough year. You know there were times in my life when I even doubted your existence. Then, I thought in 1990 that my time was up, but here you've given me seven extra years to care for my wife...*" And he went on, thanking God for life and then praying for me. What astonished me was his straight talk, his honesty. He did not cover up his doubts about God, nor did he use nice words and lofty ideals to impress me. He was speaking truthfully. I sensed a deep peace about him. I longed to stay with Art, to just listen to him tell me stories about his full life with its joys and its pains. There is grace and light as I recall Art, this man whose death was near.

I imagine Art was a bit like Simeon, this elderly man in the temple. Both knew their time to die was near. And both seemed to be at peace with God. Prophetic Simeon, taking the child in his arms, praised God for this child, who was "the consolation of Israel," "the

comfort of God's people." Simeon's life was fulfilled in a profoundly joyous way and now, he said, he could "depart in **peace**." The Greek term for peace, *eirene*, is repeated 14 times in Luke; theologians claim that peace is "both the goal and the result of God's redemptive work in Jesus." (R. Alan Culpepper, "Luke," vol. IX, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1995, p. 71.)

If peace is "**the goal and the result of God's redemptive work in Jesus**," then what do we really mean by "peace"? Personal contentment? Or is it a time without strife and war and chaos? Peace. There is **holding one's peace** – to refrain from speaking. There is **keeping the peace** – maintaining order. When we **make one's peace** with someone means we become reconciled with them, especially when one is dying. We negotiate and work to **make peace** – we ask for and arrange a cessation of hostilities.

In the Beatitudes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, he said, "*blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*" (Matthew 5: 9). Yet immediately after that verse is the blessing for those who are "persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." That implies that even peacemakers may have to endure persecution—and often do—from those who would be enemies?

Simeon had told Mary the hard reality for the child he held, for the Messiah would also bring judgment and rejection. This child, he said, would cause "the falling and rising of many, and would be a sign that would be opposed." He warned Mary, "a sword will pierce your own soul, too." She would share in the pain of the rejection of Jesus. Simeon, led by the Spirit, spoke truth.

In the OT scripture passages read today about the expected Messiah, the prophet Isaiah says, "*His authority shall grow continually, and **there shall be endless peace...***" But if you read on in the verses and throughout the Old Testament, you find that God's love was rejected over and over again. Rejected. So there was no peace.

We all pine for peace in our own very discordant society. This world seems to be filled with troubled souls. Throughout the ages, we find wars and strife and despair reign. People turn away from God, selfishly caring only for themselves. One of the lines of "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day," by Longfellow, goes, .

And in despair I bowed my head / There is no peace on earth, I said,

For hate is strong, and mocks the song / Of peace on earth, good will to men."

It is easy to become cynical, to give up the wonder of God in the cradle and the cross. It's hard to face the injustices and the darkness in the world. It is tempting to join the throngs who just stumble their way through a cruel and disbelieving world.

I suspect most of us want to harmonize everything - whether in our personal relationships or our work or in the wider world: we say to ourselves "live and let live," and we don't go near a conflict if we can avoid it. We can overlook the painful things around us, turn off the news when it disturbs us. However, there **are** wrongs around us: drug abuse,

gunfire, the homeless or hungry and unemployed; there are broken families, domestic abuse, loneliness, illness, despair and pain. Over the world wars rage, refugees flee, innocents are killed, and flames ignite. So many places of darkness, so many painful and unjust things. And all our wishing it away does not change it.

We who follow this Messiah Jesus are called to bring light to darkness, to actively make peace where it is desperately needed. Peacemaking takes work; it calls us to take a stand and respond to the wrongs around us, to work on chaotic and difficult issues. Bringing peace involves personal involvement, whether standing with a crowd when ICE agents move in, contacting our representatives, helping at a shelter or food kitchen, giving of ourselves in ways we can, cultivating relationships with people we do not yet know.

Before we can expect results, we must first treat each person as Jesus would have done: one of my Presbyterian friends who began a soup kitchen in Sioux Falls, SD, gave it a motto, "To Not Serve the Poor Poorly." To be a peacemaker demands courage and understanding and— most of all— love. Remember Mother Theresa? In every face of the dying and suffering, she saw the face of Christ and loved them. Bringing peace involves loving relationships.

Once, after I'd preached about the peace that Christ brings us, I was challenged by a member at the church door, "What about Matthew 10:34? *"I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother..."* The question was appropriate. Our faith is not complete without understanding this **paradox that Christ, who is the Prince of Peace, upsets another kind of peace.** Jesus challenges our assumptions of wealth and position as the measure of success; he replaces them with love and justice and integrity. He upsets what might be called the "status quo."

Even today families are upset by faith choices. William Willimon, then chaplain to Duke University, picked up the phone to hear an irate father saying, "You are responsible for this. My daughter went to Duke for an education, and now she's throwing it all away!"

"What?!! Please explain."

"My daughter is going to graduate magna cum laude in microbiology, and instead of finding a job and entering the workforce, she's going to Guatemala! For a year, she's going to do stuff like dig ditches for the peasants? She's wasting her education!"

Willimon listened.

*"When she left home for college, she had always been in her church youth group, but she didn't have these ideas. She listened to **you**, and ..."*

Willimon interrupted him. "No, I'm afraid it was not me. It was your doing. Wasn't it you who brought her forward for baptism?"

"Well sure, but..."

Willimon continued, "And did you encourage her to go to Sunday school and youth group?"

He stammered, "Sure, of course we did. But we didn't expect she'd go and do something like THIS! We just wanted her to be a .. a normal Presbyterian!"

Sensing this college graduate's obvious enthusiasm for making the world a better place, I stop to wonder: Do we take on new faith-challenges, ourselves? And do we rejoice when someone chooses to follow what they see as God's way for them? Do we greet and welcome the children and youth in our midst, blessing them as God's own? We might—a bit like Simeon—look a person in the eye and pronounce God's blessing upon them.

I recall a Thanksgiving years ago when my extended family came together at my parent's house. My father came into the living room, where an awkward silence had settled. You see, my 16-year-old niece Carrie, who had left home angrily a few months earlier, was with us. She had suddenly grown dread locks – purple ones—and she had tattoos, and clunky black boots (remember them?) and a nose ring, too; I had gulped when I saw her, and didn't know how to make easy conversation— or any, for that matter. But as my dad entered, he went right over to Carrie, put his arm around her shoulder, and lightly squeezed her to his side, saying, "Carrie, we love you. You're a good girl." I held my breath. She smiled up at him, leaned into him. That was it! Acceptance, love, just as she was. A pivotal moment of grace that I hold in my heart.

That is what God calls us to do and be in our world, in our own way. The child lifted up reverently by Simeon in the temple that day, Prince of Peace, God in the flesh, has dwelt among us. God is beside us, goes before us, upholds us and is within us now and always, bringing hope, bringing love and courage to be a peacemaker. We need only claim it.

Alleluia! Amen.