

Can you imagine it! These frail fingers of flesh felt the face of the divine Creator! These withered hands of clay held the Word of God Incarnate! These old arms embraced him who is Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace! God was as close to me as the baby in my arms.

I knew now that I was ready to die in peace. My heart was already in heaven. With my own two eyes I had seen the Salvation of my God, the Glory of Israel, the Light of the Gentiles. I had seen him who is my Prophet, Priest, and King, my God, my Savior, my all!

I broke into a song of praise: "**Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation.**" It was then that the Holy Spirit moved me to prophesy. "**This child,**" I told his parents, "**is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed.**" The baby in my arms would be the "either/or" figure of all human history, the one whose Word would divide all human beings into one of two groups: those for him and those against him.

In other words, the news of Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross and his glorious resurrection from the dead on the third day would fall on many like the seed that fell on the well-traveled path, or like that which fell on rocky soil, or like that which fell among choking weeds. Immediately or eventually, they would reject what they had heard and in unbelief fall away. But there would be others—others on whom, by God's grace, the good seed of God's Word would fall as on good soil. There it would take root and grow to produce the fruits of faith, "**a hundred times more than what was sown**" (Lk 8:8)—to the glory and praise of God.

I must leave you now but, before I take leave, let me say one more thing. I'm an old man, one who lived many years and experienced many things. I'm one who saw the Christchild with my own two eyes and held him with my own two hands. And so, I say to you, live your faith. "**Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven**" (Mt 5:16). Learn to sing my song. For it is a song that—in the new year and for all the years to come—will carry you through life and death into real life with God forever. May the Lord God bless you richly in 2017! Amen.

Luke 2:22-35 – St. Paul's, Muskego, WI – *The Way It Was*
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Mine is a story of faithfulness rewarded. It's a tale that takes place where happy endings and hopeful beginnings come together. To hear my story and to delight in it is to discover one more gift under the Christmas tree, just when you figured that your celebration of Christmas was complete.

I am Simeon, the last of this year's Advent and Christmas guest preachers here at St. Paul's. My story begins at the temple in Jerusalem, one of the busiest places on earth. Platoons of priests hurry by, tending to their sacred duties. Patriotic pilgrims arrive from all points of the compass, eager to see the temple and worship the Lord, the God of their fathers. Here, within the Holy of Holies, the holiest place of the temple, dwells the Spirit of God Most High. Only here can he be truly worshiped. Only here does he hear and answer prayer. Only here will he accept the sacrifices of his people.

I'm the one who met Joseph and Mary when they presented their firstborn son to the Lord. I'm the one who took the baby into my arms and sang what you today call *Simeon's Song*. For centuries you've sung this song after you've received Holy Communion. It goes like this: "**Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.**"

Some have called that scene in the temple *Christmas with Grandpa*, but I wasn't always old. I was once young, and the life I lived was full of God's grace. Some have called my life *The Life that Was Complete*. It was complete—not just in the sense that it was long, but also in the sense that there was a genuine quality to the life that God gave me.

God blessed me with parents who loved him with all their heart. And they loved his holy temple. We lived our religion. Worship was our life. Whether we were at home, in the temple, or elsewhere, our life revolved around worshiping our gracious God and Lord. It was a good life, a complete life.

I understand that many in your day have slipped away from the church and from the things of God. They fill their minds and lives with other things and, as a result, are so much poorer for it. As far back as I can remember, I loved to hear the Bible stories of Abraham and Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, David and Daniel. These were the heroes of my boyhood years.

Our pleasures were simple, to be sure, but somehow they were more real than what I often see in your world. Life for us wasn't so fast-paced. We took our time. We appreciated the simple things of life.

It was a difficult time for our nation—politically, economically, and, above all, spiritually. Anyone who knows anything at all about my people knows that we were always a scattered and struggling people. For centuries we were controlled by the superpowers of the day. The 400 years between the Old and New Testaments were probably the most difficult years in our entire history. These were dark days, days of dispute and defeat and domination—and even persecution because of our faith. In fact, there was one time when the Syrian Seleucids were ruling and they forced us to sacrifice pigs—think of it, unclean pigs!—on the holy altar of the Lord in the temple. Let me tell you, this was one of the lowest points in the history of my people.

In my own lifetime, we were ruled by the Romans. While the Roman government recognized and even sanctioned the practice of our faith—they let us carry out all the customs and ceremonies that were required by the Law of Moses—they also let us know in no uncertain terms that we were an occupied country. We a people who, for all intents and purposes, were a nation in slavery.

Our biggest problem, however, was neither political nor economic. No, the biggest problem for us was what had happened to our religion. The covenant faith of our forefathers had morphed into a legalistic system, one that was being practiced outwardly, with no inner conviction. It had become a matter of the hand and not of the heart. We were doing all the right things at just the right time in just the right place, but we were simply going through the motions. Outward religion—what we call legalism—can be a problem for any people of any time—and, sad to say, it has deadened the faith of people in your day, too. God's diagnosis through Isaiah puts the spotlight directly on the problem, when he says, *"These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught"* (Is 29:13).

Through it all, I can remember my parents lamenting the spiritual condition of the nation. They were always praying for my people and reminding us of how God had been faithful to his promises, and that one day he would surely send his promised Messiah. Religious life in our house was no mere formality; there was no pretense or hypocrisy. It was our way of life.

In time, I did grow old. I don't know why but, as I got older, I seemed to mellow. Hopefully, I became wiser, too. I'd been praying for years the prayer of the Psalmist David: *"Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom"* (Ps 90:12). The passing of the years helped me to put life into a clearer perspective. I knew that—at least in terms of an average life span—the end of my life was drawing near. And that during my lifetime I had committed many sins against God and against others, sins for which I deserved to go to hell. Oh, how I longed for the fulfillment of God's promise, the Messiah, God's own remedy for the forgiveness of my sin.

By now, I was going to the temple several times a week. I can't quite tell you how I knew this, but I knew that before I died, my eyes would see my salvation. I would have the honor and privilege—the great joy—of seeing the Messiah, the Christ, in the flesh. And, since I was getting old and didn't know how much longer I would live, I figured that it had to be soon.

The priests no longer even noticed my presence in the temple. To them, I was just some silly old man living under a delusion. Even my family and friends tried to talk me out of waiting for what the Gospel writer, Luke, so appropriately calls *"the consolation of Israel."* But God had revealed it to me. And God always keeps his promises. The Messiah would come and I, Simeon, would see him.

On the day that Luke describes in his Gospel, I couldn't suppress my smile. For God's Spirit had revealed to me that that would be the day. The Spirit moved me to get to the temple early. So I went and I waited. And then it happened. I saw him. A couple was walking into the temple courts with their baby. I could sense their humility. But they were also very proud of the baby that they were carrying. I could sense their devotion and the depth of their faith. Somehow I knew—I just knew—that their baby was the one. I reached out and touched him, and then took him into my arms. He was as light as a feather. Tears of joy began streaming down my cheeks, and I knew that nothing would ever be the same again.