

Simeon's Song

DAVE BAST

Of the four Christmas songs in Luke Chapters 1 and 2, perhaps the most poignant is the last one; the song of the aged Simeon in the Temple. It is known as the *Nunc Dimittis* from its opening words in Latin, “Lord, now let your servant depart in peace.” So, here is an interesting question: What would make you able to die in peace? Let’s dig into that today on Groundwork.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and today we are coming to the last of four songs from the Gospel of Luke that has been our Advent series this year, Scott; and they are all contained in the first two chapters; these wonderful passages – several of them justly famous. There was the song of Mary initially – *The Magnificat* – each one of them, incidentally, has a Latin title from...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; Latin terms.

DAVE BAST

Right, right; which is her song: My soul magnifies the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And then we had from John the Baptist’s father, Zechariah, a song called *The Benedictus*, also his opening song, where he says: I praise the Lord; I bless the Lord – *benedictus* in Latin – our English word, benediction, comes from that; but that is the song where he talks about how the rising sun from heaven would come; his son would be preparing the way for the one who is going to shine the light into the valley of the shadow of death. So, that was Zechariah’s song.

DAVE BAST

And then there is the most famous of them all: *The Gloria In Excelsis*; the song of the angels that they sang to the shepherds in the fields above Bethlehem: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace with those on whom his favor rests. That is one we all know and sing at Christmas; often in the original Latin again: Gloria In Excelsis Deo.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Luke’s first two chapters are huge in terms of just looking at the number of verses in them. Luke 1 and Luke 2 are some of the longest chapters in the Gospel – of all four Gospels, actually – and there is so much in them, including now one more song, and then before our series here is finished, we will have, not a song, but a closing story that comes from the very, very end of Luke 2; but we have one more song, and it is this one from this old man named Simeon, which will be taking place just a little over a month – about 40 days – after Jesus is born.

DAVE BAST

Most of us are familiar with the details of the Christmas story, and they are almost all from Luke – Luke 2. The only thing really that does not come from Luke but from Matthew is the story of the Wise Men, or the Magi; but we know the familiar tale of how Joseph and Mary arrive in Bethlehem; they have come to be enrolled. Joseph is of the House and family of David, and so, because of Caesar's decree that everyone has to go back to their native, ancestral home, they come into Bethlehem. Mary is about to deliver; she is great with child, and there is "no room for them in the inn," although some scholars have speculated that may not necessarily be a Holiday Inn Express – we should not necessarily think of that kind of commercial establishment, but perhaps there was no room with the relatives that they went to – it was all crowded.

SCOTT HOEZEE

All of the regular beds in Bethlehem were pretty well taken up. The scholar, Kenneth Bailey, has done a lot of work on this, and he has pointed out as well that what we often refer to as the stable was not necessarily really a barn off the property, but in houses in that day, the animals actually stayed in the house – not the house itself, but it was connected to the house – you could go right from the kitchen into another room where the animals were, and that apparently was about the only place left, and that is where Joseph and Mary ended up bunking with the animals. They were still in a house, but it was the animals' part of the house. It was not very nice; it was not very pleasant.

DAVE BAST

It certainly was not antiseptic or clean like a hospital. On the other hand, maybe it afforded some privacy for Mary to deliver, and that is exactly what she did, as again we know from Luke's beautiful story of how she gave birth to her firstborn; she wrapped him in cloths and laid him in the cattle trough – the feed trough – the manger; but, they did not stay there. Shortly thereafter – in particular if we go to Matthew when the Wise Men visit – they are in a house now. So, maybe when all the enrollment for the taxation was dealt with and people moved on and went back home, Joseph and Mary stayed from some period of time, and they are living in a house, and in those weeks following the birth of Jesus, they travel to Jerusalem, perhaps a couple of times, to fulfill requirements of the Law.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; they were not too far. So, as a good member – family – in the House of Israel, they would have made sure that Jesus was circumcised when he was eight days old. We do not really have a story on that, but we know it happened, as Luke tells us.

DAVE BAST

Luke says that, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But then, after 40 days – and of course, there is a lot of Old Testament background here, including from Leviticus – not the book we read a lot these days – but, when a woman gave birth she was considered ceremonially unclean. For 40 days she was not able to go to the Temple or anything, but after that – which means that if the child is circumcised in the Temple, the woman cannot attend – but after 40 days, she can become clean again, and there was a ceremony for that to present the child, but also for the woman to make a sacrifice that would re-establish her in the community as a clean person.

DAVE BAST

Right; and I think it is interesting just to read that law, actually, from Leviticus. It is significant in light of what Luke writes. This is from the 12th chapter of Leviticus, verses 6 and 8: ⁶When the days of her purification for a son or daughter are over, (this is the mother; the new mother, now) she is to bring to the priest at the entrance to the tent of meeting, a year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or dove for a sin offering. ⁸But if she cannot afford a lamb, she is to bring two doves or two young pigeons; one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. In this way, the priest will make atonement for her and she will

be clean.

So, there are two offerings needed; two animals. One is thanksgiving; a burnt offering is consuming the whole animal in gratitude to God; the other is a sin offering, or an atonement offering, in order to re-establish the relationship with God. Then we read what Luke says in Chapter 2, when Mary and Joseph came to do that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

²²When the time of her purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him (Jesus) to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, ²³as it is written in the Law of the Lord: Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord; ²⁴and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: A pair of doves or two young pigeons.

So, what is interesting here is how steeped in tradition we are. So, Jesus' birth – the birth of the Messiah – is a new thing that God is doing. This Gospel is narrating a new thing that God had never done before, but it is part of something very, very old; very, very traditional. There is this thing called a Covenant. So, we have hints here of fulfillment of all of history and the idea, too, that this thing is part of God's grand narrative. It is not totally brand new; it is a climax to a very, very old story.

DAVE BAST

The other interesting thing here is if you read that carefully – you listen to it carefully – Luke says that they came and brought the sacrifices according to the Law: Two young pigeons or two birds. Well, I just read the Leviticus Law and it said: You bring a lamb and a bird; but only if you are too poor to afford a lamb, which would have been a much more valuable commodity, then you bring two birds. So clearly, Joseph and Mary were so poor, they made the poor man's offering when they dedicated Jesus at the Temple, and that was the pair of birds. So, it says again, as if we needed that underscore. He is born in a stable. He is laid in a manger, wrapped in cloths. No fancy christening robes like the royal prince who was born in 2013, a little bit earlier.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And for Luke throughout this Gospel, Jesus reaching out to the poor and the marginalized is going to be a key theme, and so here Luke, without hitting us over the head with it – it was kind of subtle – but, he is saying: Jesus identified with the poor because he was poor himself.

DAVE BAST

The other thing to note, I think, is the devotion of Joseph and Mary. There is a line in our church's communion liturgy that says he fulfilled all obedience to the divine Law, even to the bitter and shameful death of the cross. We see it starting even before Jesus is aware. His parents are fulfilling all obedience to the Law on his behalf, and that is the kind of family he came from; so, not only poor, but pious and completely devoted to God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Things at the Temple that day were going along as usual. It was a ritual. It was standard. It was routine. There were steps 1, 2, 3; but, something extra happens on that particular day, which points to the fulfillment of another promise, and we will look at that next.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*; along with Scott Hoezee, I am Dave Bast, and today we are looking at the story of the song of Simeon from Luke Chapter 2, the song when Jesus was brought to the Temple for the rite of purification according to the Law, as we have just seen; and here is how the story proceeds:

²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel and the Holy Spirit was on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷Moved by the Spirit, he went into the Temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying – and here is his song – ²⁹Sovereign Lord, as you have

promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. ³⁰For my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹which you have prepared in the sight of all nations, ³²a light for revelation to the gentiles, and the glory of your people, Israel.

So, there it is; a lot of Holy Spirit in here. He is filled with the Holy Spirit; he is moved by the Holy Spirit; he is directed by the Holy Spirit. Simeon is spirit-filled, as we say.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, Simeon comes – from Mary and Joseph’s perspective, certainly – from out of nowhere. They are going through the normal ritual, and here is this sort of divine, Holy Spirit interruption to the normal proceedings, and this old man – I always like Frederick Buechner’s depiction of Simeon – you can picture this old man tottering; a little long gray beard, cataracts on his eyes, and he takes the baby – and if I were Mary as a new mother – you know, you always treat your firstborn as if they are made of eggshell or something, like you could break it so easily – she may have been a little nervous to hand over the child to this tottering, old man.

DAVE BAST

Yes, there is nothing here – he is not the priest, he is not officially part of the party here.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, he comes from the sidelines. He has been waiting – we are told he had been waiting, and somehow the Spirit told him that this was the day and this was the child. I also like the image that his eyes have cataracts over them, and yet he sees better than anybody. He sees that this child is the One; this is the Messiah. He is going to bring peace; he is going to bring salvation.

Again, Mary and Joseph have been in on things for a while through the angels, and so forth; but they had to be startled, nonetheless. This had to come as something of a surprise that this old man would look at this little baby – 40 days old – a month and a week – and say these remarkable things.

DAVE BAST

You know, it is interesting to think about the number of times that Joseph and Mary’s faith was confirmed, if you think of it that way. It starts out Mary is told she is going to have the baby and there will be no human father, and that was pretty dramatic; an angel announced it. Then Joseph has to be let in on this and he took some convincing; but then Elizabeth, her cousin, says, “No, I have been told also that this child is special,” and then Zechariah sings; and then the shepherds come in and say: Hey, we have just been sung to by angels; and now here is Simeon, one more confirmation that this is the one; this is the Messiah.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He had been waiting – I remember one of my professors pointed out, too, Luke says early in the reading that you just read, Dave, that he was looking for the consolation of Israel, which is another word for comfort. It echoes back to Isaiah 40: Comfort, comfort my people, says God. Tell them their sins are paid for. This is the ultimate comfort of God; this is the One whose arrival – and by the way, we talk about the Advent season – that is a Latin word, too – *advenio*, which means to arrive. So this man was told: You will live to see the Advent. You will live to see the arrival of the Christ; and he was told this day this is the one, and he begins by saying: Oh, sovereign Lord, and he uses a little bit of an unusual term for God there, not the usual Lord or God, but sovereign Lord, and what that always makes me think about that God’s sovereignty means this is all part of a plan. This is something that God has been preparing for a very, very long time, and now the climax of that comfort of Israel, which will ultimately be, as the Heidelberg Catechism will say, “Our only comfort in life and in death,” will be this Jesus; that he is the one, and that he will be the one who will pay the penalty for all of our sins.

DAVE BAST

In a sense, those two things go together, I think, in the most powerful way; a sense of the sovereignty of God; God is the one in control – do not worry, do not sweat it – but yet, we are waiting, and the longer we have to wait, the harder it is to believe that God really is in control, and those doubts begin to creep in: What if he has

forgotten? So, you look at the Old Testament – again, this is drenched in Old Testament background...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

These two chapters, and all the times in the Psalms that you read: How long, O Lord? How long are we going to go on waiting? When are you going to come and fix things? When is the promise going to be kept? When will the Deliverer arrive? So, all of those things made up Simeon's whole life, and now somehow he knows, even though it is the eyes of faith that enable him to see. I like what you said about the contrast maybe between his physical eyesight and his spiritual insight; but who is going to think that this poor family with this raggedy baby – this is the one. This is the royal child. This is the King. This is the Deliverer.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is almost an echo of Abraham and Sarah when they finally, finally get their son, Isaac, born to them way back in Genesis at the beginning of the covenant – and there, too, we did a series on Genesis recently where we said: There had to be times when Abraham and Sarah looked at their lone child, Isaac, and said: Now, how can this be the one who will lead to stars in the sky, sands on the seashore, descendants so great from this little Isaac kid? But similarly here; from this one, this little family, God is going to fulfill all of that and bring it to a climax. Simeon sees it and says he can die in peace because the promises of God are the things that come – lots of other promises we do not always get fulfilled or we do not live to see – but the one thing we can always know is that God's promises are going to come true. As I think Paul will write later in the New Testament, all of God's promises find their yes in Jesus. Simeon started to see that on this very day.

DAVE BAST

I like that idea, too. He is saying in effect, "Now I can die happy. Let your servant depart in peace." Okay, it is time; I can die happy. You think about that, what would make you able to die happy? For most of us, I suppose, we would think about our family maybe, or provision, or maybe we have achieved a reputation or we have accomplished some great thing: Oh, now I can die happy; I have finished my work. But Simeon is so focused on the purposes and promises of God, the plan of God for the redemption of the world. It is not just individualistic salvation he is thinking about, it is universal, it is cosmic, it is the nations. You have revealed this in the sight of the nations, God. Again, that is a statement of faith, because so far, it is just one little family in Jerusalem in the Temple, but it is for the gentiles, and that is what enables Simeon to say, "My life is fulfilled now, because I see God's coming."

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, right; so, what he is saying here is not: I can die in peace because I am saved and God has been good to me. Well, he is saved, too, but he sees the much bigger picture. God has been good to all of creation. This covenant that is being fulfilled is for all nations, God told Abram way back in Genesis 12, and Simeon sees that big picture.

DAVE BAST

So, Simeon's song is celebrating all of those truths and promises starting to be fulfilled, but it is also a song that sounds an ominous note of warning, and we are going to talk about that in just a moment.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are looking at the fourth and final song that Luke has in those opening chapters: The song of Simeon in the Temple. We have already seen that Simeon saw Jesus, saw him as the fulfillment of God's promises, of the covenant, of salvation for all people, and that is all happy, happy, good news; however, Simeon was not quite finished yet, because he goes on. So, picking up at Luke 2:33:

The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about Jesus. ³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be spoken against, ³⁵so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed, and a sword will pierce your own soul, too."

So, after the nice song and the nice revelation, here is a little BOOM moment of saying: Oh, but by the way, it is not all going to be happiness and good cheer. This is going to cause controversy; this is going to cause pain; it is going to cause you pain, Mary. Your own soul is going to get like a sword through it. That had to be startling. We are told later that Mary ponders all of these things in her heart. I will bet she did!

DAVE BAST

No doubt about it. You cannot help but read this in light of how Luke's Gospel is going to end. In the later stages, we know where the story leads; and so, the shadow of the cross is falling over this happy Christmas scene. All through the ages of the Church, really, there have been various ways of remembering this; and even some traditions that link the Christmas story to Calvary. One of them, I think, is that the wood of the stable was used to build the cross. That is a little bit fanciful, but you sure see that; you see that here in Simeon.

Scott Hoezee:

Life is bracketed by wood, or it is often also pointed out – now this is Matthew – but the gifts that the Magi brought were mostly embalming spices – burial – these were funereal presents. But we need to shadow of the cross here because that is why he came. We forget this too much, I think, especially in the Church; we forget what Christmas is about; and what the birth of Jesus set off is ultimately of ultimate significance, and it is therefore going to be full of scandal and brokenness and pain and hurt, and finally, sacrifice; and Mary will suffer; she will grieve deeply before it is all done.

That is why, by the way, in this series – for this particular Advent series – we did not have him in here, but in the tradition of the Church, John the Baptist is always a key figure in Advent. Now, we do not have any Christmas carols about him; we do not have any Hallmark Keepsake Christmas ornaments of John the Baptist put on the tree; nobody sends John the Baptist Christmas cards because he is a little rude. He shakes you up: Repent! But the Church has always said we need that kind of bracing message, even at Christmas; because otherwise it is just prettiness and sentimentality, and who is going to get saved through that?

DAVE BAST

The other thing we see foreshadowed here quite clearly by Simeon's words to Joseph and Mary is the earlier ministry of Jesus; not just the cross and crucifixion at the end, but all throughout the course of his public ministry, which will take up most of the pages of the Gospels, there is this controversy that breaks out. He has enemies all over the place. So, Simeon says: He is not only going to be set for the rising of many – rising to eternal life and fellowship with God, but for the fall of many; and he is going to reveal what is in people. Just his very presence will become a kind of litmus test.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is almost as though Simeon is saying: I am really happy to see this little guy, but that is not going to be the only reaction and greeting he is going to get in life. There are going to be plenty of people right in Israel – and we can think later of all those controversies with the Pharisees and the Sadducees – there are going to be plenty of people who are not going to be happy to see this man at all.

DAVE BAST

You think about that; why did Jesus provoke such hostility, such enmity, such anger; what did he ever do to deserve that? All he ever did apparently was good. He was gracious and loving and kind and healed the sick and all the rest; but he also said some very hard things, and it really brought out both the positive and the negative in people; and it provoked people to want to do him in, and eventually they did.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right; and again, for our Advent and Christmas reflections, we need that element, too; that this is serious business. God's salvaging of the world was not easy; it was not just a snap of God's fingers. It

involved tremendous sacrifice. We need somehow to remember that; for all the sweetness and light and fireside imagery by the hearth that we have at Christmas, we have to remember, ultimately Jesus has come to save the world; and when the world is as broken as this one is, that is going to involve some hard work, some hard choices, and no small amount of controversy.

DAVE BAST

Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics or passages you would like to see next on *Groundwork*.

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