

“A Word From the Wise”

Luke 2: 22-40

22 When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”), 24 and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.”(Exodus 13, Lev. 12). 25 Now 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. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. 27 Moved 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, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, 29 “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, You may now dismiss your servant in peace. 30 For my eyes have seen Your salvation, 31 which You have prepared in the sight of all nations: 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.” 33 The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about Him. 34 Then 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, 35 so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

26 There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 and then was a widow until she was 84. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. 38 Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

38 When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. 40 And the child grew and became strong; He was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on Him.

A baby inspires Simeon and Anna to do something that sounds familiar on New Year’s Eve: they look forward. But for them, it’s a future world their eyes will never see. There’s always a bit of a letdown in these days after Christmas. All that pressure — the preparations, presents and people coming together from across the miles! The pressure focuses like a laser beam on one day out of the year. When it’s over, it’s over.

Oh, there’s still a good deal of commercial activity going on, of course, down at the mall: returns, gift-card redemptions, and bargain-basement prices on cards and wrapping paper. But that’s just clean-up. The big secular holiday is over. There’s something forlorn about this last gasp of post-dated Christmas shopping.

Which is just the opposite of the way the church looks at it. From now until Epiphany, January 6, we find ourselves in the bright and joyous *season* of Christmas, that only began on Christmas Eve. But just try to sell *that* in a culture that believes the Christmas season lasts from Halloween to Christmas Day! After that, for most of our neighbors, Christmas hope winks out like the lights of an unplugged Christmas tree.

[NOTE 1] The story from our Bible passage today — the presentation of Jesus in the temple — may seem a bit like post-Christmas clean-up. The high drama out on the hillside — shepherds, angels and all the rest — is behind us. Isn't it high time Mary and Joseph packed up the holiday decor and moved on?

In time — as Matthew tells it — an angel will warn them about a threat to their newborn's life, and they will flee to Egypt. But for now, their task is presenting their new baby in the temple. There, he receives a special blessing. His mother, Mary, also goes through the rite of purification — obligatory for Jewish women after childbirth.

NOTE 2 Mary and Joseph bring with them a couple of small birds — turtledoves or pigeons — for the sacrifice. That little detail tells a lot about Mary and Joseph. The ordinary sacrificial offering for this purpose was a lamb and a pigeon — way out of their price range — but the law of Moses takes mercy on the needy. There was a special provision for parents like these, who barely have two shekels to rub together. They were permitted to substitute a second bird for the lamb.

Mary and Joseph appear, no doubt, utterly unremarkable as they walk into the temple courts with two cooing birds in a battered wooden cage. Just another raggedy, working-class couple, doing the right thing by their baby, according to the law of Moses. If these two harbor any delusions of grandeur on account of the shepherds and the angels, they don't show it.

Speaking of shepherds, the shepherds near Jerusalem were tasked with raising perfect lambs for sacrifice. When the lambs were born they were put in a special manger to keep them from hurting themselves or getting any kind of blemish. It is quite likely that the baby Jesus was appropriately (as He is called the lamb of God, the perfect one last sacrifice) laid in that manger, securely as the lamb of God.

Joseph and Mary end up in the center of a little brouhaha, all the same. Two elderly worshipers, regulars at the temple, have something to say to the holy family. One of these two pious elders is named Simeon. The other is a widow by the name of Anna.

[NOTE 3] Some years back, Simeon heard the voice of God, the Holy Spirit, speaking to him. "You will not taste death," the Spirit told him, "until you have seen the Messiah with your own eyes." The old guy's been looking for the Messiah ever since. Simeon (whose name means "heard," see Genesis 29:33), who "was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him" (v. 25) Simeon, like Joseph and Mary, serves the Lord and obeys his commands, which is a recurring motif and when it comes to applying this passage it is one of the things we can take from this passage. It is of high importance that we serve the Lord and obey His commands. Listen to what the Lord says through the Holy Spirit and do what He says! When Simeon gets to the temple that day he sees no powerful orator, no victorious

general, just a tradesman from the north country and his young wife. She's cradling a baby in her arms. Who can say how Simeon knows this child to be the One? But he does. Luke simply tells us he was "led by the Spirit." Did his heart burn within him as he looked upon the baby? Did he have a sixth sense — some weird ability to discern halos, as in some gilded Renaissance painting? Simeon speaks some words of prophecy. But we'll come back to those in a minute.

Let's first look at the other venerable witness, Anna. We know even less about Anna than we do about Simeon. All Luke tells us is that she's a widow, and well up in her 80s. She comes to the temple each and every day to pray, and stays well into the night.

Most of our denominations don't have a daily worship tradition, but some do. In the Roman Catholic Church, for instance, you still do see a few Annas at daily mass. Their hair is snowy white, their clothing simple and ordinary. As they kneel in prayer, their hands — resting on the back of the pew in front of them — are in constant motion, clicking their rosary beads. Their lips move wordlessly as they recite the ancient prayers that have become second nature to them.

Anna sits there in the outer court of the temple in her accustomed spot, eyes closed, lips pursed, intoning over and over the words of the psalms. There are worshipers who come regularly to the temple precincts, but none are more regular than Anna. She has become a familiar sight to those who pass by her: a deeply pious woman who keeps to herself. She radiates such holiness that her face seems to glow with divine peace.

On this day, Anna suddenly stops, mid-prayer. Her eyes flash open. Her head turns, as though she has no control of it — as though someone else has gently placed hands on her temples and directed her gaze. Her eyes rest on that oh-so-young mother and her newborn son.

Anna's a contemplative woman of few words, but this day finds her unusually verbal. She gets up and scurries from person to person, leaning on her walking-stick, urging them not to miss seeing this very special child. He is the One, she announces, with breathless excitement. He is the One who will redeem Jerusalem!

So, there you have it. Two exceptionally pious and holy individuals. Simeon and Anna would be unknown to us, were it not for this singular incident in Luke's gospel. Why does Luke include this story? Surely the testimony of the angels is far more impressive than anything these two elderly witnesses have to say! What could they possibly add? What they add is the human dimension. We can see in them more of the sort of faith we all hope to have when we're at our very best. It is also of note that Simeon and Anna are in their old age.

The angels already knew who Jesus was. They had known it from the beginning of time. But Simeon and Anna could only wait, not knowing who it is, exactly, they're waiting for. They can only believe that they will one day see the Messiah. Then their longings will be justified, their hopes fulfilled. No one would have blamed them for getting discouraged or giving up because they were both in their old age and life is difficult in your 80's with all the comforts and contraptions we have now, much less 2,000 some years ago.

(John Leland, a reporter from The New York Times, spent a year visiting a small group of octogenarians, people in their 80's, interviewing them, and getting to know them well. Here are some things he learned that became the basis for a book.)

The elders I spent time with, like the vast majority of older people ... lived with loss and disability but did not define themselves by it, and got up each morning with wants and needs, no less so because their knees hurt or they couldn't do the crossword puzzle like they used to. Old age wasn't something that hit them one day when they weren't careful. It also wasn't a problem to be fixed. It was a stage of life like any other, one in which they were still making decisions about how they wanted to live, still learning about themselves and the world.

Until recently, relatively few people experienced this stage, and even fewer reached it in good health. But that has changed. More people are living past age 85 than at any time in human history. For some reason, most people think of this as a cause for worry rather than a resource to be tapped. So much loneliness and isolation, so many wrinkles. In movies, beauty is always young, and amorous elders are dirty old men. We like people to ride into the sunset when their mission is complete.

For most of history, societies turned to their oldest members for wisdom. Children watched their grandparents get old and die in the family home. But the same technology that made it possible for more people to survive to old age has also devalued their knowledge of the world. Old people often inhabit a world of their own, not particularly pleasant to visit. In one study, people over 60 said fewer than one-quarter of the people with whom they discussed "important matters" were under 36; if you exclude relatives, it dropped to 6 percent. **[NOTE 5]**

Pillemer said his life was changed when he stopped thinking about old people as a problem and started to think of them as an asset, a repository of wisdom and experience. As Ping put it, "When you're old, you have to make yourself happy. Otherwise you just get older" ... So spend time with your those that are older, think of them as modern day Simeons and Annas.—John Leland, *Happiness Is a Choice You Make: Lessons from a Year Among the Oldest Old*(Macmillan, 2019), chapter 1.

Let's back up now and unpack what the patriarch Simeon says about the baby Jesus. The first thing he says to God, in prayer, is "*my eyes have seen your salvation.*" A remarkable statement, far-reaching in its implications. In past times, Israel has seen many noteworthy religious figures: prophets, priests and kings. But this child is different. This child is all three. And he will not only lead the people to salvation. This child *is* their salvation. **[NOTE 6]**

Next, Simeon says God has prepared this salvation "*in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.*" This sort of claim isn't entirely new. Isaiah said much the same thing, centuries before, about the Messiah who is to come. Still, Simeon's blunt language is startling. This helpless babe held in his arms is going to change the world.

But then the old man's prophecy grows dark. "*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 ...” All is not going to be sweetness and light. This baby will bring salvation to the earth, but he’ll also bring about division between people. Just as Mary’s earlier song, the Magnificat, speaks of the mighty being cast down from their thrones and the lowly exalted, so too this child will leave a heavy footprint on the world (Luke 1:46-55).

Then, Simeon gets up close and personal. He speaks directly to Mary — perhaps in a whisper, perhaps out loud. For some reason I picture the part in the movie “The Empire Strikes Back” of the Star Wars saga where Luke says, “I’m not afraid,” and a very serious Master Yoda leans in with a very serious look on his face and says, “You will be, You will be.” We have no way of knowing the exact way Simeon says it, but we know that He says: “... *and a sword will pierce your own soul too.*” Can he somehow know what is to come? Can he envision that scene, more than 30 years in the future, when Jesus will hang bleeding on the cross, and will say to Mary, as he does in John’s gospel, “Woman, here is your son,” and then to his good friend John, “Here is your mother” (John 19:26)? Mary’s bereavement at the foot of the cross could well be described as being pierced by a sword, as she beholds that dreadful scene no parent should ever have to witness. Simeon somehow knows Mary’s life as a mother will be one of indescribable joy, but also gut-wrenching pain.

Now this is not exactly the sort of thing you write inside a new-baby congratulations card. But Simeon pulls no punches. He tells it like it is, with the frank speech typical of the elderly. He doesn’t want this sweet young woman to be unprepared when her life turns unexpectedly tragic. “Soak it all in,” he’s saying to her, “all of it: the bad as well as the good. For you can hardly expect to have the full experience of being human — especially as a mother — without knowing heartache as well as joy.”

It’s a common thing, these days — especially for those getting on in years — to look into the future and see nothing but gloom and doom. But that’s not what Simeon’s doing. In his song, the good clearly triumphs. Even the sword that will pierce Mary’s soul is but a passing ordeal. Yet for others of us who are north of middle age, it can be all too easy to play the ain’t-it-awful game.

You’ve heard the complaints, you know the ones that begin, “This younger generation ...” This younger generation spends all their time staring into smartphones. This younger generation doesn’t know how to hold down a job. This younger generation wears their pants too low. This younger generation doesn’t know the difference between a salad fork and a dinner fork. This younger generation doesn’t appreciate all the hard work we put in to get them to where they are today. It’s kind of refreshing to see Simeon looking into the eyes of the baby Jesus, praising God and saying, “My eyes have seen your salvation!” One of the greatest gifts the older generation can offer to the young, in just the same way, is the gift of hope.

But it’s a rare gift because, for whatever reason, a lot of us tend to get grumpy in our old age. (As for those of us who are younger, you too will have to fight that tendency someday.) We grieve for times past, despair of the present and look with fear

on the days to come. Not all those fears and trepidations have much basis in reality though, seriously.

Nicholas Kristof of *The New York Times* proved it back in June with a column he wrote. Kristof debunks a lot of the trash-talk about the future of the human race. Speaking of swords piercing mothers' hearts, don't we just know it's true that there are many mothers throughout the poorer nations of the world whose children will never reach adulthood? Of course, there are some, but here's the truth: 96% of the world's children are now likely to survive until adulthood. Not so long ago, the death rate for children was around 50%. That's an incredible improvement! But the news media doesn't often report cheerful statistics like that. The lead stories on global newscasts are more likely to focus on wars and earthquakes. "Many people believe that global poverty is hopeless," Kristof writes. "87% said in a 2016 survey that poverty had stayed the same or gotten worse over the previous two decades — while in fact the share of the world's people living in extreme poverty has plunged from 38% in 1990 to about 8% now." From 38% to 8% in just 33 years. Who knew? Certainly not most of us. Not me! Kristof predicts that future historians will write about our time as the time of unprecedented gains in human well-being, health and the survival of children.¹

So, how do we explain these two conflicting viewpoints: that there are all sorts of new and unprecedented threats to human safety; and that peace is more widespread than ever throughout most of the world, and that people, on average, can expect to live much longer? We reconcile them by examining where we get those dire predictions of how bad things are. The source of much of this information is the news media. With hundreds of cable channels on TV — many of them delivering news 24/7 — and a virtually unlimited source of news stories on the Internet we have more opportunity than ever before to hear how bad things are.

What the news media rarely reports is how good things are. The reason for that is simple. Fear attracts viewers, those viewers see advertising and that's how the media companies make their money. It's like that notorious TV news teaser: "There's something in your refrigerator that could kill you. More at 11." You anxiously tune in at 11, wondering what dread contagion may be lurking in your Tupperware, and you see not only that story (about a minor problem that's pretty unlikely to happen to you), but also a host of other sound bites about riots, epidemics, identity theft and terrorist threats. You go to bed worried and anxious, and you wake up feeling the same way. Yet, most of us never stop to consider that nearly all the crises we hear about on the news affect a relatively small number of people — and that we're making great progress, as a nation and as a world, in preventing many of them. What the media does very well is hold a magnifying glass up to the bad-news stories. In our minds, they end up looking a lot bigger than they really are.

If a building catches on fire, you can bet the TV news vans will be right there, with the eye-in-the-sky helicopter circling overhead. Yet, you'll never hear on a TV news channel that the increased use of smoke alarms makes it less likely that people will die in fires. That's because the news has a bias towards reporting things that happen, rather

than things that don't happen. And so, the media is slowly winning its campaign to make fearful pessimists of us all.

This isn't about trying to be a Pollyanna. I am not telling you to put on rose-colored glasses. We really shouldn't minimize the suffering some people go through in our world. Nor should we ever let up on our efforts to prevent suffering in the future. It's just that we need to keep such news in perspective. And we ought to go out of our way to celebrate the victories that do take place, just as much as we warn one another to be careful of the threats. **[NOTE 8]**

Can you imagine how the biblical story would be different had Simeon and Anna focused on the bad things that were happening all around them? Nobody could dispute it. There was disease, famine, banditry and slavery. Life expectancy was short. The Roman overlords were stepping up their oppression of the Jewish people. There was no shortage of bad things to commiserate about. Yet, when these two wise elders of Israel catch a glimpse of the baby Jesus in his mother's arms, they both intuitively zero in on the tremendous potential for good present in this child — who is the Son of God. *The Son of God!* Born in their very midst? Who could have imagined it would happen in their lifetimes? It's all in how we look at it. If Christmas teaches us anything, it's that there's more potential in the birth of a baby than in any threat — real or imagined — we could ever dream up. And when that baby is the Son of God, the powers of death and disorder flee in disarray. True love dispels all fear.

Listen well to the word from Simeon and Anna. It's a word from the truly wise.

—*Carl Wilton contributed to this material.* **Source:** Nicholas Kristof, "This May Be the Most Important Thing Happening in the World Today," *The New York Times*, June 3, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/03/opinion/sierra-leone-progress-health-children.html>. Retrieved June 14, 2023

Sermon Notes for “A Word From the Wise” based on Luke 2:22-40
Given in Doster Community Church on December 31, 2023

- I. Mary and Joseph show that they are righteous and they want to do right by Jesus. According to the Law of Moses as recorded in Exodus chapters 13, 22, and 34, Numbers chapter 18 and Leviticus chapter 12 they bring the baby on the 8th day of his life to dedicate Him to the Lord, bring a sacrifice and officially give him his name.
- II. It is obvious that they are poor because their sacrifice is supposed to be a lamb and a pigeon but that is way out of their price range. Moses takes mercy on the needy and has a special provision. They were permitted to substitute a second bird for the lamb.
- III. Simeon (his name means “heard”) was righteous and devout ... and the Holy Spirit rested on him. Like Mary and Joseph, Simeon listens to God and obeys. He goes to the temple when prompted by the Holy Spirit.
- IV. All we know about Anna is that she is a widow in her 80’s and goes to the temple every day to pray. She tells everyone, Jesus is “The One” that is to come.
- V. People in their “old age” in their 80’s or beyond, are a resource, an asset, a repository of wisdom and experience.
- VI. Simeon prophecies and calls Jesus “a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to God’s people Israel. This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel and will be a sign that will be spoken against so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”
- VII. Things are not all getting worse as the news would have you think. People living in extreme poverty has dropped from 38% of world’s population to 8% between 1990 and 2023. 96% of the world’s children now are likely to survive until adulthood.
- VIII. Focus on the good while not ignoring the bad. True love dispels all fear. Listen to the words of Simeon and Anna. What are you going to do about it? Please write down one thing you can do this week to apply this message to your life: focus on the good, listen to God and obey what HE says, pay attention to people who have lived into their 80’s.