

The Sunday after Christmas
December 27-28, 2008
Luke 2:22-40

“In the Fullness of Time”

In these days after Christmas, people often slow down, relax, and have some rare quiet time to reflect and take stock of their life. Maybe it has something to do with the calendar year that is quickly drawing to a close, and a new year just around the corner. Maybe it has something to do with the sending and receiving of Christmas cards as we catch up with the lives of other people. Maybe it has something to do with the promise made and kept by God – the promise made that he would send forth his anointed One, the Messiah, who would rescue his people from sin, death and the despair of a hopeless existence, and the promise kept when that Messiah was born of Mary in the humblest of surroundings. God made good his promise in the fullness of time as Paul the apostle tells us in today’s second Scripture (Galatians 4:4-7): **“When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children”** (Galatians 4:4-5). That is the theme for today’s message, “In the Fullness of Time,” as we consider two of God’s aging children from the Gospel lesson, Simeon and Anna. May the Lord’s rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

In today’s Gospel lesson (Luke 2:22-40), we meet Simeon and Anna, who are not mentioned in any of the other Gospel accounts except in Luke. Simeon and Anna must have been done a great deal of reflection in their old age, taking stock not only of their lives, but also of God’s long awaited promise that he would send the Messiah. They had spent a lifetime waiting for that Messiah. What would he look like? A mighty warrior who would destroy the enemy? A savvy ruler who would make sweeping political reforms? A charismatic leader who would move people to action? Truth be told, isn’t that where we often look for answers – in the powers of this world to redeem and deliver us? In the fullness of time, God’s promise is kept in a way that must surely have surprised Simeon and Anna. It’s not royalty or a military commander, but a tiny infant, barely a month old. Did this child match up with their expectations of Messiah? Scripture is silent on this, but we do know that Simeon’s and Anna’s response is not doubt or disbelief, but holy joy and thanksgiving. Taking the child, the promised Messiah, the anointed One, in his arms, Simeon bursts into song: **“Master, you are now 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...”** (Luke 2:29-30). Simeon’s song of praise is one that has been sung by countless generations of believers who have rejoiced in God’s promise made and kept. It has come down to us by its Latin name, the *Nunc Dimittis*.

Mary and Joseph had come to the temple to fulfill what the Law of Moses required. This Law stipulated that a woman who gave birth to a male child was considered unclean for seven days and was to remain isolated for an additional thirty-three days (Leviticus 12). Following this 40-day period, a sacrifice of purification was to be offered to remove the mother’s uncleanness: a lamb and a young pigeon or turtledove; or, for those who could not afford this, two young pigeons or turtledoves. Mary and Joseph offered the latter, the sacrifice of the poor. That is all they could afford. Mary’s uncleanness was removed by a sacrifice of two birds, but how is our uncleanness removed? How are we purified from the sin that defiles us? Not through soap and water; not even through ritual sacrifice, but only through the blood of Mary’s Son, Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the World (John 1:29). Besides Mary’s purification, the Law of Moses also required that every first-born male child was considered consecrated and holy to God, set apart for him (Exodus 13:12-16). Later, the Lord declared that the tribe of Levi should take the place of the first-born and be specially dedicated to his service (Numbers 3:11-13). Even with this, every first-born male child really belonged to God and was to be presented before the Lord in the temple. Payment was required to redeem the child as a reminder to the people of Israel’s dependence

upon the Lord (Numbers 18:15-18). Jesus, Son of God and Mary's Son, submits himself to the requirements of the Law in order that he might redeem us from the Law which accuses and condemns us of our sin and disobedience. Through the shedding of his precious blood upon the cross, Jesus has fulfilled the whole Law in our behalf, and he now presents us to the Father: ransomed, restored, and forgiven. In the fullness of time, Jesus has done for us what we could never do for ourselves, as the words of the Christmas carol remind us:

*Nails, spear shall pierce him through,
The cross be borne for me, for you;
Hail, hail the Word made flesh,
The babe, the son of Mary! (Lutheran Book of Worship #40, stanza 2)*

In the fullness of time, Simeon and Anna had the blessed privilege of beholding with their own eyes the long-awaited Messiah, Jesus. Every time we come to this altar, we too have the blessed privilege of behold with our eyes, touching with our hands, receiving with our lips that same Messiah, the Lord Jesus, as he himself comes to us under the earthly forms of bread and wine, giving us his true Body and Blood. And in faithfully receiving him, we receive again his gifts of life and salvation. And like Simeon of old, we burst into a song of praise and thanksgiving: **“Master, you are now 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...”** (Luke 2:29-30). Amen.