

## “Lord, Dismiss Your Servant in Peace”

Luke 2:21-40 (NRSV)

Imagine that **a week has passed since the first Christmas**, when **angels** filled the skies over the fields of Bethlehem as they announced Jesus’ birth to the amazed **shepherds**, who then ran, leaping the low stone walls in the fields, to run to see their new-born Saviour-King lying in a manger. Young **Mary** had hardly recovered from giving birth; the mental tapes of the miraculous events were set on constant replay: the forced journey to Bethlehem, their frantic search for a place to stay and give birth, her labour under the stars, her betrothed, **Joseph**, anxiously standing beside her in the brisk night air. As Luke said, “Mary treasured all these [things] and pondered them in her heart” (2:19). Listen to poet, **William Butler Yeats**, as he muses about Mary’s thoughts in his poem, “The Mother of God”:

What is this flesh I purchased with my pains,  
This fallen star my milk sustains,  
This love that makes my heart’s blood stop  
Or strikes a sudden chill into my bones  
And bids my hair stand up?

Unlike later millions who would nod to the memory of Christmas only briefly once a year, **this couple would live their entire lives in the unfolding mystery of the Incarnation.**

The beautiful events that followed the week after Jesus’ birth, recorded in Luke 2:21-40, were given to Mary and Joseph to deepen and to confirm the significance of the Incarnation in their minds – and ultimately in the thoughts of the faithful throughout the centuries. Specifically, the events associated with **their baby’s traditional naming ceremony** helped them think further thoughts about the profound meaning of their son’s birth. These same events can also help make the dazzling wonder of the Incarnation a life-long experience for us.

### 1. **Jesus’ circumcision and naming** (Luke 2:21).

Luke describes Jesus Christ’s circumcision and naming ceremony in a single concise sentence: “After eight days had passed it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel; before he was conceived in the womb” (2:21).

**Circumcision** was performed to signify that **Jesus was included in the household of faith**. It was an ancient ceremony that went back all the way to Abraham (Gen. 17). Without it Jesus could not have identified with his own people even though he was of Hebrew blood. Similarly, basing their theological thinking on Paul's analogy that **baptism, like circumcision, is a "sign" and "seal" of the righteousness of God being applied to his people by faith** (Rom. 4), Presbyterian and Reformed Christians, along with other mainstream denominations, have always offered baptism to infants, as well as to young children or adults. Although this was frequently done about a week after birth, in my case, my baptism certificate shows that I was brought to church and baptized and formally given my formal names, **Johannes Hendrik**, on November 11, just under one month after my birth.

Of course, the **names to be given to a child** are usually considered well before the birth, so that when the baby arrives, he or she will already have a name. But this ceremony of **circumcision (or baptism) includes the formal giving of names**. Although we do not know his other names, Mary and Joseph's son's **principal name in English was "Jesus"** because this was the name that had been picked out for him ahead of time by God himself. The literal meaning of the name **"Yesu," in Aramaic, is "Yahweh is salvation."** Understanding the meaning of this name is essential for understanding the Incarnation, but I realize that in this secularized day and age most people on the street have no idea of what the name of Jesus means. In Spanish-speaking countries, the name **"Jesus"** as a first or last name is common enough. But for those who know him, the name is both a claim and a promise, and that is why it is so often upon our lips.

The **origin of the name** reveals something that makes it even more precious. The English **"Jesus"** is close enough to the Greek **"Iesous"** which, in turn is a transliteration of the Hebrew, **"Yehoshua"** – our **"Joshua"** -- the name of the great leader who succeeded Moses and led Israel into the Promised Land. Originally, however, Joshua's name wasn't Joshua, but **"Hoshea,"** which meant **"salvation."** Because of his faith and leadership in believing that through God's providence the Promised Land could be conquered, "Moses gave Hoshea son of Nun the name of Joshua" (Nu. 13:16). As we know he became Israel's greatest general. Thus the name "Joshua," or "Jesus," also suggests **"deliverance."** Therefore, the name "Jesus" tells the world about the heroics that would be accomplished by his life and his death.

Both Mary and Joseph had been told separately by an angel to **name the child "Jesus."** The angel said to Joseph, "She will bear a son, and you are to name him

Jesus for he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). Gabriel’s announcement was similar: “You will conceive ... and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus” (Lk. 1:31). I’m sure Joseph and Mary must have discussed the angel’s instruction frequently, both before and after their son’s birth, but when the time actually came for the ceremony of the circumcision and Joseph uttered the divinely given name, the sense of the moment must have overwhelmed them. **This child, our baby, is to be “salvation” – he will effect “deliverance”!** This child, our baby, will somehow be the salvation of humankind and effect the deliverance of the world! What a post Christmas memory that would be!

So, eight days after his birth in Bethlehem, Jesus’ parents took him to a rabbi, probably at a local synagogue. The uttering of his Christmas name was followed by the knife and the sharp cry of the infant Son of God and the spilling of some blood as he fully identified with God’s covenant people. The great English poet, **John Milton**, wrote in his poem on the topic:

Alas, how soon our sin  
Sore doth begin  
His infancy to seize!

Other post-Christmas rites included Mary’s purification and the couple’s presentation of their baby in the temple, which took place about a month later.

## 2. **Mary’s purification** (Luke 2:22-24).

The poverty of Jesus’ parents was obvious, considering the humble offering which they brought to the temple in Jerusalem, almost next door to Bethlehem, for Mary’s purification according to the Law of Moses: “a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons” (2:22-24). Luke can’t seem to remember which of those two choices it was that they brought, but either would have been all right for poor folk who couldn’t afford a lamb (Lev. 12:6-8). Mary and Joseph’s humble offering was a not so subtle, public declaration of their poverty.

**Christmas begins and continues with a spirit of need.** Didn’t Mary sing: “For he has looked with favour on **the lowliness of his servant**. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed” (Lk. 1:48a)? Didn’t Jesus Christ himself also, later, begin his famous beatitudes with, “Blessed are **the poor in spirit**, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3)?

It all reminds me of a **lovely Welsh carol** with 20<sup>th</sup>-century English lyrics:

All poor men and humble, all blind men who stumble,  
 Come haste ye, nor feel ye afraid;  
 For Jesus our treasure, with love past all measure,  
 In lowly, poor manger was laid.

Though wise men who found him laid rich gifts around him,  
 Yet oxen they gave him their hay  
 And Jesus in beauty, accepted their duty  
 Contented in manger he lay.

**God did and does not come to the self-sufficient.** This is a truth that we must remind ourselves of again and again. Our only adequacy is in Christ.

### 3. **The presentation of Jesus in the temple** (Luke 2:25-38).

While Mary and Joseph were in the temple precincts **they met two other Israelites whose lives exemplified faith and godliness.** Their names were **Simeon and Anna.** These two embodied all that was good in Israelite piety.

For those of us who are getting older it doesn't hurt to see that **they were both older people.** **Anna** is described as being "of a great age" (2:36b). In fact, having been widowed "seven years after her marriage" (2:36c), she is described as "having lived as a widow to the age of 84" (2:37a). This could mean that she was 84, or that she had lived 84 years **after** being widowed, making her at least 103 to 105 years old (Raymond Brown, p. 442)! Though **Simeon's** age isn't given; the text suggests he was also advanced in years. After all, they had **both waited years and years to see God's promises fulfilled.** Further, their stooped profiles would have announced their age to all who approached them. Up-close onlookers would have noticed the age-spotted backs of their hands and the telltale translucent skin around their veined eyes – but they would also have seen evidence of souls that were still young and growing. I imagine that these were exactly the kind of people whom **Rembrandt** used as models for his now world-famous paintings. Young people need to remember that older people can be good people too.

**Both were also devoted to God.** **Simeon** is called "righteous and devout" (2:25b), meaning that he was kind and generous to others, as well as careful in his religious duties and service for God (Leon Morris, *Luke*, 1988, p. 96). And **Anna**, it seems, "never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day" (2:37b). Whenever the doors were open, she was there. She was a woman of rare piety.

**Both were prophets.** Anna is called “a prophet” (2:36), and Simeon’s song is itself a prophecy (2:29-32). What gives people the gift of prophecy? **Both were filled with expectancy.** Simeon is described as a man “looking forward to the consolation of Israel [-- how I love that phrase --] and the Holy Spirit rested on him” (2:25b). After she beheld Jesus, Anna “began to praise God” and wanted “to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (2:38). Messianic expectation had filled the horizon of the lives of these two godly people. They couldn’t wait for it to happen and they couldn’t wait to tell each and everyone when they saw it had happened! They believed when few others believed in Christ’s coming. They never gave up but kept trusting and waiting and looking. What an example they are even for us today!

**Simeon and Anna represented all who saw that their only hope was in the mercy and grace of God.** Along with the poor carpenter and his wife, and the outcast shepherds, they were the flesh-and-blood examples of those to whom Christ comes. They personified the paradox of being completely empty and profoundly full. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matt. 5:6). They came to God’s house hungry and they received as few others have. Although I can tell you of a few in this congregation, lives like these are rare. Such longing is not in vogue today. The ideal twenty-first-century person sees himself/herself as fulfilling **Ernest Hemmingway’s** line: “You’re the completest man I’ve ever known.” He needs nothing, no one, not even God – or so he/she thinks. We need to ask God to show us our insufficiency and need. What grace would come to us if we prayed for a greater sense of our spiritual need!

There’s **another facet to Simeon’s beautiful soul.** “It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah” (2:26). He’d received an inkling, a holy nudge from God that he wouldn’t leave this life until the Messiah had come. How long had he been waiting? Who knows: days, months, years? We do not know. But we can sense his anticipation as he approached the temple once more, confident that God would answer the longings of his heart. **What is it that we anticipate before we die?** Some search for something for years but never find it. Some think of a number of things they must still do or experience before it’s too late. Some think of some grand project that must be completed before they can let go. And some are content with whatever God’s way with them must be, feeling there is nothing more that needs to be added. I’d like to think that there’s always something more to anticipate. It’s a great way to live – to be fully alive -- until the day we die.

**Simeon must have been looking at anybody and everybody** who came towards him on the street. “Is this the one?” he would think. “Oh, there’s a likely couple with a baby – maybe this is him!” And then, one grand day, says Luke, “Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what customary under the law” -- he knew for certain that this was the one, and he -- “took him in his arms and praised God ...” (2:27-28). What an unforgettable moment, what an irreplaceable day that was! Now, with the baby in his arms, secure in God’s providence and presence, **Simeon experienced profound peace of soul**. “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word” (2:29). And well should he have had this feeling. After all, he held in his hands the “Prince of Peace” prophesied by Isaiah (9:6d), the one of whom the angels sang, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours” (2:14). God’s favour rested upon Simeon. Now he was ready to die, for that is what “dismiss” means (Brown, p. 439). He was ready to go home to be with God forever.

**The reason Simeon was ready to go was clear:** “For” he sang,” my eyes have seen your salvation” (2:30). The baby he was holding was and would be an integral part of God’s plan for the salvation of the world. Jesus was and is central to what salvation is all about. Jesus is **“the reason for the season.”** Further, this salvation was for all everybody. Simeon said it was “prepared in the presence of all peoples [or all nations].” Jesus Christ was and is “a light for revelation to the Gentiles and [the people of] Israel” (2:31-32). Everybody who wants to be will be included. Jesus Christ is our light too in this dark world; he is our salvation. Simeon must surely have held the baby tight, tears of joy were ready to spill in the lower corners of his eyes. This was good news indeed.

**To receive salvation**, all one has to do is to spiritually take Jesus Christ in his or her arms as Saviour and Lord. “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” “My only comfort in life and in death is that I am not my own, but belong – body and soul, in life and in death -- to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ” (The Heidelberg Catechism, Question 1). Naturally, verse 33 tells us, “The child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him” (2:33). May we share their profound amazement and hold every word of God’s Word close to our hearts.

This dramatic encounter closes with Simeon turning to Mary and Joseph (Anna was also standing nearby), and addressed them, especially Mary:

Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too” (2:34-35).

No doubt, **Jesus’ birth and ministry would bless Mary; but the future would also bring great sorrow.** That future would include the family’s flight to Egypt to escape Herod’s murderous wrath, and her son being eventually misunderstood and rejected, the terrible events of Passion Week and, finally, watching her son die upon the cross. **Richard Crashaw** wrote a few lines echoing what thoughts she might have had then, “Hanging all torn she sees; and in his woes and pains, her pangs and throes.” A great sword would go right through this mother’s soul.

Of course, **some of these lines apply to us as well.** Does this story reveal our own inner thoughts? Will they be thoughts that allow us to rise above our sins and burdens, or will they cause us to stumble and fall? Jesus Christ’s life and death will reveal what our inner lives are really like. How will we respond to him? Let’s kneel before him in humility and allow him to gently, graciously raise us up!

Imagine the thoughts that must have been going through Mary and Joseph’s minds. **Their baby was and is a mighty deliverer.** He delivers us through the heroics of the incarnation and the cross. This should give us Christmas joy all year long, and every year again. Further, **their baby comes to the needy** – to those who realize he is their only hope. Truly, “he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (1:53). Today **he comes to those who possess a perpetual sense of spiritual need and hunger.** These can and will always live in the wonder of the incarnation. **Their baby grew into a man,** and it was discovered that his life, suffering and death – hard as it is to bear -- brings wholeness and peace.

Knowing this, may we be ready to say, **“Lord, dismiss your servants in peace, with your eternal blessing.”**

Amen

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