



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

Presentation of Our Lord: Feb. 2, 2020

Sermon Title: "To Carry and be Carried"

Gospel Text: Luke 2:22-40

Today is a very special day on the Church Calendar, the Presentation of Our Lord. It is a day the Church has been marking and celebrating every February 2nd since the 4th century. It commemorates the day, forty days after Christmas – forty days after the birth of Jesus – when his parents Mary and Joseph took him to the temple, in accordance with Old Testament law, both so that their firstborn son could be ceremonially presented to the Lord, and so that Mary might be ritually purified.

The Presentation of Our Lord is a festival day that most likely isn't all that familiar for most of us, because if February 2nd doesn't fall on a Sunday we typically don't mark this day. But you might be familiar with *another* ancient tradition associated with this day – "Candlemas" – a day on which the church blesses the candles everyone will use for the upcoming year, as we pray that the light of Christ might enter our homes just as Jesus entered the temple that day, forty days after his birth. And so as part of our prayers today, we will ask God's blessings on our candles here at Grace.

So, what happened that day in the Jerusalem Temple that, so many centuries later, continues to merit the *Church's* attention and *our* attention? It's because the lives that were transformed as the infant Jesus entered the temple that day provide insight into the way Jesus transforms *us* as he enters *our* lives.

And so let's look carefully at just one of the people in this lesson, explore how his life was impacted by Jesus that day, and consider what lessons that one transformed life provides. His name was Simeon, and he's one of my favorite people in the New Testament. He shows up only in Luke's Gospel, and only briefly. But his example of faith is profound.

Luke describes Simeon as "righteous and devout." What a lovely way to be remembered in the pages of history - righteous and devout. Luke implies that Simeon was of an advanced age too. And so his faithfulness was not something new but something that had long marked his life. Simeon was in the temple that day, patiently awaiting the fulfillment of a promise from God that the Holy Spirit had delivered – a promise that before Simeon died, he would see the Lord's Messiah.

How long had Simeon been waiting for that promise to be fulfilled? How many days, weeks, months, years - perhaps even decades – had Simeon shown up at the temple? Presumably he showed up day-after-day, and day-after-day he went home *empty handed*. But I don't believe he ever came home *empty hearted*. And I don't think Simeon ever lost faith that God would

keep God's promise. That, my friends, is an important lesson for us today. A big part of the life of faith – a big part of following Jesus – is simply showing up, trusting that we are loved and that God will keep all of God's promises *to* us and *for* us. Can we be like Simeon, and exhibit the same kind of patience, persistence, trust, and faith?

As Simeon stood there in the temple, day-after-day, anticipating the fulfillment of God's promise to reveal the Lord's Messiah, who was Simeon expecting to meet? A wise, dignified, elderly priest? A bold and brave military commander? A brash political revolutionary? Surely Simeon carefully studied each and every visitor, wondering if this was the one he had been *waiting for*, the one he had been *hoping for*, the one God *promised to send*.

Of course, as we know, the Lord's Messiah appeared at the temple *not* as a priest, a military commander, or a politician, but a *baby* – a baby from an obscure little town, born to equally obscure parents. Nevertheless, Simeon recognized God's blessing even when that blessing took a form that no one could have reasonably anticipated or expected.

Has God made promises to you? How do you anticipate God will fulfill those promises? More to the point, when you come to church, when you pray, when you go about your day – how do you think God is going to reach out to *you*? Through a priest? A commander? A politician? Anything is possible. But isn't it just as likely that God could come to you through a far more obscure means, like a child, a homeless person, or even a wafer and a sip of wine? Can we be like Simeon, and with eyes and hearts wide open, live in expectation that our Lord and Messiah can and does come to us through a multitude of surprising and unlikely means?

When God's promise was fulfilled for Simeon, and as Simeon held salvation in his arms, Simeon's joy was full. He had everything he would ever need. His life was complete. "Lord, now you are dismissing your servant in peace." In other words, "Thank you God. You kept your promise. I've seen the Messiah. If I die this night, it will be enough. Everything will have been worth it." That too is a lesson from Simeon. He knew the many treats and temptations the world has to offer. And yet he knew that nothing could ever surpass Jesus. Can we be like Simeon, and retain a single-minded focus on Jesus as the true source of all *joy*, all *meaning*, all *fulfillment*, and all *wholeness* in our life?

There's a small but important detail right at the end of today's Gospel lesson that's easy to overlook, but so important to note. Verses 39 and 40 state that after their time at the temple concluded, Jesus and his parents returned to Nazareth, where Jesus continued to mature and grow in wisdom. It's the last detail recorded in scripture about Jesus until he appears again at the age of 12. Imagine how you'd react if Jesus erupted into your life one day and then never showed up in quite the same way again. I suspect that's what happened to Simeon. He had a mountaintop experience. It transformed his life. But he was wise enough to place his faith in *Jesus*, not just in experiences or feelings. Experiences and feelings can be valuable. Mountaintop experiences of faith can be important to our formation. But we can't rely solely on them, or condition our beliefs on the constant presence of such experiences. They can *point* us to Jesus, but they can never *replace* Jesus. Simeon knew that, and I hope we do too.

One of the great mountaintop faith experiences of my life happened some years ago on a warm night in June, at the opening night of my first Allegheny Synod Assembly. Of all the graduated seminarians who had been sent out across the country by the ELCA, I was the only one assigned to this Synod, and that was the night of my ordination. There at the front of the church, as I knelt alone and prepared before the Lord to be ordained by Bishop Pile, so many thoughts went through my head. I worried whether I was truly *prepared* to be a pastor or *worthy* to be a pastor. The weight of the office and its responsibilities weighed heavily on me. That weight became tangible as the hands of all the Synod's pastors joined those of Bishop Pile upon my head. It felt so burdensome, a weight too heavy to bear.

But as God's blessings were invoked upon me, Jesus lifted that weight and began to draw me upwards. I felt like I was floating. I knew then that whatever gifts I lacked, Jesus would supply. I would never need to rely solely upon myself. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, but what blessed assurance it *was* and *continues to be* to know that the same Jesus who *Simeon* carried in the temple would carry *me*.

Jesus also carries *you*. From the exhilarating tops of mountains to the despairing depths of valleys, he will always be with you. He will always love you. So *depend* on him. *Cling* to him. Just like *Simeon*. Amen.