

Luke 2:22-40 (NRSV)

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

"Master, now you are 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,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel."

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "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--and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

As I read this passage about Simeon and Anna here at the end of the year, I couldn't help thinking of Bill and Jo At Lee who passed on this year and who even now are sleeping in the Lord. As I heard the words of the Psalm, words of praise from all of creation and praise from the peoples of the earth, Kings and princes, men and women, young and old, I couldn't help but think about the Christmases that the confirmands and pastors went to carol at the lovely home Bill and Jo shared with Kip and Patti At Lee.

Why, after all, do we carol at people's houses? Why do we carol at retirement homes, at the houses of people who can't easily get to church anymore? We carol because we want to bring the songs to them, because we are a people united by song, by praise, by thanksgiving. We don't want the people who can't participate in the songs, can't participate in the praise of the congregation, to be forgotten or neglected. So we go to them, to Asbury and to Calvert Pines and we share the songs of Christmas with them, because we are a people united by song.

And I also couldn't help thinking that when Simeon says, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace," he's not talking about going home, he's talking about dying. He's talking about returning to God after having seen and blessed a particular child. And I thought about Bill and Jo returning to God, having blessed children, their own and other people's children all their lives.

I mentioned that we're celebrating the baptisms, today, of Max and Natalie and Lindsey Gingue, and I hadn't really thought what a wonderful reading this is for a baptism. Part of what a baptism is about is presenting the child – in this case, the children – to the community to receive a blessing. These children who are a blessing to their parents -- much of the time, at least -- and will be a blessing to this community, in baptism they **receive** a blessing, a welcome from this larger family of which they will be a part and a welcome from God who claims them for his own, forever and always.

Why do you suppose it is that the lectionary gives us this tale about death and blessing just a couple of days after Christmas? One reason might be that after the presents are all opened, and half of them are broken, after all the excitement, there's a little bit of a let-down. W.H. Auden in his poem, "A Christmas Oratorio," captures this feeling of letdown. He writes,

Well, so that is that.
 Now we must dismantle the tree,
 Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes -
 Some have gotten broken - and carrying them up to the attic.
 The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
 And the children gotten ready for school.

He writes that the kitchen table seems a little smaller, that the streets are narrower than we remember them, that we had forgotten how depressing the office is. He writes, "To those who have seen The Child, however dimly, however incredulously, The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all."

For those who are struggling with this feeling of being let down, Simeon's and Anna's blessings of Jesus remind us what real blessings are. Not cell phones and iPods and Wii Fit, although these can be amusing and useful. Not dolls and toys and electronics. The real blessings are people and relationships and lives well lived,

continuity and community, the blessings of God for God's people and for the world they live in. The real blessings are elders who offer wisdom and an example, children who are full of life and light and parents and grown ups who honor and cherish both elders and children. And death, too, can be a blessing at the end of a life well lived.

And these blessings are not free, but come at a price. What does Simeon say to Mary? "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 -- and a sword will pierce your own soul too." Blessings can be both sweet and a little painful. Relationships give joy and eventually they end. Life gives joy but eventually everyone returns to God.

So, yes, I miss Bill and Jo today near the end of this year. I'll probably miss them at the end of every year, until I meet them again in God's good time. I'm sure the community of their day missed Simeon and Anna, who were righteous and devout and well-loved. And we welcome Max and Natalie and Lindsay, and their parents Rick and Dot, all of whom will be a blessing to this community. The real blessings, you see, aren't things but instead are people and relationships, the love of God, the songs and praise of the faithful, lives well lived and well ended. And these we celebrate at the end of the year and all year long.

Amen.