

Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3  
Luke 2:21-40

First Sunday After Christmas  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
December 26, 2021

## **The Consolation of Israel**

### *Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson*

Our Old Testament Lesson from Isaiah the prophet looks both backward and forward—backward to Israel’s history with God, and forward to the salvation of Christ. God is going to do a new thing, and Zion will be given a new name. Righteousness and praise shall spring up before all the nations. Listen to these words from Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3. . .

### *Introduction to the Gospel Lesson*

In our Gospel Lesson the story of the Presentation of the Infant Jesus in the temple relates the birth of Jesus to the history of Israel and gives the historical context. In addition to Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus, we meet two elderly and pious Jews—Simeon and Anna, who welcome the new day for Israel in the child Jesus. And Simeon provides a glimpse of the greater divine purpose that Jesus will fulfill as a light to the Gentiles. Listen to these words from Luke 2:21-40. . .

### *Sermon*

Our text from Luke this morning provides us with several situations for reflection. The first (in verses 22-24) is found in Mary and Joseph’s bringing Jesus to the temple for the required Mosaic ritual of the mother’s purification following childbirth, and the dedication of the firstborn son to God. Mary and Joseph willingly and faithfully execute the will of God—whether announced by an angel, or required by the law.

The purification rite called for the sacrifice of a lamb and a pigeon, except in hardship cases, where two pigeons or two doves would do. With Mary and Joseph, the offering was a pair

of turtledoves. So, economically these young parents are of limited means. They had struggled to get to Bethlehem for the census. Once there, they found no room in the inn; so Mary gave birth to her child next to the beasts of burden.

The birth of a child brings with it responsibilities to all parents, rich and poor. In the Presbyterian Church parents of newborn children are encouraged to have the child baptized. In the Directory For Worship of our *Book of Order* we read:

The session's responsibilities for Baptism are

- a. encouraging parents to present their children for Baptism, reminding them that children of believers are to be baptized without undue haste, but without undue delay, and authorizing the Baptism of those presented. (W-2.3012a)

In infant baptism the larger community of the church promises to help raise the child to know and love the Lord, to nurture the baptized person in the Christian life, and to support the parents in their raising of the child. And in the sacrament we affirm that the child is not only a child of the parents, but also a child of God.

Birth is both an ending and a beginning. It's an end of waiting. It's an end of preparation. It's an end of anticipation. But it's also a beginning. The beginning of adjusting your schedule to the schedule of a newborn. The beginning of providing food, clothing, and shelter. The beginning of brothers and sisters, grandparents, and others, caring for a new baby. The beginning of planning for outings and education.

If you have raised a child or even watched the process from next door, you realize that growth happens quickly. A boy who was twenty inches long at birth squirms in your arms at two days old, and looking back it seems that in the blink of an eye he's a teenager towering over you. Our 13-year-old grandson, D.J., is already taller than we are (though I realize that's not saying

much). A teenager has got one foot out the door, and you sense that his horizons are well beyond his home.

Having looked at Mary and Joseph, now let us turn our attention to Simeon. (vv. 25-35) Simeon was an elderly prophet living in Jerusalem. He was a righteous and devout man. And he was waiting for the Lord's Messiah—the consolation of Israel. Waiting for Isaiah's prophecy to be fulfilled.

Whether we like it or not, waiting is a big part of life. Someone said that we spend half our life waiting. In waiting rooms and waiting lines. We wait to be seated, and we wait on the phone to speak to an operator—a real person. With our computers we wait for that little circle to stop spinning. One report said that on average we spend six months of our lives waiting at stoplights. We've all heard the old adage that, "Good things come to those who wait," and "Some things are worth waiting for." Well, Simeon had been waiting all his life for the Messiah. And now something good has come, and the wait was well worth it.

The Holy Spirit rested upon Simeon and revealed to him that his hoping and waiting were not in vain. In fact, before he died, Simeon would see the Messiah. And the Spirit guided Simeon into the temple when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus there as an infant for the Presentation and Purification rites, as was customary under the law. And there the old man took the infant child into his arms, praising God with words of joy, uttering what has become a famous prayer or song, the "*nunc dimittis*," which is sung in churches to this day, sometimes as a canticle or chant.

"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,  
according to thy word:  
for mine eyes have seen thy salvation,  
which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;  
a light to lighten the Gentiles,  
and the glory of thy people Israel." (Lk. 2:29-32 KJV)

The scene is a moving one with an old man now content to die, holding a six-week-old baby who at long last is “The Consolation of Israel.”

Mary and Joseph were amazed at what Simeon said regarding their son. Simeon blessed them and then declared to Mary these haunting words:

“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.” (vv. 34b-35)

These words likely mean that Mary will know the pain of seeing many fall. Some families will even be divided. In Matthew 13 we read;

And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and in their own house.” (v. 57)

But it is also a painful truth that Mary will one day know nature’s reversal—where the parent buries the child.

At the birth of most children, there is a wider company of people who are affected by the birth. Not just parents, but grandparents and great grandparents, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, friends of the family, church members,

Mary and Joseph, Simeon. Next (in vv. 36-38) we meet a widow of 84 named Anna—like Simeon a person with elderly wisdom. She was a prophetess and spent her time in the temple worshipping, with prayer and fasting. Like Simeon, Anna had been hoping and waiting for the Messiah to come.

Tom Long, Professor of Preaching at the Candler School of Theology at Emory, said that waiting for God is not easy. Not many can bear its harsh discipline, endure its long and sometimes dark hours. But waiting for God should not be like sitting in a darkened theater, idly waiting for the show to begin. It’s more like waiting for an honored guest to arrive at our home

or school or job site. There's much work to be done, much getting ready. Cleaning, cooking, setting the table. Dressing appropriately, getting things in order. While Simeon and Anna waited, they didn't just sit and roll their thumbs. Simeon was full of devotion and did what was just. Anna kept the lights burning in the Temple with her ceaseless worship. They did what they could. They lived in the moment.

But at the presence of Baby Jesus old Anna begins to praise God and speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Israel. She was not only a recipient *of* revelation, but also a witness *to* revelation. Simeon and Anna form part of that great cloud of witnesses. When we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion—as we will next Sunday—we share with Simeon and Anna and that great cloud of witnesses, the joy of knowing the coming of the Messiah—The Consolation of Israel, Christ Jesus as our Lord and Savior. We eat the bread and drink the cup, proclaiming the Lord's death, until he comes again. (I Cor. 11:26)

Finally, there is not only Mary and Joseph, not only Simeon and Anna; there is also present in the story—Jesus himself. Jesus is just a baby, but he is surrounded with the grace of God, with the love and care of Mary and Joseph, with the joy of Simeon and Anna, with the hopes and dreams of all who were looking for the Consolation of Israel.

With the requirements of the law fulfilled, Mary and Joseph with Jesus will return to Nazareth in Galilee. And Jesus will grow and become strong. He will gain wisdom. And the favor of God will be upon him.

And the old servants of the Lord, Simeon and Anna, they can now die in peace. And so can we. And so can we.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.