



New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

AN EARLY WRAP UP

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Are you ready for it to be December? Wow. Hard to believe it's already here again. But I do love this month. Ever since I was little, I have always liked church in December. Maybe it was just the excitement and anticipation of looking forward to Christmas presents. Maybe it was the change of pace in the services with Christmas programs and costumes, and singing carols in church. Maybe it was knowing they handed out candy canes after the service. Maybe it's because I wasn't the pastor then.

Don't get me wrong – I still love it. It's just a bit more challenging than I realized before. Because there are only so many texts that you use for a Christmas sermon, and after you preach 4 or 5 Christmas sermons a year for a few years, you begin to wonder how it will stay fresh. It's a good thing God is faithful and his word is so deep, because you can go back to the same well over and over and he always supplies. But it does stretch you.

Then, when you get to a morning like today, where you're talking Christmas AND a baby dedication AND the Lord's Supper, you have to ask, what's the connection? What's the tie in? Are these just random pieces, or is there a way to wrap it all together?

Christmas is all about wrapping, isn't it? Who wraps the gifts in your family? I'm not so good at it. My biggest challenge is to remember to flip the box over and start with the bottom. That's a tough one. The end goal is to have it look nice when it's sitting right side up. That means you have to think upside down and sideways. You have to surround that box with paper.

That's the answer for us this morning. We're going to take the normal December topic of Jesus' birth, but we're going to come at it like wrapping paper and turn it upside down first. We're actually going to look at an incident AFTER Jesus' birth, then flip the box over entirely and go back way BEFORE his birth. I think we'll end up seeing that a baby dedication, the Lord's Supper and Christmas do actually go together in a profound way.

So let's start by looking at what happened after that first Christmas, after Jesus had already been born. That might feel anticlimactic at this point, but I want to go to what was essentially Jesus' baby dedication. It's a part of the story that often gets skipped over at Christmas. We sign off with the wise men heading back home, then leave the baby Jesus and move on to stories from his adult life. But something important happened

shortly after he was born. Like Derek and Meghan, Mary and Joseph wanted to see their child grow up in a faith filled household, so they too made a special effort to bring him before God.

Luke 2:22-35

When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons."

According to Jewish law, new mothers had to wait 40 days after the birth of a boy to go and make sacrifices at the temple. Then, if he was a firstborn son, the parents would consecrate him to God. As you may recall, in the final plague that caused Pharaoh to release the Israelites from slavery, God struck down every firstborn boy in Egypt, but he spared the Israelites. After that, as a show of gratitude and worship, each firstborn man and animal was dedicated to God. Mary and Joseph were good observant Jews, so they wanted to present Jesus at the temple. Bethlehem was about 6 miles away from Jerusalem, so when the time had passed Mary and Joseph made their way there.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

When Isaac was a baby, we took him to church one Sunday morning, and he started getting a little fussy. So during the sermon, I took him out to the lobby. He was starting to get his first teeth, so his gums were sore. But he was a little happier if I was walking around with him, so that's what I did.

An old man I had never met before came up to me and was asking all about Isaac. After hearing he was teething, he said to me, "You know what you need to do? Rub a little whiskey on his gums. That'll take care of it." I'm sure it would have. It was a little surreal to be in church and have this complete stranger telling me I needed to get my baby all liquored up.

Not quite the same as Mary and Joseph's experience, but still: imagine how it must have felt when Simeon approached them. The Bible doesn't tell us who he was. It doesn't appear that he was on staff at the temple as a priest. He's just a kindly old man who walks up to them and asks to hold their baby. Then he proceeds to tell them some incredible things.

Some time has passed since the visits from the angels and the shepherds and the wise men. Life had settled into somewhat of a normal family routine. Mary and Joseph weren't expecting anything out of the ordinary when they went to the temple – they were simply being obedient. Suddenly they get this message from God. *The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him.*

It was not new information – it's what the angel said was true of Jesus. But Mary and Joseph seem to have not really taken it in before. Although they had some incredible experiences leading up to Jesus' birth, Simeon's words catch them totally by surprise. The wonder of being chosen by God had worn off a bit as they got into the routine of parenting a newborn. Jesus was a baby that needed to be fed and changed like any other, and although his beginning may have been spectacular and unusual, that glory was no longer top of mind. He didn't look different than other kids. Unlike the paintings of him, he didn't have a little halo. He appeared completely normal. So real life had set in, and as any first time parent will tell you, those are overwhelming days. And nights.

Then along comes Simeon who says, "Do you realize who you have here? I've been waiting my whole life just to get a glimpse of him."

It's easy to take Jesus so for granted as part of our lives.. Maybe things started out strong in your relationship with him. He may have shown you some incredible answers to prayer when you were in a time of feeling especially close to him. Then life slips into the ordinary routines. We don't experience the same miracles, and we lose sight of the wonder. Real life sets in, and our faith becomes stale and flat. We don't stop believing, we just sort of move on. Jesus the Son of God becomes Jesus the religious habit.

But God is God in the flat times as well as the exciting ones. He is Lord of the valleys as well as the mountain tops. And he is as close to you as he ever has been. He is as powerful and as responsive as ever. The reality of his presence in our lives doesn't change because our circumstances or our feelings do.

Thank God for people like Simeon who come into our lives and remind us who Jesus is. Scripture doesn't tell us his job title. Nobody remembers the position he held in society or how much money he had or any of his big accomplishments. His gift to the world and to us was his ability to recognize Jesus.

Addison has been inventing characters with super powers lately. He's always imagining what it would be like to do things that are impossible. His newest one is the Digitizer 10,

a lego character who has the power to get inside computers and battle viruses. He's never even heard of Blade Runner.

I want Simeon's super power. I want the ability to look into a situation and see where Christ is in it. I want to recognize what God is doing in my life or someone else's. Wouldn't that be fantastic? God is active and involved in everything around us. So often I'm oblivious to anything but my own concerns, and if I could only have more clarity to truly see God's hand, it would change everything.

The good news is, we can. Simeon didn't really have a super power. It's amazing when you think about it. The wise men had a star. The shepherds had angels. Joseph had dreams. Those are all very specific, dramatic forms of guidance. Simeon didn't have any of that. What did he have? Just the Holy Spirit. *Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts.*

So often when we hear the Christmas story, everything sounds so miraculous that it's hard to put yourself in the shoes of the people who were there. We've never experienced anything comparable, so it's difficult to identify with it.

But Simeon we understand. We can relate to him. People today still talk about being led or moved or prodded along by the Holy Spirit. If we believe what we say we do, then every person who puts his or her faith in Christ has the same Holy Spirit living in them and giving them guidance. We have that same power that drove Simeon. We may not be able to recreate the experience of the wise men or the shepherds, but we can follow Simeon's example, because we have the same Holy Spirit. Recognizing Christ is one of the key roles of the Holy Spirit.

1 John 4:2

This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.

But as I said before, at least speaking for myself, I often have difficulty really seeing Christ in a specific setting. So what does Simeon have to teach us? What enabled him to identify the baby Jesus in the crowds at the temple?

Luke doesn't go into great detail about Simeon, but each comment tells us something important required of us if we want to recognize Jesus. First, Simeon knew how to

Run good routes.

I'm using a football analogy here. You sports fans better listen up because this is a rare moment. My boys have been teaching me how to play Madden '07 on the computer so I'm learning a few good plays. But whether you're playing on the computer or in real football, a lot depends on your receivers being open so they can catch the ball.

Derek Moye is a Pennsylvania wide receiver who is being heavily recruited by colleges. When asked what makes for a good receiver, he said this: "I would probably say that running good routes is the most important aspect of being a receiver. There are receivers in the NFL who aren't too fast or too tall, but they know how to get open and make catches because they run good routes."

Luke tells us that Simeon was righteous and devout. In the Greek, that word for "devout" could be translated to "hold onto carefully". Simeon was watching his life and faith closely. He was paying attention to what he did and where he walked, doing everything possible to stay close to God. He was running a good route, putting himself in a good position so that he'd be open to receive what God sent his way.

Sometimes the simple reason we're not recognizing God is because we're not staying where we should. We say we want to hear something from the Lord, but our actions tell otherwise. Where we put ourselves determines how open we are. Maybe it's the friends we choose to hang out with or the way we spend time when we're by ourselves.

Psalm 66:18

If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.

Simeon ran a good route, looking for ways to do the right thing and be ready for what God might say.

The second thing I believe Simeon shows us how to do is

Gain some wait.

Again, Luke gives us insight.

He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.

I hate waiting. Just ask Karin sometime. I don't care what the context is, I'm terrible at it. If I'm waiting in traffic, I get frustrated. If I'm waiting for help in a store, I get obnoxious and pushy and snippy with the sales person. If I'm waiting for my family to get in the car, I call them about a hundred times as if that will help.

Waiting is a position of helplessness. Things are out of your control. You can't force the situation. There is nothing for you to do And that's exactly how it should be.

I tend to act the same way with God. I want him to speak on my terms. I give him a window of time in which to act, and tell him what I want him to do, and when he doesn't I get frustrated. I get obnoxious and pushy. And I ask him about a hundred times as if that will help.

Simeon waited a lifetime to see God do something. He knew God was the one in control. So he waited. And Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit was on him in the waiting period. God was right there with Simeon when all he could do was wait. And even then, as

Simeon was willing to wait, God revealed to him that the wait would be worth it. He would see something eventually.

Have you lost your patience with God? Is he too slow for your pace? Are you struggling with the fact that you're not the one in control? Maybe you've had an agenda for him, and your biggest frustration is that he's not keeping up. Waiting is a spiritual discipline that God can use in a powerful way.

Lamentations 3:26

It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.

God takes our waiting and shapes us in that time, and it prepares us to be ready when he reveals himself.

Simeon knew when his waiting was over, too, which is another quality that characterized him. As old as he was, he still knew enough to

Take bold steps

The text tells us what happened: *Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts.*

I think one of the greatest movie visuals is the scene from *The Last Crusade* where Indiana Jones sees the cave where the holy grail is supposed to be hidden. His quest will be finished if he can just reach it. But the cave is in the side of a cliff across a deep canyon. Indy's clue tells him to take a leap of faith. So he steps off the edge of the cliff on his side of the canyon, not knowing whether he will plummet to his death, or float on a breeze across the ravine.

It turns out that there was a perfectly solid bridge that was completely camouflaged. It couldn't be seen until he was standing on it.

Sometimes, following God's Spirit means taking that step of faith without seeing what's ahead.

Imagine being Simeon, feeling compelled to walk into the temple grounds. We're not talking a little country church: The footprint of the Temple complex was roughly equivalent in area to 35 football fields. There's no telling how many hundreds or thousands of people would be there on any given day. Simeon is scanning the crowd, not even sure what it is that he's looking for. Maybe it's an adult, maybe it's a baby...Who knows? It seems like he would be looking for a needle in a haystack. But he has the Holy Spirit with him in that haystack, guiding him precisely where he needed to go, each step of the way.

There's this sense of adventure and drama to it that I love. Simeon never said, "I'm too old for this." He was up for the challenge. There's an edgy, wildness in the idea, and he wasn't afraid to do something radically out of the ordinary.

I don't know how many times I have missed an opportunity to see God at work because I've been too afraid of looking silly or feeling foolish. Often the lack of recognizing Jesus is simply because I haven't been brave and courageous enough to take a bold first step.

There's that old cliché that says it's hard to steer a ship unless it's moving. Once we're moving, the Holy Spirit can guide us. And when he does, it won't be boring. Following God can be a fantastic adventure when we take bold steps.

Simeon's story culminates with him finding Mary, Joseph and Jesus, and he says some pretty incredible things. Let's look at his quote again.

"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

I would say that Simeon had an ability to

See beyond the baby.

There's no mention in Simeon's words about what a cute little guy Jesus is. He doesn't comment on how healthy he looks, and he doesn't pray that he'll become a strapping young man some day who is a mighty warrior or an excellent carpenter.

That would have been the natural thing. We see a baby and we see a future. We see a baby and we see potential. Limitless possibilities. Big dreams and open doors.

But this baby wasn't about future human potential: He was about what God already accomplished. Jesus being there meant that God had acted. The wheels of salvation were turning. The great moment all creation longed for had arrived. God has split space and time and poured his own self into a body. My father-in-law once described it as God in a brown paper bag. Simeon knew the significance of Jesus was outside the scope of how we normally define people and their accomplishments. God was doing something entirely new here, and Simeon had the insight to look past the bundle of joy to see God's face.

This week, Maggie Palm had her seventh grade class read a story and come up with two types of questions (with the help of their parents): "on the surface questions" and "under the surface questions." The first were the obvious facts and figures from the story, while the second kind were supposed to get at the underlying message. Those questions were much harder. It's always difficult to dig below what we can see.

We miss God's work sometimes because we don't see past the baby. We focus on our own human potential instead of what God has done for us in Christ. We want our own idea of the future, not realizing how small it looks in comparison to God's plan.

At Christmas, I think that one of the hardest things for us to grasp is the connection between the manger and the cross. We get caught up in what we call the holiday spirit. We like the promise it holds out for peace and harmony and family togetherness. And sometimes we miss the fact that the baby in the manger has already demonstrated the kind of sacrifice the adult Jesus will show on the cross.

Simeon could see it. He already knew what lay ahead of Jesus. You can tell it in his comment to Mary: *A sword will pierce your own soul, too.* Mary would suffer the agony of watching her son suffer. The cross loomed large long before there was an angry mob or a trial. God's salvation plan started in eternity past.

And this is where we flip the package back over, so to speak. We started the morning with an event after the manger, and we wrap up with a snapshot from heaven long before Jesus was born as a baby. Paul tells us this:

Philippians 2:5-11

*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:
Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.*

Jesus was involved in the decision to come to earth. Long before Calvary, he was called on to make a huge sacrifice. He left the glory of heaven. He left his closeness with his Father. He left his power and position and rights to be worshipped. The impossible happened when the Almighty Son of God became a vulnerable baby boy. He willingly sacrificed everything for our sakes.

The literal translation is that he emptied himself when he came to earth. That's the language of the cross. He emptied himself when he took on a body. He emptied himself again when he laid his body down. He told his disciples at the Last Supper,

Matthew 26:28

This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Mary and Joseph thought they were just doing the right thing for their Son in bringing him to the Temple. They thought they were just dedicating him to the Lord. What they learned from Simeon was how much bigger God's plans for Jesus were than their own. They no doubt hoped their son might grow to become an influential leader and save the world by conquering. Simeon knew his very existence was proof that God already had conquered.

In a few minutes, we'll once again celebrate the Lord's Supper together. As you prepare to participate, here are some questions to consider:

1. Am I recognizing Jesus? Can I see what God is doing in my life and in other people's lives? It's not a super power that opens our eyes, it's the Holy Spirit. How often am I recognizing who is in front of me?
2. What is preventing me from being open? If I can't seem to see Jesus, If God seems distant or unreal, is there something that could be keeping me from running a good route? Am I positioning myself in the best possible place to hear what God is saying to me?
3. What bold step can I take today? What's the nudge from the Holy Spirit I can act on? We'll never know what amazing things God is wanting to show us until we respond to what he already has shown us. As we step out in faith, he'll guide us on the greatest, biggest adventure of all – helping us to know him well and see his hand everywhere.