

Nunc Dimittis
First UMC of Pocatello
December 26, 2021

Luke 2:29-32

This morning, we're concluding our Advent and Christmas series on the various Christological hymns of the New Testament. Again, these are passages of scripture whose lyric language and poetic construction have led scholars to hypothesize that they were *sung* by the earliest Christians – developed for and used in worship, that is – before they were written down as a part of the Gospels and Epistles that would be included in the canon.

With Mary's song, the Magnificat, we listened as a teenage girl's soul magnified the Lord so intensely that an entire new world order was birthed into being, a world in which the lowly are lifted up and the mighty are cast down.

With the Philippian Hymn, we rejoiced at the fact that this new world order is not just a naïve, impossible fantasy, but a flesh-and-blood journey, a journey first taken by Jesus himself so that, through repentance and faith, it might be taken by us all. Emptied to the point of death; exalted to God's right hand.

With the Colossian Hymn, we marveled over a Christ who takes into his reconciling life *all things*, including our pain and humiliation and suffering, so that, no matter where we are or what we are going through, we might know his peace and his presence.

With the Johannine Hymn, we learned that to sing is to witness, to *point* to the true light, and come to see ourselves clearly in the light coming into the world from beyond us. We are not the light, but when

we sing our praises to the One who is, we loosen our grasp and our fear and are able to receive grace upon grace.

And, finally, those of us who were gathered together two nights ago on Christmas Eve heard that grand composition of the heavenly host, which declared the incarnation of Christ to be the highest glory of heaven and a gift of peace to all the earth.

Now, we reach the last track of this holy mixtape, Simeon's song:

*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.*

Simeon lifted up this song of praise when he encountered the holy family in the Jerusalem temple. Mary and Joseph had come to name their eight-day-old son, to circumcise him, and to dedicate him to the Lord as their firstborn. It had been promised to Simeon by the Holy Spirit that he would see Israel's Messiah before his death.

Somehow, when this aged man catches sight of Mary's baby, he sees in that tiny, wrinkled, utterly dependent creature the Redeemer and Deliverer that his eyes had scanned every crowd for for so long.

In Christian tradition, Simeon's song is referred to as the *Nunc Dimittis*. *Nunc Dimittis* are the first two words of the song in the Latin translation of the Bible, known as the Vulgate. They mean "now let depart." For centuries, the song of Simeon has been prayed by Christians around the world at the end of the day. A nighttime prayer. A prayer of dismissal, of rest, of peace. A confession and declaration of satisfied sight.

In the context of Simeon's life, I find this prayer to be profound. I've often wondered what it must take for an old man to say, "Alright, God, I've seen it. I've seen what you've told me I'd see. My tenure as a watchman is over. I can depart now in peace." It's the *rare* artist, the *rare* seeker, who reaches old age without losing heart or self-destructing or being crushed underfoot. There's a poet I like who, at the end of his long and prolific life wrote:

Most of my life was spent
building a bridge out over the sea
though the sea was too wide.
I'm proud of the bridge...

...

This is my job, to study the universe
from my bridge. ...

At thirty years old, such words pierce through my inner fog like light cast off from a lighthouse.

And yet, the fact that the church has taken this prayer and brought it into the daily, domestic cycle of prayers offers a clue about how the mundane art of daily noticing can lead to spiritual, meaningful insight. In other words, if you pray Simeon's prayer at the conclusion of every day, what must it do to for heart, and how must it train the mind, to choose to say, "My eyes have seen your salvation"?

In a Christmas card I received from one of you, some words from St. John of the Cross had been included: *They can be like a sun, words. They can do for the heart what light can for a field.*

When the heart says, "I am dismissed in peace, because I have seen what I needed to see," think of how those words might become like the sun shining down on a field, illuminating all that was noticed over the course of the day, beckoning out of the ground of experience perceptions

of the holy, providing the raw energy of attention that life needs to spring forth yield its fruit.

If you do that over the course of a season or, like Simeon, over a life, my goodness, *who knows* what kind of fullness might be found. Not necessarily a material fullness, mind you, but a fullness that comes from a fluid, grateful, open connection to the self. What resources are there in the toolbox of Christian spirituality for opening up to that fullness?

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries a man lived named Ignatius of Loyola. He became the founder of the Jesuit Order within the Catholic Church, and he championed many forms of prayer that have enriched the lives of Christians ever since. One of those prayer forms is called the *daily examen*, and I'd like to share it with you because it is very much in harmony with the nighttime prayer of Simeon.

In a traditional *examen* prayer, there are five movements.

The first movement is to thank God for being present in you and with you. This can be done with words, with physical movements like grounding the feet, straightening the spine, and breathing deeply, or through other centering gestures.

The second movement is to name a few things from the day that you are grateful for. They can be big things or small things, things you experience every day or things that were unique to this day.

The third movement is to then review the day from start to finish, not getting mired in any one moment, but flitting over the past twenty-four hours, lightly touching memory, and noticing – this is the crucial thing – *noticing* what points of the day brought on what Ignatius called a spirit of *consolation*, and what things brought on a spirit of *desolation*.

Consolation refers to a greater openness to God and others and the gifts that they bring. Desolation refers to a felt sense of having withdrawn from God or others and getting caught in pride or shame.

Positive experience or pleasant emotions don't always correspond to consolation, and negative experiences or disruptive emotions don't always correspond to desolation. For example, maybe you got angry, but that anger led you to stand up for someone else, and doing that opened you up to greater responsibility and accountability for the wellbeing of your neighbor. That could be consolation. Or maybe you spearheaded a big, busy, fun event for a group, but the experience left you drained and agitated, and you realize that your efforts had been rooted in insecurity. That could be desolation.

The fourth movement, after reviewing the day, is to talk with God about whatever stood out to you as the most important thing. Turn it over in the presence of God and see what there is to learn from it.

The fifth and final movement is to look ahead to tomorrow, notice what things you're looking forward to and what things you're dreading, and then to ask the Holy Spirit for whatever gifts you will need to enter those moments as your fullest, best self.

And that's the *examen*! Acknowledging God's presence, thanking God for some things, reviewing the day, turning over what stands out, and looking to tomorrow.

Ignatius would say that an *examen* prayer shouldn't take more than fifteen minutes. So, you're moving through these sections pretty quickly. He would strongly encourage you to do it every day in the evening. He would also suggest writing down the gratitude and consolation and desolation that you notice; that way you will see if patterns emerge.

Lastly, he would warn that the *examen* itself can get desolate if used it as a prayer for beating yourself up every day. The point is not to extend judgment, but simply to notice, to *see*, to acknowledge the sacredness of your life by offering it attention and reflection. Eventually, God helps us to learn from what we see, and to expect the slow, subtle, immensely important inner movements of the Spirit.

When you leave later this morning, I've made up some cards for you to take home, if you'd like. They have the *examen* steps on one side and Simeon's prayer on the other. This is the last Sunday of the year, the last sermon in a series – maybe you're thinking hard about a New Year's resolution. I invite you into a practice of praying the *examen* in the evenings. Try a week or two. Try a month. I'd love to hear about what you start to notice, where your eyes see the salvation of God.

I'm intrigued by Simeon saying that *his* eyes had seen the salvation that was prepared in the presence of all people. Yet all people didn't – haven't – seen it! Perhaps the eye must be trained, and the heart taught. Perhaps what seems mysterious to me on the front end of things at thirty, that an old man would bow out satisfied and at peace, seems to Simeon quite an ordinary thing, the last, best *Aha!* in a life full of *Aha*'s! I think that's a question worth living. And if you think so too, I offer you this time-tested prayer.

In the name of God our Creator, God our Redeemer, and God our Sustainer. Amen.