

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.

A Sign That Will Be Opposed

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: February 7, 2016 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Luke 2:22–40

In the middle of September in 1983 I had just begun my ministry at what was then North Congregational Church. That day I was driving a few of our parishioners to my ordination service at my home church in South Deerfield, Massachusetts. During the two hour drive Beulah Dolliver, whom a few of you will remember, told me she was worried sick. Just before leaving she had heard that Charlie McKinnon, a young parishioner and her family friend, who was in his 30s, had just had an aneurism, and she didn't know his condition. This was long before email and cell phones, so the news that Charlie had died awaited our return to Cambridge.

I was a newly minted minister, about Charlie's age, and ill-prepared for my first duties to be consoling an inconsolable mother and brother and conducting a funeral service for several hundred family, friends and colleagues. Charlie had worked for the Middlesex Sheriff's Office for 17 years, all his adult life, and his service was the only time I can think of that the old church in Porter Square was completely full. I remember getting up from behind the huge old pulpit, looking out over the congregation and feeling a wave of anxiety.

But as I've found many times since, God's grace is sufficient unto the day. And part of that grace is conveyed through familiar prayers and words from scripture. Among them were words paraphrased from Luke, which I used to commend Charlie into God's hands.

"Holy one, now let your servant go in peace; your word has been fulfilled: my own eyes have seen the salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of every people: a light to reveal you to the nations, and the glory of your people Israel." I have offered these words at countless memorial services over three plus decades since then, final words of sending forth, words of culmination.

These words were first uttered by Simeon in the Bible at the conclusion of his own life. The Lord had promised Simeon that he would not see death until he laid eyes on the Messiah. When Simeon lays eyes on the 40 day-old infant Jesus, he knows he has seen the Messiah and may now die, and he says, Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word." And then Simeon describes what he has seen in beautiful and poetic words: "I 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."

But Simeon's vision is not all peace and light. For he then turns to the young mother Mary and says, "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." Simeon left behind a decidedly double-edged message.

With the benefit of hindsight we know just how accurate was Simeon's many-faceted message. To many Jesus brought healing and compassion. But his message was not good news to the haughty, the mean-spirited and the merciless; and they would, indeed oppose him and ultimately pierce his body and his mother's soul.

What Simeon sees is a decidedly mixed future. He does not see a dream—world; he does see the restoration of paradise. Whatever the Messiah is, whatever the restoration of Israel is that

Simeon sees, it is a story of grappling with the guts and dirt and ambiguities of life. Whatever resolution is to be accomplished it will contend with the mountain of contradictions and absurdities and pain of life. My former colleague and friend and New Testament scholar, Francois Bovon, now deceased, may he rest in peace, perhaps knew more about the Gospel of Luke than anyone in the world. He wrote of this section, “Readers often miss the tension between the hymn and its continuation, which is privately directed to Mary. In the one are peace and light; in the other, sword and suffering.” Bovon sees the old man discovering his own inner contradictions in these two speeches and finally accepting them. Only then can Simeon “depart in peace, only then can Simeon achieve the resolution of opposites.¹ The resolution of opposites that Simeon sees comes in accepting them, not in making them disappear, nor in covering them over with fantasy.

These tensions, these opposites, these ups and downs, these signs of glory and moments of anguish can never be fully separated or done away with, can they? They are part of life to the very end. They can be accepted, and maybe they can be marveled at, too. The days around Charlie MacKinnon’s death and funeral were filled with anger and love, anguish and comfort, tears and laughter, loss and appreciation, soul piercing and soul mending, rage and gladness, doubt and assurance, hideousness and beauty, all these things, like members of the trinity, utterly inseparable. And the only thing or at least the best thing to say at the end of it all is: “Holy one, now let your servant go in peace; your word has been fulfilled: my own eyes have seen the salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of every people: a light to reveal you to the nations, and the glory of your people Israel.”

This letting go is not merely accepting the death of a beloved and sending him forth with a blessing. It is letting go at every level. It’s letting go of every illusion of control, letting go of the way we wish things had been, letting go of ruling the way they will be. The Franciscan Friar Richard Rhor captures it perfectly, I think when he says,

Death is not just our one physical dying, but it is going to the full depth, hitting the bottom, going the distance, beyond where I am in control, and always beyond where I am now. No wonder it is scary. Such death is called "the descent into hell" in the early Apostles' Creed, while in other sources, "the pit," "the dark night," "Sheol," or "Hades." We all die eventually; we have no choice in the matter. But there are degrees of death before the final physical one. If we are honest, we acknowledge that we are dying throughout our life, and this is what we learn if we are attentive: grace is found at the depths and in the death of everything.

“Grace is found at the depths and in the death of everything,” he says. This is not where we expect to find it. A wise therapist I once knew said that we spend the first third of life acquiring things: identity, self-confidence, maybe family and profession, in other words happiness and security. But then we find that life doesn’t deliver happiness and security, or at least not the way we thought it would. Then we spend the last two-thirds of life learning to let things go. I think she was right. I would add that then, when we have learned to let things go, by the grace of God we find what we were looking for in the last place we would have looked.

Rohr says,

After these smaller deaths [found in living and letting go], we know that the only "deadly sin" is to swim on the surface of things, where we never see, find, or desire God or love. This includes even the surface of religion, which might be the worst danger of all. Thus, we must not

¹ Francois Bovon and Helmut Koester, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 104.

*be afraid of falling, failing, going "down."*²

It is so hard to learn, and painful, this reality. It is only by skimming the surface, failing to fully live that we can try to avoid death or hold it arm's length. It is only in embracing the fullness of being, searching and finding God and love and in the process encountering unimaginable death and loss, too, that we actually live. When this excruciating but beautiful reality is reconciled within us, like Simeon, we may say, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace ...; for my eyes have seen your salvation." Amen.

² Richard Rohr's blog, February 1, 2016, <http://bit.ly/20O0jMJ>