

Selected Sermons #6

The Festival Half of the Church Year by E. Schaller

LUKE 2:22-32 Sunday after Christmas

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.”

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 of revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”

Dear friends and fellow-members of the family of saints -

It is not time that marches on, but we. The years do not flash by; it is we who pass on through one year after the other. We are in motion; we are going somewhere and leave our times behind us. The Psalmist says, "The days of our lives (are) soon cut off, and we fly away." (Psalm 90:10) In this hour we are gathered to worship together for the last time in the old year, not because it is slipping away from us, but because we are leaving. We will not meet again this year. Our feet are shod for traveling; our loins are girded for the journey, and we wish only to pause a moment here to tell our Lord that we are going on gladly and for a very good reason.

Human nature does not like to step forward into the unknown. The old year has become a familiar path; the year ahead is unmapped, uncharted, and a silent wasteland. In fear of it men fill it with broad highways, green pastures, and pleasant valleys, but this comes out of their imagination and is as unreal as a child's dream. They do not know – and neither do we know – into what we are marching, but we do know how we are leaving the year whose last remnants we are even now pushing behind us.

We do know that we are going on with fullest confidence. Let us give expression to this our faith by using the words of Simeon:

“Lord now lettest thou thy servant(s) depart in peace.”

May our Gospel serve to show

I. Why we may say this

II. What we mean when we say it

I. Simeon, who leads us in our year’s-end prayer, gave the reason for the expression of such a sentiment and for the right to hold it when he declared, “*For mine eyes have seen thy salvation.*”

Now, it is well known that people and times see what they would like to see, or what they expect to see, and wish to see so eagerly that their imagination plays tricks on them. People dying of thirst in the desert often see great lakes of clear, cold water ahead of them; their feverish mind deceives them. But Simeon’s mind was perfectly clear, and he had come to the Temple that day, as on many other days, to worship as a true Israelite, as one who was indeed hoping and waiting for the Savior of Israel – just as many, many had before him, except that God had especially promised him that he would see the Christ during his lifetime. Yet what he saw that day was not of his own making; it was not by his wisdom that he chose from among the children brought to the Temple on that day this infant of Mary’s or that he swept it from its mother’s arms to cry out his joy as he held it. By special revelation God showed Simeon the child that was his

Savior; by plain signs God pointed out the little Jesus – for God can do this; God does it all the time.

God did it for us, too – **for why is it that we can say with Simeon**, “Our eyes have seen thy salvation”? To be sure, the Savior is here, as he has promised, but the Savior was there in the Temple that day among many other children – yet how many actually saw him? Even as it is today, we have been again to the manger in Bethlehem, and there our eyes saw God’s salvation, a Savior prepared not for his parents only, not for a few but for all nations, to shine to the gentiles, and to bring glory even for Israel.

In spirit we took him into our arms, we knew him, and we claimed him as our Savior because by special revelation God showed him to us. Not only did he set forth the glory of this Child in his holy Word, but by the Holy Ghost he enabled us – though we were blind and ignorant in our sins – to pick him out from among many false saviors as the one Son of God and to believe that there is no other name than his given among men, whereby we must be saved. By the same grace our eyes, as the eyes of Simeon, have seen God’s Salvation in the Child of Bethlehem.

Perhaps you say, “Simeon’s sight must have been a future sight, a foresight. He was still seeing in hope – for of such a tiny child one could not expect much. Even the

Savior must first grow up to be a Savior, to perform his mighty work.” But if we so believe, we are in error – for Simeon (because God revealed it to him) was privileged to see his salvation at work. Not only did he behold the glory of God in Christ, the saving God as he revealed himself to people, for others had seen that. Moses saw it in the burning bush; Elijah in a vision. They knew that God is a glorious, saving God, but they had not seen him save. The eyes of Simeon, however, were even then feasting themselves on the wondrous sight of his salvation being prepared. **He saw his Savior at work.**

“What!” you say, “Such a tiny child, forty days old, at work?” Indeed, yes, for are we not told that Jesus came to the Temple to fulfill the law of God? Though in his human nature still so weak that he must be carried, yet this Child, in whom Simeon recognized the Lord, was already suffering for his people the curse of being put under the law, as it is written, “When the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, made under the law.” (Galatians 4:4) It was, of course, a very small part of the law which he was there to fulfill – the offering of a sacrifice for himself – but that was a beginning of the work for which he had come.

Is not the doom of all people this that they who are subject to God’s law have failed to keep it? Did not the law curse them because they failed? “Cursed is everyone who

does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.” (Galatians 3:10) We have so often said that the great burden of all people, the dread of their lives, and the hopelessness of their future is caused by their sins; and what is sin but the transgression of the Law? No one could keep it perfectly, especially not the moral law. If someone could but take its curse away and satisfy the holiness of God by keeping it perfectly – Ah! That was the task of the Savior, and he was already at it! “One jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law,” he said, “till all is fulfilled.” (Matthew 5:18) And here he was, a tiny infant, already at this terrible task which had broken the back of mankind with its heavy burden.

May we not, then, as we today stand with Simeon in the temple and see this child and say, “*For mine eyes have seen thy salvation*”? Jesus came to bear our sins, but also at the same time to fulfill all righteousness for our sake. “God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him.” (2 Corinthians 5:21) Because Jesus came to the temple, because there he began at the beginning to keep God’s law and continued therein to the very moment of his obedient death, therefore we are able to say today, “*Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.*”

If we are leaving to go somewhere else, we go in this perfect peace of mind – for what is it that makes people

uneasy when they must depart, no matter from where they are to depart or when? Is it not for one of **these reasons** – either that they feel they have left something undone, or because they are afraid of the place to which they are going? Now if we are going on, can we be troubled about an unfinished past? We indeed have one, look back. Is everything finished in the year past? Have you done all you were commanded to do by the Lord or made good all your great faults and mistakes? Can we be troubled about the future? Have we deserved a smooth road and a safe arrival? We answer, *“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace. For mine eyes have seen thy salvation.”* We have seen what Jesus did for us, so we depart in peace.

II. Let us also understand what we mean when we say this. There has been some question about what Simeon meant to say when he spoke about departing in peace. On the one hand, there are those who insist that Simeon was an old, old man – and that is how he is also often pictured. He had been waiting to die but could not die until he had seen the Lord’s Christ. If this is true that he was greatly advanced in age, then we surely have a right to understand his marching song in a certain familiar sense. Then his departure meant for him his death, his leaving the world altogether. For him all uncertainty was over. The question of what he should find on yonder shore of the valley

of death was settled beyond all question. Then both he and his God were through with the past, surely.

Let our words this last day of the old year have the same meaning; we are leaving here today; **we are going on** – and if God has that in store for us, if we are walking out of this year to meet our death and final departure, if that be his will – well and good, so be it. As we leave our last footprints in the sands of the old year, we depart in peace. We do not cling to one another fearfully and look back. Though we are conscious of a life pitted and scarred with countless sins and crimes – each of which must have condemned us – we die in peace, *for we have seen our Salvation.*

But there is another understanding that may be learned from Simeon's words. Some declare that Simeon was not an old man – and indeed we realize that there is nothing whatever in the Gospel to show that he was old; not the slightest indication is given of his age. Perhaps he was in the prime of his life – and his words, when carefully examined, do not seem to indicate that his departure was meant to signify his death. Instead, his words are like those of a slave or servant who has been sent for by his master to undergo an examination, a hearing. He has been called in to give an account of himself. And after such an accounting, the slave now cries joyfully, “Master, you are letting your servant depart in peace; you are sending him away to resume his life of service with your blessing and with a good conscience.”

Might not Simeon very well have meant this, too? After having held his Savior in his arms, Simeon was **ready to go on with life happily**. He knew now that all his accounts with God were in order, that God was his friend, and that he had nothing to fear.

If this is what Simeon meant, **so do we say it today**. On this last day of the old year, God has called us to an accounting as it were. That could be a dreadful moment, for we are short. We are not here in God's courts because we bring something to him from our resources; we are here because here we await God's accounting with us and to receive from him a load of Christmas gifts. Here our Lord Jesus has come to us with much to bestow upon us from heaven's resources. With Simeon we have stood with our arms outstretched and with him **we have received** the gifts of **salvation**. We have seen our Salvation; and thus we neither fear the past nor dread the future.

We hear our heavenly gifts as with happy footsteps we depart to the streets outside the temple. There is much to be done, for much lies before us in the chambers and the byways of mankind. The gift of salvation belongs to them also. Let us carry it with us into the new year; in Jesus' name and to his glory! Amen!

O Lord, we welcome thee #93

To God the anthem raising #112

In his temple now behold him #139