

What Child Is This?

Luke 2:25-40 (Christmas 1)

It's the pondering question asked by the writer of that beloved Christmas carol we just heard and sang, the question which we really have been answered all week long. Looking in the manger, we ponder, "What child is this?" On Christmas Eve God's Word told us this child is the greatest gift God could ever give us. Since God gave up his own Son for us, we have the assurance all of his promises will be kept. On Christmas Day focusing on the familiar story of Jesus' birth, Scripture showed us that in this child God has come to us in flesh and blood to be our Savior, a Savior worth treasuring.

Today, on this Sunday after Christmas, we unwrap God's gift even more with help from these two people whom we meet. Of all the people involved in the Christmas story, these two people are often forgotten, but it's clear that they are two people who were waiting for God's promise of a Savior to be fulfilled. When Mary and Joseph took him to the temple in Jerusalem on the eighth day of his earthly life, Simeon and Anna help us today to answer that pondering question: What child is this?

Let's start with Simeon. He was a faithful believer who lived in Jerusalem. Luke describes him as "righteous and devout." Simeon was righteous not because of his own actions, but because the Holy Spirit had worked faith in his heart to trust God's promise of a Savior. Simeon was waiting for the arrival of that Savior, the comfort of Israel, comfort ultimately prophesied by Isaiah. A few weeks ago we heard the words of that prophecy. **"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and call out to her. Her warfare really is over. Her guilt is fully paid for. Yes, she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins."** (Isaiah 40:1-2) To this faithful believer who eagerly anticipated the promised Savior, God the Holy Spirit somehow made a promise to Simeon. He would not die until he had seen the Messiah, the Christ, the Lord's anointed Savior with his own eyes. It was on that day Simeon would be able to not only see him, but also hold him in his arms the very fulfillment of God's promise.

Again somehow the Holy Spirit moved Simeon to go to the temple. When Simeon arrived at the temple and saw Mary and Joseph, and the child he knew what he had waited so long to see was right there in Mary's arms. Simeon knew that this child was the long expected comfort of Israel. Now as Simeon's eyes saw him, his heart filled with faith and joy moved him to take that little newborn child into his arms. Holding that little baby Jesus in his arms, Simeon spoke words of praise to God, words we often call the Song of Simeon that we still use in our worship today. In Simeon's praise, he declared for us this little child to be the embodiment of God's salvation. **"Lord, you now dismiss your servant in peace, according to your word, because my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared before the face of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."** (vs. 29-32)

We do not know how old Simeon was at this point. We often picture him as a frail old man. Maybe he was, maybe he wasn't. However it makes no difference how old he was. God kept his promise to Simeon. Simeon's eyes had seen and his hands were holding salvation in his arms. Jesus' name means "Savior". Salvation comes in no one else except through this little child. As the embodiment of salvation, Jesus was bringing God's salvation to the world. Simeon was confident that this little Jesus was the one to save him from his sins and this gave him peace. As a result, this man who had so faithfully served God in his life could leave this world in peace. Simeon's confidence is our confidence. The peace that filled his heart fills our hearts as we look at this child.

This child is our salvation. Seeing him with eyes of faith and holding him in our heart, we too can join Simeon in his praise. We are prepared to leave this world in peace no matter when that is because our eyes have seen

through God's Word the comfort of Israel, God's salvation. For that very reason, we often sing these words at the end of a worship service. Gathering together in worship, we are shown Jesus. He is presented to us through his Word and the Holy Spirit strengthens our faith that clings to him. We hear the news of the forgiveness of sins through Jesus. We receive forgiveness through the body and blood of Jesus in his Holy Supper. Preparing to leave God's house as our time of worship together comes to an end, we leave with true peace in our hearts and peace on our lips knowing that through Jesus we have salvation as a gift of God, salvation through the suffering of this child whom Simeon held in his arms that day in the temple.

Following his words of praise, Simeon speaks of that suffering. He turns to Mary speaking prophetically and somewhat cryptically about what this child was appointed to do and what Mary would be feeling. **"Listen carefully, this child is appointed for the falling and rising of many in Israel and for a sign that is spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."** (vs. 34-35) Jesus would ultimately be rejected. He would suffer at the hands of wicked men. The writer of the carol posing that pondering question seems to build off of Simeon's words. "Nails, spear shall pierce him through; the cross he'll bear for me, for you." Today we see him as a little baby, but we understand that little baby will suffer. That is how salvation will be given to us through his suffering and death on a cross so that we would have the peace of sin's forgiveness.

How would this news affect Mary? Jesus was her little child. Yet she also understood that Jesus was her Savior. Happiness filled her heart as she held him in her arms, but her arms couldn't reach out to take hold of him as his hands and feet were pierced. She would see those nails being driven into his hands and feet. She would see the child whom she had once held in her arms and care for, die in agony. She would stand by helplessly below his cross as a witness to his suffering and death. "A sword will pierce your soul too," Simeon said. That sword was not a mortal wound. It was not a wound that somehow also paid for sins. It was a sword that any mother would go through at the sight. It was the sword of grief. Simeon's words were a subtle reminder to Mary that this child, the Savior of the world, would suffer so that salvation may be given through him.

But Simeon wasn't the only one to help answer today's pondering question. After Simeon spoke to Mary, Luke tells us about Anna who must have been standing nearby. Anna was another faithful believer who was waiting for God's promise to be fulfilled, a promise of redemption. Luke didn't give us a lot of extra information about Simeon's background, but for some reason he tells us more information about Anna's background. She was a prophetess, a part of a tribe of Asher. The tribe of Asher was one that only remnants of people remained. A majority of its people had been taken away into exile centuries earlier by the Assyrians never to be heard from again. Anna was among the line of those remnants. We may not know exactly how old Simeon was when he saw Jesus, but Luke tells us that Anna was very old. She was only married for seven years and then was widowed at a young age. Anna, even in her old age, was always worshipping in the temple. She fasted and prayed day and night.

As she had made a habit of doing for so long, Anna was in the temple that day. It seems she was nearby when Simeon took Jesus in his arms. Maybe she even heard Simeon's proclamation about that little baby Jesus. We don't know if Simeon and Anna knew each other, but Anna and Simeon, recognized Jesus as the Savior, the one to redeem people from their sins.

Seeing the child, Anna gave thanks to God and she kept speaking about the child to all who were waiting for that redemption to come. It wasn't just a one time telling. Over and over again, day after day she kept telling people what she had seen and what she knew. Jesus is the child, who like Anna, we give thanks to God for giving to us. He is the child that, as we keep holding him in our hearts knowing he is our salvation and redemption, we can't help but speak of to those in our homes and in the world.

“What child is this, who laid to rest, on Mary’s lap is sleeping? Whom angels greet with anthems sweet while shepherds watch are keeping?” That hymn writer answers that question for us. “This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing.” Yet today hearing the words of Simeon and seeing the actions of Anna, our understanding of this baby Jesus grows even deeper. There is no doubt in our minds as we ask that same pondering question.

This child is the long-expected comfort of God’s people. This child is the embodiment of salvation that we have seen so that we can live in this world with peace filling our hearts and even leave this world in the peace only he can give. This child is the one that as we hold him in our hearts, we rejoice and give thanks to God for what he comes to give us. This child is the one that we keep speaking of so that the same peace and joy which fills our hearts also fills the hearts of those around us. Then they too have the answer to the same pondering question. Amen



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