

Recognize Who Jesus Is

What are you looking forward to in the new year? Maybe you're waiting for the next vacation you're planning. Are you anticipating a move to a new home or renovating your current house? Do you have an upcoming graduation or job change? Maybe as you look ahead at the new year, it's not as much about what you hope will happen, but rather what you hope *won't* happen. As you reflect on this past year, your prayers might be for better health, for more financial stability, for a restored family, that no more loved ones would die. Each of us has had another year filled with blessings and hardships. We can be certain that the next year will bring more of the same, joys and burdens. So, what are you anticipating?

Our gospel lesson tells us about two faithful believers who were waiting. Simeon and Anna were eagerly expecting the consolation of Israel, the redemption of Jerusalem. They had lived long lives, certainly full of highs and lows, and they were longing to see salvation. The Messiah. God's Chosen One who would restore God's people bringing tidings of comfort and joy. As Mary and Joseph brought the child to the temple, Simeon and Anna would see that little baby with their own eyes and rejoice. After their long waiting, they were filled with comfort and joy because the Spirit led them to recognize who Jesus is. Jesus is the complete fulfillment of the Law of the Lord. He is the salvation that God has prepared for all people.

The complete fulfillment of the Law

This day at the temple came 40 days after Jesus' birth. According to the ceremonial law given to Moses recorded in Leviticus, when a mother had a baby boy she needed to wait 40 days before coming to the temple to complete her ceremonial purification with a sacrifice. Mary and Joseph also brought a sacrifice to redeem, or buy back, Jesus as their firstborn. Another Old Testament law said that every firstborn male, human or animal, belonged to the Lord and should be dedicated to Him. But parents could "buy back" their child while the Levites took the place of full-time service to God. As we see Mary and Joseph carrying out the requirements of the Jewish customs, we see Jesus' perfect obedience for us. Even while Jesus was still an infant, humanly dependent on his earthly parents, God made sure that every part of the Law was fulfilled. The Law requires purity before God. The Law requires that a sacrifice be made for our sinful state. The Law requires that we should serve God, and that a ransom must be paid. Recognize how in Jesus all these requirements are met – a perfectly pure

sacrifice who always served God so that his death could pay the ransom for our sins.

Even in Simeon and Anna we see the compulsion of the Law. Simeon is called righteous and devout. He was dedicated to upholding the Law, walking in God's ways. Anna was in the temple as often as she could be, night and day worshipping, fasting, praying. They wanted to serve the Lord. The Law shows that obedience and service is owed to God. But Simeon and Anna did not obey in the hopes that they might be good enough. They were waiting for the coming salvation. They knew that God had promised someone greater who would be the fulfillment of everything the Law foreshadowed. They knew someone was coming that they would see in the light. He would reveal what all these laws were pointing toward.

Not everyone was eagerly looking for this fulfillment like these two faithful believers were. Many Jews at that time observed the laws just as much as Simeon and Anna, but they placed their own restrictions on top of the Law. Their obedience didn't come from hearts of faith. As for the Gentiles, the Greeks and Romans around the Jews, these people found their confidence in man-made things. They gloried in the arts, science, human wisdom, and pagan idols. Simeon points out how many would react to Christ. He told Mary, **“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.”**

When any heart encounters Christ, their innermost thoughts are revealed. Jesus came to say that the Law was fulfilled, that because he was perfectly obedient in our place, salvation has been won, the ransom price has been paid. But to some, this light is a harsh reality that exposes the naturally unwilling heart. By nature, we all are opposed to God. His plan of salvation – through Christ alone, by grace alone, free, as a gift, not by works – that's not what our hearts want to hear. Human pride wants a multi-step plan where we can earn our forgiveness, where God says, “Well done! Look at how good you've been! You deserve my love!” So, when any of us hears that this little child was sent to take our place and to give us free salvation without anything expected of us, we are by nature against Christ.

Maybe you think as a Christian you're no longer against Christ. It would make sense that Jesus isn't a stumbling block to us who believe. When the thoughts of our hearts are revealed, are they really going to say, “Jesus, I oppose you. I don't like what you have to say”? Maybe not in such direct words. But look at what's lurking in your heart. What innermost thoughts would you never want to be revealed? The grudges you hold against family members who've hurt you; the

hatred you have toward those who oppose *you*; the greed and coveting of those who you see as “better off” than you, especially at this time of year; the unavoidable lust at every turn – all these shameful thoughts are exposed by the light of Christ. They are exposed as hostility toward God, as a rejection of his way. They show how often we still desire our own way rather than his. They show that we still fall.

The salvation prepared for all people

Why do you think Simeon and Anna were so eagerly waiting for this consolation, this redemption? They knew that we sinful humans could not keep the Law on our own. They knew what darkness lies in our hearts. They knew how opposed we are to God, as often as we try to serve him. We need the salvation that only God can provide. At the end of this year, we give thanks – just as Simeon and Anna did – for what we know to be true. Yes, every year will bring its challenges due to the burden of sin. But what is even more certain is what God gave through this baby boy of Christmas.

The symbol of Baby New Year might be traced to the Greek god Dionysus, who supposedly was reborn every year and represented fruitfulness and good luck. Today, the tradition of Baby New Year is meant to indicate renewal. In the infant child of Jesus, we see the best renewal. He brings a restoration unlike any New Year’s resolution that fades after a few weeks. His comfort isn’t fleeting so that we need to seek out the newest trend to bring us joy. We celebrate Christmas year after year because God’s love endures forever. In fact, we can have this Christmas joy year-round, because our eyes have seen God’s salvation.

Simeon had been waiting confidently for this blessed privilege. The Holy Spirit told him that he would not see death until his eyes saw the Lord’s Christ, the Chosen One whom God would send to save all nations. What great joy must have filled Simeon’s heart as he was led to hold this baby boy, the Savior of the nations! As Simeon sang his song of praise, his confidence shone brightly. He knew that God would now let him depart this life in peace. Simeon didn’t fear any guilt or death, because in Christ, he was at peace with God. As Simeon held that baby boy, the Spirit led him to recognize here was the way of salvation that God had prepared from eternity for all people.

Yes, Jesus would be the light to the Gentiles. Those who didn’t know the gospel promise would see the light. Their eyes would be opened to God’s grace, his free, undeserved love for all. Jesus would be the glory for God’s people Israel. They had long been promised that the Savior would come from their nation. Even as their earthly kingdom fell to empires around them, God maintained the family line of the Savior through his people and repeated the promise again and again to his chosen nation. And now, his salvation had come at the proper time.

As the angels proclaimed, the birth of this child was good news of great joy for all people. This message *is* challenging to many who hear it. They do stumble and oppose him. But by the grace of the Spirit, Jesus also lifts many up to glory.

There’s a reason that Anna kept telling people about this child. There’s a reason she spread the news of the one who would bring the redemption of Jerusalem, of God’s people. There’s a reason that shepherds kept rejoicing and praising God after seeing a little boy in a manger. There’s a reason we fill our churches every December, why we decorate our homes and our sanctuary, why we sing extra special music to praise God. He has brought us tidings of comfort and joy as we recognize who Jesus is. He is the one who has completely fulfilled the Law of the Lord in our place. There’s no burden on us to keep all God’s commands so that we might be good enough to please God. There’s no fear that we will be punished for all the times that we fail. Jesus is the one who brings salvation to the world, who gives us peace with God. He has paid the full redemption price so that we are freed from slavery. This good news of salvation is for all people, proclaimed to the ends of the earth. That good news has reached us so that we give thanks and praise God like Simeon and Anna.

Do you think that Simeon and Anna stopped going to the temple? Now that they had seen Jesus, they could stop looking forward. Jesus fulfilled the Law completely, so what more did they have to do? Yes, nothing is required of believers for salvation because salvation comes through Jesus alone. But as we recognize who Jesus is, now the thoughts of our hearts are focused on how we can give glory to Christ.

Let me leave you with this thought. At the end of our reading, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph returned to their own town of Nazareth, and Jesus grew up – physically as every person does, but also in wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him. As we enter a new year and recognize who Jesus is, we grow up too. The message of salvation through Christ causes us to be raised up in faith, to grow in wisdom as we live in peace and joy for him. Most importantly, as you return to your own town, the grace of God is upon you. For your eyes have seen his salvation which is prepared for all nations, for you. Your sins are forgiven. Whatever may come in this new year, we can confidently say, “Lord, now you let your servant depart in peace,” as we recognize who Jesus is. Amen.