

Christmas 1-December 31,2023

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

Luke 2:22-40

"Dismissed in Peace" Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.

Christians need to have an ear to know if what you hear are words of the law of Moses or if they are the gospel of Jesus Christ. You need to know if you are still a slave to the law or if you have been adopted as a child of God and have been set free from the law.

Paul wrote his letter to the church in Galatia to inform them that Jesus, although he was sinless before his crucifixion, was still born under the law. Mary gave birth to her son just as any mother would. Mary experienced the pain that became one of the curses for women after Adam and Eve fell to the serpent's temptation to question what the Lord had told them in the garden of Eden. Jesus was born under the law from the beginning and Mary and Joseph continued to keep the law of Moses. Today's reading takes place 8 days after the birth of Jesus when Mary and Joseph did what was required according to the law of Moses. The 12th chapter of Leviticus describes in detail how long a mother must wait before going to the priest and was then given permission to return to society as ceremoniously clean after giving birth. This length of time depended on whether she gave birth to a boy or a girl. The mother could not simply be declared clean after waiting for the prescribed number of days. Luke records only what the poorer people had to pay as an offering to the priest which he would then take into the temple and sacrifice as an atonement to be made clean. Young Mary and Joseph would have fallen into this lower tax bracket of either offering two turtledoves or two pigeons. In Leviticus, it says that the wealthier people would have to offer a lamb.

Regardless of your level of wealth, according to the law of Moses, you had to make some kind of offering, even if you could only afford a couple pigeons, to receive the permission that you could be dismissed from the temple and return to your people and families declared clean and in peace.

Receiving permission to depart in peace has a Latin name. It is called the Nunc Dimittis. Simeon we are told was a man who was righteous and devout. Simeon was a good person. There is no mention of him having a wife who had just given birth and needed to make some restitution so that they could depart from the temple in peace. Simeon was not waiting to be dismissed according to the law of Moses. Simeon had been waiting to see the Messiah and then he could be dismissed from this world in peace.

It is not uncommon for families to speculate when their loved ones might take their last breath. Some people feel that the ones who will die wait until certain people can get to see them before they can be dismissed in peace. Other people who are dying seem to wait until everyone has left their room before they are dismissed from the burdens of this world. It is not uncommon for family members to give permission to their loved ones so that they can depart from this world. We can be misled to assume that Simeon is a very old man who now can die soon after holding Jesus in his arms. Luke was very wise in describing Anna's age. Luke describes Anna as a person of a great age. It is not wise to tell a woman in her 80's that she is old. A colleague of mine did that once and it did not go well for him. But Luke never mentions anything about Simeon's age. He simply says that he had been waiting to see the Messiah and now that he has seen the salvation of the world, he can be dismissed in peace.

After Simeon literally beheld Jesus, he was set free from the burdens of this world. Unlike Mary and Joseph, who had to scrape their change together to make an offering as cheap as it was, Simeon after seeing the good news of the birth of Jesus, no longer cares about the law of Moses. Simeon will depart in complete peace without a worry if he had done enough or given enough as the Lord's servant. We also don't know if Simeon lived only to see the next day or week or lived for another 50 years before he died. The length of his days no longer mattered to him whether short or long if he knew that Jesus had arrived to grant him peace.

Simeon is described as a good person, but it was not because of his goodness that he was at peace even when facing his eventual death. It also was not Simeon's idea to see Jesus. Jesus was revealed to him by the Holy Spirit. It was the Holy Spirit that was resting on him day and night that led him to the temple to see the salvation that Jesus would give him.

If you want to believe women shouldn't be preachers, we shouldn't have included this story about the prophet Anna. We know for sure that she wasn't a young female preacher. Luke tells us that she had been married and was a widow at the age of 84. After becoming a widow, she was not at peace. I have known some women who after losing their spouse, never are at peace until they die themselves. But this was not the case with Anna. Anna did not sit at home and feel sorry for herself and wonder what to do next. Instead, Anna worshiped in the temple day and night. It was there that, not only was Anna able to be dismissed from the temple in peace after seeing the Lord, but she couldn't wait to be dismissed from the temple to proclaim how peaceful she now was to others who were looking for some peace that was lacking in their lives.

Whatever happened to the Nunc Dimittis, these words that Simeon spoke in the temple? We still do a very abbreviated version of this permission to leave the church when our services end. I say to you, "Go in peace and serve your neighbor." and you respond by saying, "Yes, we will. Thanks be to God."

There is another place in worship where the Nunc Dimittis has been used in the past, when you ask for permission to be dismissed in peace and it is granted after seeing the salvation of the Lord. After you have been declared forgiven, or clean after seeing and tasting the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, most often we sing what we call the Post Communion Canticle which begins with the following words, "Thank the Lord and sing his praise, tell everyone what he has done." That does sound just like what Anna did after seeing the Messiah who was brought to the temple. If you turn to page 93 in the front of the green hymnal, there is another option of a Post Communion Canticle which are the words that Simeon said after he held Jesus in his arms. Either way, whether you are dismissed in peace like Simeon or sing the praise of Anna, after you have been made clean through the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, you are at peace when you leave this place.

You did not come to this place on your own today. As we declare in the meaning of the 3rd Article of the Apostles' Creed, we believe we gather in church just as Simeon and Anna did only because the Holy Spirit has led you here. And while you might first enter this place of worship believing that you must make an offering for you to find peace, true peace will never happen through your offerings. Because of your sin, you owe your entire life to the Lord, and this is a debt that you cannot pay. Any effort on your part to make a small down payment on this great debt would not please the Lord but would insult him.

Jesus did not come down from heaven to earth to blend his words of forgiveness with Moses words of law. His gospel is separate from the law according to Moses. The good news of Jesus Christ is unconditionally for you, today. You have been made clean simply by his words regardless of your age or when you will die. You will be at peace after you see Jesus in his supper today. You will want to thank and praise him and be dismissed from this place and tell the world what Jesus has done for you. Amen