

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Baby Names: And He Was Called Jesus”

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January 3, 2021

After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

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.”

Luke 2:21-35

This is our last week in this Advent and Christmas series we’ve called “Baby Names.” You might first be thinking, “We’re past Christmas. Why are we still with this Christmas stuff?” Good question. Two reasons. First, historically and liturgically, Christmas is celebrated for twelve more days after the 25th of December. If you didn’t know, that’s where the “Twelve Days of Christmas” song comes from. Second, Christ’s coming to the world, and Christ’s coming anew, for that matter, isn’t just something we stop thinking about once the Merry Christmases start to wane. It’s a good time to ask, “Christ is here. Now what?”

So in the spirit of “Baby Names,” we come to a passage shortly after Jesus was born, in which he is actually named Jesus, and then his encounter with a devout man named Simeon.

[Read Luke 2:21-35] Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

I wonder what that morning must have been like for Simeon. I imagine he woke up and for a second it seemed like every other morning, but then something seemed different. Something told him he needed to go to the temple that day.

I wonder what a standard day for Simeon might have been like. Not just a “day in the life” for people in general back then, but specifically for him. If you’ve never heard of Simeon, it’s perfectly understandable. This passage is actually the only place in the whole Bible he’s mentioned—never shows up again. Really doesn’t tell us all that much about him, just that he’s in Jerusalem, that he’s righteous and devout, and that the Holy Spirit rested on him.

But the real kicker is that at some point in his life, as v. 26 tells us, “It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.” Now that’s got to be quite the thing hanging over you. Sure it’s a good thing, to know you would see the Lord’s anointed, the one who would deliver God’s people. That was a big hope for Simeon: to see the people of God restored and consoled. So it was a good thing for him in one sense, to have that assurance. But in another sense, got to be quite the thing hanging over you. You know that at some point you would see the Christ, the one you had been waiting for, but you have no idea when it would happen. What would that do to you?

It’s like this. Ten years ago there was a sitcom running called *How I Met Your Mother*. In one running gag, two friends Marshall and Barney get into an argument, so to settle it they make what’s known as a “slap bet.” And it’s exactly how it sounds. The winner of the bet gets to slap the loser as hard as he can. You know, like mature people do. One thing leads to another, and because of a few other twists, Marshall ends up with five slaps, slaps that he can hit Barney with, anytime, anywhere, from now to eternity. So for Barney, any moment, wherever he is, could be a moment he gets slapped. It goes about how you’d expect. There are some stretches of paranoia. Then there are long stretches when he doesn’t really think about it at all. Then every so often, sometimes expected, sometimes completely unexpected, Marshall would wind up and slap his friend.

That’s almost what I imagine Simeon’s day-to-day was like, just instead of being afraid of getting slapped, some days he might wake up wondering, “Is today the day? Is today when I meet the Messiah?” But like Barney, maybe there are some stretches when he’s really paying attention to it, and then maybe there are other stretches when it kind of slips into the background. Luke doesn’t tell how old Simeon is, or just how long ago it had been since the Holy Spirit had told him he’d see the Messiah, but honestly the picture I have in my head is that Simeon has been waiting a long, long time.

So maybe most days he would wake up and go about his life—it’d be a stretch for me to think that he was constantly on pins and needles for years on end. Some days he’d wake up thinking about it. Other days, maybe not as much. But then something about this day felt different. Something told him he needed to go to the temple that day.

At some point while he’s there that day, in walk a young couple with a baby boy just over a month old. They were presenting him to the Lord in the temple and offering a sacrifice. It was a

common occurrence, one no doubt Simeon had seen time and time again, but there was something about this child.

Luke doesn't tell us how or when Simeon realized who the child was, that this child was the Messiah, the Christ, the one he had been waiting for all that time. Luke just tells us he takes the child up in his arms and says these beautiful, powerful words: "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."

Imagine the relief, the exhale, the fulfilment of what he had been promised all that time ago to see the Messiah before his death, but never knowing when that day would come. He's saying he goes to his rest now, now that he has been dismissed in peace, now that he has seen with his own eyes the salvation of the Lord—all the more fitting that he learns that this child's name was Jesus, meaning "The Lord saves."

We've been talking a lot about names over the past six weeks, names for Jesus, names prophesied in Isaiah 9, "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace," then Mark taught us last week from Luke 1 and Christ as "Son of God." Now as Christians we hear each one of those names, those titles, and we say, they're talking about Jesus, they're pointing to Jesus. But here we have his actual name officially being given to him, given eight days after his birth at his circumcision—that's the way they did it then. It was the same name that the angel had told to Mary months earlier, and now it was reality, and that name was Jesus, the Lord saves.

So with Simeon we see the first reaction that Luke gives us to the child after he is officially named Jesus. And I don't think it's an accident that Simeon responds this way. Because salvation may not always come exactly as we would expect.

At first, it's those beautiful words. "Master now you are dismissing your servant in peace." And "My eyes have seen your salvation," and "a light for revelation to the Gentiles." Beautiful, powerful words declaring the peace and rest he finally feels knowing that the salvation of the Lord has come.

Jesus's parents are amazed too by all that Simeon said. Imagine that. They know who Jesus is, and they're amazed by it. But maybe it just hadn't registered for them until they heard someone else say it. This is the salvation of the Lord, and they were amazed, because it is amazing: that this child is God's Son, God's anointed, the Messiah, the Savior. That's amazing stuff. It'd give me peace to hear it. It'd give me rest and assurance.

But all the more surprising then when Simeon keeps talking. He 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." Gotta say, not exactly uplifting. Why does he say that? He's saying this Jesus would bring about hardship for some, rising and falling for many, opposition to himself, and maybe the most unsettling, that "a sword [would] pierce [Jesus's mother's] own soul too." Not exactly keeping

with the threads of peace and rest as he was saying a second ago. Not exactly what you would expect for words of salvation.

But maybe that's part of the point: Jesus, the Lord saves, but never exactly how we would expect it, and never only on our terms.

The past few weeks there's been a series of commercials up from Match.com, and they're pretty much making fun of how hard a year 2020 has been. The gist of it is this: Satan, complete with red skin and big horns, is looking for love, and he's using Match.com, but hasn't had much luck. But then he gets a match with, you guessed it, the year 2020. And they really hit it off. Match made in heaven—or match made in hell I guess. For dates, they watch movies together in empty theaters, do yoga together in empty studios, smile for selfies in front of burning dumpsters. When asked about why 2020 is so special for Satan, he says, “I started by using the match custom filter, filtered out joy, happiness, toilet paper, and reason. Most years I've dated are a little, I don't know, straightforward. I mean, a little misery, but nothing truly soul-crushing about them.”

You can guess the point. 2020 has only been good for Satan, says Match.com, but make 2021 *your* year. It's drawing on what I sense is a lot of optimism for the coming year. That happens every year when you turn the calendar over, but even more so this year it seems. With 2020 being so draining for so many, 2021's got to be a step up. Folks are waiting for a new start; folks are looking for things to get better. So there's a lot of redemption being woven into 2021: when we're free of the pandemic, when we're able to do things the way we used to do them, when everything that was hanging over us this year will be gone, when all the mess of last year will be behind us. And no doubt, some of that will be true.

But I'm also pretty sure that 2021 won't just be a year-long catharsis and bliss. Hardship remains from last year, not least of all surging cases and strained healthcare systems, but also polarization and propaganda, the scars of jobs lost, businesses closed, school days adapted or lost altogether, not to mention the emotional toll this has taken upon families and friends.

The promise of a new year never pans out exactly as expected. And within that I hear echoes of what Simeon seems to be saying to us: that he has found peace and rest in seeing the Messiah at last, in seeing the salvation of the Lord in the flesh right in front of him, but then in his words to Mary a moment later, that salvation does not always come easy and never exactly as expected.

So friends, maybe you woke up this morning and things felt just the same. Maybe you woke up this morning and something felt different. Whichever way your morning was, and whichever way you find yourself looking ahead into 2021, and whichever way the name of Jesus, the Lord saves, factors into that expectation for you, may you be steeled by the good news that no matter the falling or the rising, no matter the opposition, no matter what inner thoughts may be revealed, no matter what swords may pierce our own souls, there is hope, and there is salvation, and his name is Jesus.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.