

29 December 2002
Christmas 1

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Waiting”

Text: Luke 2:25-40

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

“Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel . . .”

Waiting. That’s something we usually don’t consider such a good thing. Waiting in lines, waiting in doctor’s offices, waiting for installers or repairmen to show up, waiting for the bus or the metro, waiting and waiting and waiting. We don’t like it. We’re an impatient people. It’s a waste of time!

Advent forced us to wait – to wait for Christmas and not celebrate too soon. The world doesn’t like waiting and so celebrates Christmas for at least a month or so. But in the Church we waited. Four weeks, looking forward, looking back, anticipating, waiting to celebrate. . . . For waiting can be good, too. It can be a time of preparation and reflection, if we let it. And so people with sicknesses or diseases who are waiting to die often discover how valuable the gifts of life, and family, and faith are. Waiting gives us opportunities for conversation and meditation that we might not otherwise have in our busy and hectic lives.

But then when the waiting is over, it is time to rejoice! When we finally reach the front of the line, when our name is called, when we finally hear that knock on the door! And so too our Christmas waiting is over, and so we have rejoiced with the ripping open of Christmas presents, the breaking forth in Christmas hymn and carols, the greeting of Merry Christmas to all the people we meet.

And so Simeon is the perfect man to hear about at Christmas, for he is truly an Advent man. He is the waiting man. He was *waiting* – waiting for the consolation of Israel. . . . And that’s all we know about him! That he was waiting. We don’t know who his father and mother were, or what tribe of Israel he was from, or where he grew up. We don’t know his occupation, whether he was married or not, or even how old he was! All we know is that he was waiting . . . waiting for ***“the consolation of Israel,”*** for ***“it has been***

revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ."

And so what joy must have filled his soul when his waiting was finally over! When after having seen probably hundreds or thousands of babies brought to the Temple for dedication to God, ***"according to the custom of the Law,"*** he finally receives his Christmas present! What joy as he takes this 40 day old baby in his arms, knowing that he has now seen ***"the consolation of Israel."*** This baby is the One who would give comfort and hope. The One who would rescue us from our sin. The One who is the long-awaited Redeemer, promised by God from the beginning, and spoken of by many prophets. The wait for Simeon is finally over, and he is ready to ***"depart in peace."*** He is now ready to die.

But Simeon does one other thing also – he unwraps his present. He unwraps the meaning of this child and what this child will do and the effect He will have in this world. This child is ***"[God's] salvation . . . a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to [His] people Israel."*** And yet also, because of this, ***"this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through [Mary's] own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts will be revealed."*** . . . And that seems a little like finding coal in your stocking, doesn't it? Simeon finally gets his present, after so much waiting, and he is filled with joy, and what do we hear when this child is unwrapped? Not only of good things, like salvation and light and revelation and glory . . . but also of opposition, and sadness, and the revealing of thoughts and secrets in our hearts.

What does all of this mean, Simeon? What does it all mean? But that's all Simeon says to us, and he disappears from the scene as quickly and mysteriously as he came. And we do not hear from him again.

But we know what Simeon's words mean, because we know what would eventually happen to this child. He is the light of God, but His light hurts our eyes which are used to the darkness of sin. He is the glory of God, but glory that was revealed in serving, in lowliness, and in humility, and so was nailed to a cross. He is the revealer of God and of our sin, and so was opposed because we do not like our sin exposed or talked about or pointed out to us. He is our salvation, but is rejected by many because we would rather save ourselves. . . . And so Simeon's words came true. Because of Jesus, many in Israel did rise, and many did fall. Mary's soul was pierced as she had to watch her Son – her Son who was conceived miraculously in her – as she had to watch this Son crucified, and her tears mixed with His blood flowing into the ground. And the thoughts of many hearts are revealed by Him, for what we confess of Him publicly with our mouths is what lives

privately in our hearts.

And so what do you confess? Of Him, and of yourself? We confess that we are sinful and unclean. We confess that we deserve punishment for our sins. We confess that we need consolation – forgiveness, and a rescuer. But we also confess that we are modern-day Simeons, who are not only waiting for our consolation, forgiveness, and rescue, but that we have, in fact, already received it! Our wait, like Simeon’s, is over! For to you and I, the same promise made to Simeon has been made to us. To you and I who are gathered here by faith, we have been promised that we “***will not see death until we see the Lord’s Christ.***” And we confess that we do see Him, and have seen Him, and have touched Him, as He comes to us as humbly and lowly as He came to Simeon. For what did Simeon see? Simeon saw a baby, that looked just like any other baby, and yet by faith He knew that this was no ordinary baby, but His Saviour, the Redeemer of the world. And we too – what do we see? We today see words on a page, water in a bowl, and bread and wine, that looks just like any other words and water and bread and wine. And yet by faith we know that these are not ordinary at all. But that here, in these humble and lowly means, we hear, and see and touch our Saviour, our rescuer, the Redeemer of the world. He comes to us still today just as He came to Simeon, and so our waiting is also over.

For what are we waiting for? Acceptance by God? He has accepted us and made us His children in Holy Baptism. *What are we waiting for?* The voice of God to speak to us? He has spoken to us and given us His Word. *What are we waiting for?* Forgiveness? He has forgiven us, freely and fully, of all our sins. *What are we waiting for?* Eternal life? He has already given that gift to us, and we have already begun living that new life. *What are we waiting for?* To see and touch God in the flesh? We already have, and will again today, as we eat His body and drink His blood in Holy Communion. What are we waiting for that God has not already given us? The answer: nothing. God our Father has already given us everything. Our Advent waiting is over, our Christmas present, our Saviour, has come! And all there’s left to do is rejoice!

And so since we are modern-day Simeons, we sing Simeon’s song! Only we don’t call it Simeon’s song, we call it the *Nunc Dimittis*, and we sing it after having received all of our Lord’s gifts, right after Holy Communion. And like Simeon, in this song we are rejoicing in our Saviour, in our Lord’s goodness and graciousness, in His love and forgiveness. . . .

But do you remember what I said earlier, when we considered Simeon’s words? That when Simeon “unwrapped” this “Christmas present” and rejoiced, he spoke not only of good things, but there also seemed to be coal in his stocking! For he also spoke of

opposition and sadness. . . . And isn't that also the reaction of many to the Church still today? That all we talk about in the Church is sin and death and gloomy things – like finding coal in your stocking? But that's exactly what we are celebrating and rejoicing in at Christmas. That that coal in our stocking, that is usually fuel for the fire? Its not lit! Its not burning! For the fire of God's wrath against our sin and guilt is not given to us, but has been taken by Jesus on the cross. And the blackness of our sin is no longer on us, for we have been washed clean and made white through the blood of Jesus, shed on the cross. . . . And knowing the gloominess of our condition, of our sin, and the secrets of our hearts of which we are so ashamed does not put a damper on our celebration, but in fact, increases our joy! For we know that no matter how black our sin, how deep our guilt, how stubborn our wills – that our Christmas gift has taken it all away. That this child has caused our "***falling and rising***" – as in Holy Baptism we have died and been raised with our Saviour, and as we fall on our knees before Him in repentance, and He raises us with Himself in forgiveness and new life!

And so we, like Simeon, rejoice! For our waiting is over! And in this we rejoice not only at Christmas, but every day. For every day we receive this gift of God anew. Every day we receive His forgiveness. Every day He sends His angels to guard and protect us. Every day He sustains us in the faith. Every day . . . until we are taken from this day to the day which will have no end, and begin living our eternal life in all its fullness and joy. . . . And for that we still are waiting, like Simeon. Waiting now in joy, ready to go at any time. "***Lord, let your servants depart in peace.***" We are ready. For our Saviour has come to us at Christmas, has come to us in His Word and Sacraments, and is coming for us again. We have seen Him, heard Him, tasted Him, and touched Him. He has given us all that we have and all that we need – all His gifts. And so *what are we waiting for?* Only His call. His call to come home and live with Him forever.

Until that day, we live like Simeon. Coming to our Lord's House, and unwrapping His gift for all to see and hear, that they too might have our joy, and wait with us.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds steadfast in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen