31 December 2023 St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
The First Sunday after Christmas Vienna, VA

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"The Inflating Joy of Jesus"
Text: Luke 2:22-40

After a very long year and a very busy Christmas season, a gently reworked encore presentation of a sermon from yesteryear, which will be new for all but a handful of folks in my congregation.

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

If your neighborhood is like mine, or like the one we drive through coming to church, there have been lots of Christmas decorations lighting up the night these past few weeks.

And if your neighborhood is like mine, then among those decorations have been some rather large inflatable figures, of all kinds of people and animals and snowmen, anchored on lawns in front of houses.

And if your neighborhood is like mine, those figures now lie dead on the ground, all the air, all the spirit, taken out of them. Now they are lifeless lumps of deflated plastic testifying that Christmas is over. Ho ho ho.

And if you're like *me* - not like my neighborhood, but like *me* - you sometimes feel that way. Deflated. All the wind, all the spirit, sucked out of you.

But if you had been in Jerusalem, right after that first Christmas, and especially that day 40 days after Christmas when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the Temple, you would have seen the exact opposite happening! On that day, not a great *deflating*, but a great *inflating* took place! To a man named Simeon.

We're not told much about him. He probably went unnoticed by most people in their day-to-day lives. Another man just blending in with the crowd. We *are* told that ***he was a man of faith, righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel.*** And then this also: ***the Holy Spirit was with him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.*** And this day, he had been led into the Temple . . . and perhaps he was praying . . .

Now the Temple was a busy place, with lots of hustle and bustle. And so a man and a woman and a newborn child, entering the Temple, wouldn't have attracted much attention. They were, after all, doing what *all* devout, law-keeping, parents did - bringing

the mother 40 days after her delivery to the Temple for her purification (Leviticus 12), and bringing their first born son to be presented to the Lord (Exodus 13). And so it was a day just like any other day . . . a man praying . . . a father, mother, and child come to offer a sacrifice . . . just like any other day . . . *until* the paths of these two crossed . . .

And then suddenly this man was *inflated* with Christmas joy! Filled with the Holy Spirit, Simeon comes alive and announces to all that God has kept His Word of promise and sent a Saviour. And Mary and Joseph, who had seen a lifetime of wonders the past year, now see another, as Simeon takes Jesus up in his arms and rejoices. And the words that seem to dance off his lips reveal the dancing joy of his heart that cannot be contained. This was no rehearsed speech, but the Word of God given Simeon to speak, from the joy that filled his heart, the joy that comes with receiving the greatest gift of all.

And I wonder if Mary smiled just a bit, because she knew this joy. It was the same joy that filled her own heart, which had overflowed into dancing words of her own, when she herself had said: ***"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour"*** (Luke 1:46-47). God had looked on the humble estate of another, just as He had with her. This child born to bring joy to so many . . .

And so now Simeon needs nothing more. His eyes have been opened to see this child who would soon open the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf. And so now he can ***depart*** not just the Temple, but this world, ***in peace***, because the Word and promise of God has been fulfilled. But not just the Word and promise of God *to Simeon*, but His Word and promise to us all, to send a Saviour. Simeon can depart this world in peace, and so can we, **because this child would <u>not</u>** - because this child would be ***a light for the Gentiles*** and ***the glory of Israel*** from a throne not of gold but of wood, where He would hang in the midst of - not joy, but hate and mocking and death; where He would make peace between God and man. Peace in the forgiveness of our sins.

And of this work of Jesus Simeon speaks as well, for He says that this child will ***cause the rising and falling of many***; that ***He will be opposed***; that He will cause ***Mary's own heart and soul to be pierced*** in two; that He will ***reveal the thoughts and desires*** of *our* hearts. *But all this* <u>is the reason</u> *for our Christmas joy. This is not bad news* (though it may sound like it), *but good news!*

For first, ***the falling and rising*** of which Simeon speaks is the falling of our old sinful man and for the rising of a new man, a death and resurrection to a new life which takes place for us in Holy Baptism. And then second, that ***Jesus was opposed***, so much that He was crucified in our place, is so we may be *welcomed* by our Father in heaven. Third, ***Mary's heart and soul*** which will be mightily ***pierced*** as she witnessed her son's brutal death will be healed with the joy of the resurrection. And then fourth, the ***revealing of the thoughts and desires*** of our hearts is the work of the Law, that thus revealed, they may be confessed and removed, forgiven by the blood of this child, shed for us.

And it would not take long for all these things to begin. For when King Herod found out about this child, he did not rejoice, but set in motion a bloody slaughter, killing all the boys two years old and under in Bethlehem and the surrounding region, that in this sweeping holocaust he might kill off this rival baby king (Matt 2:13-18). That was the slaughter of the Holy Innocents, which is commemorated on the fourth day of Christmas - December 28th - every year. But Herod was not successful, because it was not yet time for this child to die. For, in fact, no one could take His life from Him - He came to lay it down of His own accord (John 10:18); to give His life for the life of the world. To give His life for you and me. That was <u>His</u> joy, and what brought Him and His inflating joy, here on Christmas.

And then, having thus spoken, Simeon disappears from the scene. We never hear <u>*of*</u> him or <u>*from*</u> him again. Yet one thing, I think, we can be sure of - his Christmas joy was never deflated! Whenever he did depart (whether it was soon after this or a while after this), it was in the peace of which he spoke - the peace of the Spirit, the peace of forgiveness, the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding (Philippians 4:7).

But that's not the end of this story. Luke then goes on to tell us also of **Anna**, a widow, a prophetess who lived day and night in the Temple, but about whom we also know very little else. But her witness is important as well, as the second witness required by the Law (Deuteronomy 19:15) and being from the tribe of Asher, a representative from the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. For Jesus had come for all of Israel - indeed, for all the world. And perhaps her witness foreshadows what would happen some 33 years later, when a few other women would also testify of Jesus - *the resurrected Jesus*, the life-inflating, joy-giving resurrection of Jesus, after the joy of seeing the empty tomb.

And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.

And then *they went home*, Luke says. Just like that. It's over as quickly as it began. Seems very anti-climactic, doesn't it? After such joy in the Temple! Like all those figures now lying dead on the ground around my neighborhood, all the air, all the spirit, taken out of them. But there is even joy here, too, in this little fact, as Jesus lives as we live, though without sin. In His life He fulfills every jot and tittle of the Law that we have broken, in our place. And He experiences all that we do, and so knows what you are going through in your life. All the trials and troubles and deflating. ***And the favor of God was upon Him***, that it may now be upon us. All that He did was to inflate us with the joy of the Spirit. To give life to us who were dead in our sins. To raise us up to a new life that will never end . . . or be deflated.

And so Simeon's Christmas joy is our joy as well. Which is why we sing Simeon's song

not just at Christmas, but *each time* we, too, take up the body and blood of this child - not in our arms, but in our mouths, as we eat His body and drink His blood, *given and shed for us for the forgiveness of our sins.* Given and shed for us for our consolation. For us who need consolation.

I mentioned earlier that sometime I feel like those deflated decorations. And I'm sure you do, too. And I'm sure Simeon did, maybe even that day in the Temple! Maybe that's why he was there, maybe why he was praying. And waiting for the consolation of Israel, he received it. Consolation that is for us, too. Consolation from the sin and hurt in this world that is inflicted upon us; from the guilt of the sin and hurt that we inflict upon others. Consolation from the despair and doubt we feel in our hearts. Consolation from the disappointments and pains of life. Consolation from the fear and worry that sometimes consumes us. In Him, in the midst of all this, like Simeon, we too can have peace and joy. The peace and joy of sins forgiven. The peace and joy of our enemies - satan and death - defeated. The peace and joy of the Spirit, who has inflated us with life both now and forever. The peace and joy which surpass all understanding.

So yes, Simeon's Christmas joy is our joy as well. And so like Simeon, we are ready to ***depart in peace***. Whenever and however. For we too have been given the greatest gift of all - ***for to us a child is born, to us a Son is given*** (Isaiah 9:6). Today we heard that God kept His Word to Simeon, so that we know He keeps Word to us.

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

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