

# Shepherd of the Mountains

Lutheran Church (LC-MS)

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The First Sunday after Christmas

December 31, 2017

“A Thing *or Two*”  
(or, “Here’s the Thing”)

Text: Luke 2:25-32

*“Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And 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 he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,*

*“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”*

*“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the (newborn) Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:2).*

Here’s the thing: none of the four Gospel writers tell us anything about Jesus’ *childhood* except *Luke*. And *Luke*, frankly, only tells us a thing or two. Okay, *two*, to be exact.

The *first* thing - well, *you* know the first. It’s your favorite Christmas story. It starts out like this - - what’s

that? you say you’ve got a *lot* of favorite Christmas stories? Well, let’s get some of those others out of the way *first* - like the one that starts out like this:

“Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that” (*A Christmas Carol*, by Charles Dickens).

Or, how about this one:

“One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. She had put it aside, one cent and then another and then another, in her careful buying of meat and other food” (*The Gift of the Magi*, O. Henry).

Or *this* one:

“‘Twas the night before Christmas, when all thro’ the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse . . .” (*Twas The Night Before Christmas*, by either Clement Clarke Moore or Henry Livingston, Jr.).

Or even *this* one:

“In the days when Augustus Caesar was master of many kings and Herod reigned in Jerusalem, there lived in the city of Ecbatana, among the mountains of Persia, a certain man named Artaban” (*The Other Wise Man*, by Henry Van Dyke).

So then, now to *everyone*’s favorite:

*“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 And everyone went to their own town to register.*

*4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.*

And that *second* thing - well that's the story we have for our Gospel this morning - this *Christmas* morning. The one about *Simeon*. Only here's the thing: we don't know much about Simeon. And what we *do* know, well, I'm sorry to say, we really *don't* know.

For instance, if you have it in your mind that Simeon is some really old guy, that's not something we know. That's only something we *think* we know. It's only something we made up.

And if you picture Simeon as ready to lie down and die, well, *that's* not something we know *either*. It, too, is only something we *think* we know, something we made up.

The truth is, we really only know a thing *or two* about Simeon. Okay, make that *three*!

First, we know Simeon was "*a man*." He wasn't a prophet or a seer or a religious leader, but rather just an ordinary man. There was nothing great or wonderful about him - *although* he is described as being a man of God, for Luke calls him "*righteous and devout*."

And, second, and more specifically, we know that Simeon was a man who was full of the Holy Spirit. "*The Holy Spirit was upon him*," [and it] *had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit*" - "*that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ*," the "*consolation of Israel*."

And we also know that his timing was impeccable. Okay, so in all fairness, the credit for *that* likely should go to the Holy Spirit, who by some means we'll never know managed to push him in the direction of the Temple at just the right time, but the fact is, "*he came . . . into the temple*" at the very moment "*when the parents brought in the child Jesus*."

And that's when Simeon made his famous move! And that's when he made his equally-famous declaration:

22 *And 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* 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") 24 and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of turtle doves, or two young pigeons."

Brand new mother Mary was unclean - according to Jewish law. So, thirty-three days after they had been up to the temple to have their newborn son circumcised, Mary and Joseph returned there with the baby. *She* needed to be purified, and so *they* came to take care of it. The Law of Moses (Lev. 12:1) was clear:

"The Lord said to Moses, 2 'Say to the Israelites: "A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days, just as she is unclean during her monthly period. 3 On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised. 4 Then the woman must wait thirty-three days to be purified from her bleeding. She must not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary until the days of her purification are over. . . . 6 'When the days of her purification for a son or daughter are over, she is to bring to the priest at the entrance to the tent of meeting a year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a dove for a sin offering. . . . But if she cannot afford a lamb, she is to bring two doves or two young pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. In this way the priest will make atonement for her, and she will be clean.'"

Mary and Joseph couldn't afford the lamb, Luke lets us know by telling us that the newlyweds brought "*a pair of turtle doves, or two young pigeons*." That meant no lamb was necessary. Only here's the thing: in a larger sense - from a *theological* standpoint - no lamb was necessary because - already here at only forty days old - Jesus *was* the Lamb - the sacrificial lamb, whom, 33 years later - John the Baptist would declare "*the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*" (1:29).

Oh, and as for the “*presenting*” the little guy “*to the Lord*” that Luke talks about, they did that, too. *You* heard how Luke explained why something had to be done: every first-born son was considered “*holy*” to the Lord. Holy in the sense of “dedicated to.” Holy in the sense of “belonging to.” As a priest of the Lord. Only here’s the thing: since the priesthood had been allotted to one of the twelve tribes of Israel - the tribe of Levi - all those first-born sons were able to be *redeemed* from the Lord - they could be bought back for the price of five shekels. And here’s a thing *or two*: since the Torah called for the *redemption* of the first-born of every clean *animal* as well, that act of obedience was a reminder - a lasting memorial - of the way the first-born males of every Israelite family were spared the night all the first-born in *Egypt* were *slain*.

So then, enter Mr. Perfect Timing, right on cue. And marvel at a thing *or two*. *One*, surely other parents and babies were in line in the Temple that day, just waiting for the priests to receive *their* offerings; but Simeon knew just what little boy was “his”! And, *two*, when this strange man reached out for the Christ-child, Mary handed Him to him!

25 *Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 26 And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. 27 And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, 28 he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,*

29 *“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; 30 for my eyes have seen your salvation 31 that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”*

The words are carefully chosen.

“*Now.*” Simeon’s life has reached its climax. It could never rise any higher. God has delivered on his promise. No matter what else happens, it’ll all “only be downhill from here.”

“*Your servant.*” The better reading is “your *slave.*” We know that from the *other* two words: “*Lord,*” and “*depart.*” Taken together they form a clear picture - one irrefutable picture, the picture of a slave being emancipated - or released from his service. For “*Lord*” is not the usual (KOOR-ee-oss) κυριος but rather (dess-pah-TACE) δεσπο-της, from which we get our English “despot.” And (app-uh-LOO-ice) απολυεις is the word often used for forgiving - releasing us from - our sins. As I said earlier, there’s nothing in the text here to say that Simeon is old - not like there is with Anna, who was either eighty-four years old, as our English Standard Version translates, or, more likely if you ask me - more *remarkably*, and therefore more worth *mentioning*, eighty four years *a widow*! And there’s nothing here to say that Simeon is saying he’s ready to die, either; he’s just saying that he’s reached his peak, that nothing in his life could ever be as sweet and satisfying as this single moment.

And no wonder, right? For never mind Simeon’s *eyes*, his very *arms* are “seeing,” well, this *thing* - this *saving thing* (toh sew-TAY-ree-on) το σωτηριον - that God has done! Just like “*the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing [emphasis added] that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us’*” (Luke 2:15).

And here’s the thing: this *thing* turns out to be *a thing or two*! For on the one hand - to the “*Gentiles*” - to the nations (ETH-nay) (εθνη) - it’s a light, it’s a revelation! But on the other hand - to YHWH’s “*people Israel*” - it’s a “*glory*” - *their* glory - the supreme honor that the long-promised Messiah should have come from among *them*! NO nation on earth has ever known such a glory!

33 *And his father and his mother* - [understandably!] - *marveled at what was said about him.*

Marveled, if it's not too much to press the point, at these *things*! The one parent was as surprised as the other. "Who was this man? How did he know their son? How did he know what the angel had told them?" And perhaps most amazing of all, "what was this about him being the salvation not just of the Jews but of the Gentiles, too?" Oy veh!

34 *And Simeon blessed them* - [and then, well, here's the thing: he got *serious*!] - *and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed 35 (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."*

The "*behold*" alerts you to the important part. It says, "You see, here's the thing: where this Jesus is concerned, there is no middle ground; you're either *for* Him, or *against* Him." Oh, and not to ruin their first Christmas together, but rather to pave the way one future day for their Easter, if you will, Simeon here declares that *Mary* is going to see that effect in Israel with her own *eyes*.

Why just "*Mary, his mother*"? Because while *Joseph* is going to be long gone - long *dead* - by then, *she* is going to be there at the foot of His cross, where, as the Lamb of God, he will take the sin of the world away - away to the tomb where his crucified body briefly will be laid. Yes, while those thorns are going to cut his head, and that spear is going to pierce his side, a sword is going to pierce her. Her soul. A *giant* sword - as our made-in-China grandson Shaun could readily tell us, for it's his favorite Bible story and he sees its two main characters in broken pieces of bread, and paper, and waffles, and cookies - the very kind the Philistine giant Goliath wielded against the young shepherd boy David (1 Sam. 17:51). Grief and pain shooting through her mother's soul there at Calvary like a giant sword.

So, I don't mind telling you that I'd like to tell this Simeon a thing or two! I mean, who invited this "spoilsport" to this first-ever Christmas - or *after*-Christmas - party? Only here's the thing - a thing or *two*, if we're honest.

One, "forewarned is forearmed." It's always better to know in advance that Jesus is going to be rejected by many in our world than to be caught off guard and depressed when we see it happen.

And two - well, Luther says it better than I ever could. He says it in his "Christmas Book," the one that begins, "Our Lord Jesus Christ was born of a line of ancestors whom the Evangelist Matthew arranges with artistry into three groups of fourteen patriarchs, fourteen kings, and fourteen princes." He says, "Today in the world . . . the pope, the bishops, the fanatics, peasants, townsmen, nobles tread [this Child] underfoot." [And] "in my heart it is just as bad as it is in the world. . . . I do it myself. I cannot believe in him as I should. He ought to be my true friend and comforter. But the 'old donkey' in me won't have it, and the devil blows the bellows. . . . He is a sign to be spoken against."

Only here's the thing - again, the *comforting* thing, the thing the angels sang about that first Christmas:

*"10 Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."*

Okay, a thing or two! For "*13 suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"*

His punishment brings us peace - His sacrifice brings us forgiveness, His death brings us life - as *we too* wait for the "*consolation of Israel*" - not to come, but to come again. Thanks be to God. Merry Christmas. Amen.