

Nunc Dimittis: The Song of Simeon

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Hello, I'm Karp. I'm currently in between community groups. And this is a reading from the Gospel according to Luke, chapter 2, verses 22 through 35, as printed in your liturgy.

When the time came for the purification rites required by the law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. As it is written in the law of the Lord, every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the law of the Lord, a pair of doves or two young pigeons.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.

[1 : 29] Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, Sovereign Lord, you have promised, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace.

For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel.

The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother, This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be spoken against so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed and a sword will pierce your own soul too.

This is the gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ. Well, good morning, friends. Welcome to Christ Church. My name is Andrew, one of the pastors here.

And I just love that nativity scene. My favorite was the star of the show. Shout out to Walter St. Clair. Great job there. We are going to open up another song of Christmas.

[2 : 52] But before we do that, let's go to the Lord in prayer. Father, would you give us eyes to see, ears to hear, hearts to receive your word and the glory of Christ come to us to save us, to redeem us, to make all things new.

So help us to wait for him in faith and in faithfulness with great hope and anticipation and joy because your promises are good and true.

And we trust you, O God. In Jesus' name, amen. All right, so on this final Sunday of Advent, we're looking at one more song from the beginning chapters of Luke's gospel.

It's called the Song of Simeon, or as many Christians have liked to call it in Latin, the nunc dimittis. Can everyone say that with me? The nunc dimittis. All right, now what this means in English is nunc means now, dimittis means dismiss.

So nunc dimittis in Latin means now dismiss, which are two words that come right out of the mouth of Simeon here in our text, right here in verse 29, as he takes baby Jesus into his arms and gazes upon this infant child with his very own eyes.

[4 : 05] Verse 28 says that he even praises God. He praises God and he says to God, now dismiss your servant in peace. And honestly, you know, there's not much more anyone knows about this guy, Simeon.

But these words of his, these Holy Spirit-inspired words, this song has been recorded and remembered and treasured and recited for over 2,000 years in the history of the church across Protestant, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox traditions.

We all have Simeon's song, the *nunc dimittis*, in our liturgical books of worship and prayer and song. And why? Because who says such a thing as *nunc dimittis*?

This is an incredibly striking statement that Simeon offers up to God. He's basically saying, I'm ready to die, God. You can take me now. He's saying, I'm ready to go.

My life and my life's purposes are complete. I'm good. I'm done. There's nothing more for me to do, nothing more for me to see, nothing more for me to wait for. I'm at peace even with death.

[5 : 06] Simeon here is talking like everything he'd ever dreamed of seeing, everything he'd ever dreamed of experiencing, all of that was somehow fulfilled for him as soon as he came to this temple and entered into this moment where he took baby Jesus into his arms.

This is an absolutely stunning, remarkable statement that we're looking at, the *nunc dimittis*. Now dismiss your servant in peace. Because again, who in the world says such a thing?

And that's the question that I want us to ponder this morning. How might we be able to join in Simeon's song? How might we be able to come to the end of our lives? How might we be able to say as soon as today, Lord, I am ready to die.

You may now dismiss your servant. I have fought the good fight. I have run the race. And my eyes have seen everything I've needed and dreamed to see fulfilled. You know, for me, this is a question I've thought a lot about.

This past year, I turned 37. And, you know, this year I also found out that the average life expectancy, at least for U.S. men in 2022, was 74 years old.

[6 : 13] All right? So half that, right? 37, 74, right? And I've been asking myself, in light of that lately, what do I have to show for these last 37 years?

What do I say about that? And I've been asking God a lot lately, how, God, specifically, do you want me to spend whatever time I have left, maybe less than what I've lived?

So that at the end of my life, how can I say, Lord, now dismiss your servant in peace? That's a question I've been asking God myself lately. Now, some of us maybe don't even think it's possible to come to the end of our lives, right, and say something like what Simeon said.

Maybe some of us think that Simeon's words were simply just, you know, lavish hyperbole. Like when John Coltrane, he performed *Love Supreme* live and was so satisfied with his performance, he was heard to utter these words as he left the stage.

Nunc dimittis servum tuum. Now dismiss your servant, right? But surely he didn't mean that literally, right? Who would mean that literally? Or even if he did, maybe he was just one of the lucky few, right?

[7 : 22] Maybe some of us think that only a very select few, a super privileged, super lucky, super fortunate, super blessed people ever get to say, now dismiss your servant at the end of their lives and actually mean it.

Maybe you know someone like that. Maybe you hope to be someone like that. I consider my mom actually someone like that. A couple years ago, as many of you may know, she was diagnosed with early stage breast cancer.

And she didn't know she was going to survive. She didn't know that she was going to live on, and thanks to God that she has, she has beat cancer. We're really thankful for that. But she didn't know that at the time.

And I remember when she announced this to our family, she was teary-eyed as she announced this. And at the same time, you could tell she was also filled with incredible gratitude and contentment and peace.

And not knowing the road ahead, she was able to say, you know what, though? God has been faithful. God has been kind. God has been generous. And I have accomplished and seen pretty much everything I'd ever hoped and more.

[8 : 23] And she said, I'm ready. I'm ready. And it made sense to us because she's really had a wonderful legacy. My mom was a high school principal. She started an award-winning Christian school in Hayward, where many students locally and globally have met Christ and become well-adjusted Christian professionals.

She retired with, you know, the respect and admiration of her colleagues and family. She raised three kids who are still walking with Jesus. Well, I don't know. You can judge whether or not I am. But three kids who still love Jesus and her servant in the church. And she even got to become a grandma to three grandchildren. And they all live within 15 minutes of where she lives. And she's literally living her dream.

And her friends tell her all the time how blessed she is. And she knows it. And she believes it. But not everyone has a story like that, right? Not everyone has such a happy ending life story.

Actually, most of us are trying to work our butts off to give ourselves just the best chance. Just a chance to say, ah, my life story is complete, right? I'm satisfied and I can die in peace now.

[9 : 26] Well, these words of Simeon's are words that we're really, all of us are after. We're all after these words, right? Even those of us who don't or aren't sure we can believe in God, maybe some of us wouldn't say, Lord, now dismiss your servant in peace.

But we all still want to say at the end of our lives, I can die in peace. And with fulfillment and contentment after a life well lived, a life of meaning and purpose.

But again, the question is, is this even possible? Can we get to that place of fulfillment and contentment at the end of our lives? And if so, how? If I could put it another way, what is it that our eyes need to behold in order for us to die in peace?

What is it that our eyes need to behold in order for us to die in peace? And here's where we open up our text and listen for what God has to say. Beginning here in verse 22. This is the context for Simeon's famous song, Nunc Dimittis.

Verse 22, read with me. When the time came for the purification rites required by the law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord as it is written in the law of the Lord.

[10 : 31] Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the law of the Lord. A pair of doves or two young pigeons.

So before Simeon even comes onto the scene to utter his famous words, Nunc Dimittis, we need to remember that the center of this story, it isn't Simeon. Even the center of Simeon's story isn't Simeon, nor are we the centers of any of our stories.

No, Simeon and all the rest of us, we are mere secondary, tertiary actors in Jesus' ultimate story. He is the center of all our stories. So here in verse 22, what we have is Joseph and Mary with the 41-day-old infant Jesus.

The heavens have just been filled with angels singing glory to God in the highest and peace on earth over this little Jewish baby. Shepherds have come out of nowhere looking to find and behold and celebrate and glorify God over Jesus.

And Mary has just been taking all this in, trying to understand it, putting all the pieces together, treasuring these things in her heart with faith and openness and wonder. And at this point, they are still in Bethlehem.

[11 : 36] They haven't moved back to Nazareth yet. They still have their newborn. They're not far from Jerusalem. And as verse 22 says, according to the purification rites required by the law of Moses, Jesus is taken to Jerusalem for his parents to present him to the Lord.

And this is meant to show us that Jesus was raised in a God-fearing, faithful Torah-observing family. Right? The law is mentioned actually three times here. Verse 22, verse 23, verse 24.

This is a godly family devoted to the Lord. And even though they are relatively poor, verse 24 indicates that they are only able to afford two young birds rather than the one-year-old lamb.

Even in their poverty, they intend to raise Jesus up in the way that he should go and that he should not depart from it. And at the same time, what they're also doing as they're presenting Jesus to the Lord is that they're recognizing that this child of theirs is not primarily theirs.

This child belongs to the Lord. And this is actually a word for all of us parents. I think it's the best advice I've ever heard for parents.

[12 : 40] It's that our children, they are not our own. But they belong to the Lord. They don't exist to fulfill our dreams but to fulfill God's calling upon their lives. And he is in control of their destinies.

And it is actually precisely because of this that we are at the same time responsible for them. To help them discern and discover and fulfill those purposes from God. Precisely because our children are not our own.

This is the best word on parenting I can think of. And I'd love to do a whole sermon on that sometime, but another day. But all this again is to show that the story here is centered on Jesus. This helpless, vulnerable baby who can, all he can do is eat, sleep, cry, poop, and pee. He is the center of the story, even as a baby. And God is putting all these faithful people and influences around him, like his parents, and like we'll see, Simeon.

Each of them playing their roles, living out their life's callings in faith and in faithfulness to God in service of the Messiah. Okay, and now enter in verse 25, Simeon.

[13:40] Okay, now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon who was righteous and devout. So it's another God-fearing influence that's brought near to infant Jesus. It's another Torah-observing, justice-seeking, pious, prayerful, humble, God-fearing influence.

And verse 25 says he was waiting. He was waiting for the consolation, the comfort, and encouragement of Israel. And see, this waiting, this waiting for consolation was actually evidence of his righteousness and of his devotion.

This is what every righteous and devout Jewish person was to do. They were to wait in faith. Even waiting their whole lives under the occupation of this pagan Roman Empire, even waiting at the tail end of 400 years of silence from any of the prophets of Yahweh, he was waiting in faith, believing the promise of God that consolation and encouragement and comfort were coming to God's people just because God said so.

No matter what their circumstances looked like, no matter how long they had to wait, God had spoken through his prophets. The prophet Isaiah said in Isaiah 52, burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people.

He has redeemed Jerusalem. And Simeon believed this promise from Isaiah 52. He believed these promises enough that he was willing to wait for them his entire life, his whole life, as though they would be fulfilled.

[15:01] And this is a good word for us Christians to pause and reflect upon, especially in this season of Advent, right? This Advent season is a season to remind ourselves that we too, just like Simeon, are awaiting our final consolation.

When Christ returns to make all things new, to wipe away every tear and bring the final justice and shalom of his kingdom, Simeon's waiting is a beautiful model for our waiting.

No matter how long we have to wait, no matter what our circumstances look like, will we believe the promises of God? And will we live by faith, as though these promises will be fulfilled in Christ and in God's perfect timing?

That's hard, right? It's hard to wait. Waiting's hard, because to quote the pastor and author Mark Rogop, waiting is what you do when you can't do what you want to do, right?

Waiting's what you do when you can't do what you want to do. But you know, in his excellent book, *Waiting Isn't a Waste*, Mark Rogop would encourage us that waiting on God is actually living on what we know to be true about God when we don't know what's true about our life stories.

[16:11] He says, Waiting faithfully is living on what I know to be true about God when I don't know what's true about my own life. Waiting faithfully means seeing our seasons of delay as opportunities to hope and trust in and commune with our unhurried and unworried God.

I love how the Bible teacher Jen Wilkin puts it. She says, In our culture, waiting is seen as an evil to eliminate instead of a virtue to cultivate. And because waiting is seen as the enemy, our anger and frustration flare when our expected timetables are not met.

But here is the good news for the Christ follower. If you've been looking for a simple way to shine like a star in a crooked generation, cultivate the virtue of patience in waiting.

Admittedly, that is much easier said than done. It's one thing to wait for your coffee drink in a drive-thru, and it's quite another to wait for an illness to resolve or a long-overdue apology to be spoken.

The sheer number of hard waits we will face in our lifetimes presents both the challenge and the opportunity of growing in virtue, of growing in Christlikeness.

[17:21] She writes, Impatience is all well and good for those without faith, but the Christian faith is by definition one of delayed gratification. The children of God are and always have been called upon to wait.

We wait for God's kingdom to come in fullness, but our waiting is distinctly different from that of the faithless. No white-knuckled, jaw-clenched waiting will do for those whose hope is anchored in the

bedrock of the finished work of Christ.

Like Simeon, Christians who profess the first and final comings of Christ, our waiting is a hopeful, joyful, eager waiting that draws us nearer to God and makes us more sensitive to His Holy Spirit as we marinate in His words and His promises.

And that's why it says here in verse 25 that the Holy Spirit was upon this righteous, devout, faith-filled man named Simeon. Simeon was waiting for the consolation of Israel no matter what and no matter how long he was stewing in the words and promises that God had spoken by the Holy Spirit as He lived through them for however long it was going to take.

And he lived as though these promises were going to be fulfilled, and thus the power and the presence and the clarity and direction of God were upon him. And in fact, Simeon was so sensitive to the Spirit's voice in the words and promises of God that he had the prophetic insight and intuition and discernment, verse 26 says, to see what was going to happen in his own lifetime.

[18:47] It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Now just imagine that for a second. The Holy Spirit revealing to you that after your people had been waiting for 400 plus years, you would get to see the Messiah.

But also, without telling you exactly when, how would that affect your life if you got that message? What do you do with a promise like that? Well, it appears that Simeon, like Mary and Joseph, he just treasured this revelation in his heart.

He didn't force the issue. He continued to live faithfully, wondering exactly how this promise would be fulfilled. But in the meantime, he simply sought to be obedient to the Spirit in everyday faithful service to God.

He wasn't preoccupied with predicting or guessing the future, but trusted that God would do what he said and just lived according to what God said in his word, faithfully and patiently, regardless of God's secret timing.

And so verse 27 says that when the time came, moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts, as was likely his devout practice.

[20:00] And he'd probably seen babies brought to the temple courts every day of his life, right? Baby after baby, purification ritual after purification ritual. Oh, how nice. Oh, how cute. How sweet.

Good for that family. He probably thought to himself, you know, a thousand times, I hope this little boy becomes a nice young Jewish boy. But this day was gonna be different because verse 27 says, on this day, the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the law required and filled with the Holy Spirit, this stranger, Simeon, he goes to Mary and Joseph and filled with the Spirit, they somehow let him take baby Jesus into his arms, right?

And verse 28 says, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God. And can I just say what a beautiful picture this is to me, this lifelong, faithful, spiritual grandpa figure, right, in Jerusalem, holding someone else's baby in the house of God and praising God, singing praises over this baby. I mean, think of all the children and all the babies that Jesus would one day take into his own arms, just like Simeon so lovingly and affectionately did with him. This is the opposite of generational trauma.

This is generational blessing right here. And I want to encourage us to be a church that's a baby-stealing community, all right? Let's take those babies and praise God over them.

[21:25] Let's hold each other's babies. Let's let each other hold our babies. And let's love each other's children. Let's love what we see up here, right? Let's praise God together over these children and trust that God will one day raise up young men and young women out of these babies that will do the same, that will be baby huggers themselves, baby blessers, baby prayer champions as well.

Simeon here is a picture of a faithful older saint connecting with and investing in and valuing the next generation who he hopes will accomplish even more than his own generation.

He sees in baby Jesus an answer to so many of his prayers. And another soul he sees in Jesus. He sees in Jesus another soul who will continue God's work in the world.

Hope that's our heart as well here at Christ Church. But what's even cooler is that, you know, normally when someone might take a baby into their arms, they might speak a blessing over them. They might make a petition to God on the child's behalf, right?

Like, Lord, make this child a mighty man of God. Make this child a woman of faith and prayer, right? But Simeon, he doesn't bring a petition here asking God to make something of the baby.

[22 : 37] Rather, he utters a prophetic proclamation. It's not a petition. It's a proclamation because this is no ordinary child. He knows with certainty what and who this child is.

Verse 29, he says, Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace for my eyes have seen your salvation. He sees in this child the salvation of the world which you have prepared in the sight of all nations a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel.

Simeon was proclaiming to the world that in his arms was the salvation of the world. And not just for his people Israel but for all nations to behold.

That was the glory of Israel. The glory of Israel was not that they were going to be some supreme, superior, glorious nation but Israel's glory is that the Messiah who would save all nations would come from the line of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and King David.

You see, this, this is what loosened Simeon's lips to utter *Nunc Dimittis*. Verse 29, Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace for my eyes have seen it.

[23 : 48] My eyes have seen your salvation. I love how the German Catholic commentator Friedrich Nucht wrote, Simeon now rejoiced at the prospect of death. Such a sensation was hitherto unknown in Israel.

Pious Israelites closed their eyes in death, weary of life and submissive to God's will, not altogether hopeless but full of horror of the future. Death was a thing to be feared and each new day of life, which was granted, was looked on as a gain.

But all at once, everything was changed. Holy Simeon had seen the Savior and was now ready to die joyfully. In fact, he did die very soon after.

A pious tradition even goes so far as to say that he died before he left the temple. He was thus the first to take the joyful news to limbo that the Savior was born and the day of salvation at hand.

See, the thing that our eyes must see, the thing that the human eye must behold if it is to be filled with light and hope and joy and peace is Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world.

[24 : 51] It's only when we gaze upon Jesus with this kind of faith that any of us will ever be able to say, Lord, now dismiss your servant in peace. It's only when our eyes have seen the incredible salvation that God has written into history in the history of his Son.

And listen, this isn't just any salvation plan, right? This isn't just one among a million other happy-go-lucky religious myths about some wishful future utopian existence that the Christian God just happens to promise to people no matter what.

No, from verse 33 to 35, you can sense here a change of tone in Simeon's voice, a change of even demeanor. Now, Simeon doesn't know the fullness of the story and all its details, nor do Mary nor Joseph.

Verse 33 says that the child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. They're trying to put the pieces together as well. No one at this point knows all the specifics of God's salvation plan for this little 41-day-old infant.

However, Simeon, filled with the Holy Spirit, he does have some inkling about this very unique and sobering salvation story that's surrounding baby Jesus.

[25 : 59] Look with me at verse 34. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother, this child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be spoken against so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed and a sword will pierce your own soul too, he's saying to Mary.

Simeon, he may not know exactly how Jesus will be the Savior of the world, but he does see in Jesus a polarizing, divisive figure who many will oppose and speak against because of everything that he and his kingdom stand for that will be at odds with all the arrogant empires of the world. Simeon sees a Savior who is truly for all people from every nation, tribe, and tongue, but he doesn't see a universalist, relativistic Savior who will just please everyone, make everyone happy, and just indiscriminately save even those who oppose him.

No, just as God said to Adam and Eve, there's going to be the offspring of the woman and the offspring of the serpent. Grown up, Rabbi Jesus would say the same thing, do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to earth, I did not come to bring peace but a sword, for I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.

Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it. Jesus says there will be sheep and there will be goat, there will be wheat, and there will be weeds.

[27 : 22] And so Simeon foresees that Jesus will cause some to fall and others to rise. He foresees that Jesus will at the same time be a stumbling stone of a rock to those who reject him and at the same time a chief cornerstone and foundation for those who receive him.

There will be joy and pain that come in the coming of Christ. And Simeon prophesies about this in verse 35 that Mary herself will experience some of this pain when he says to her, and a sword will pierce your own soul too.

And what this is alluding to, whether anyone recognized it at the time or not, is the cross. The worst moment, not only in Jesus' life, the worst moment of Mary's life when her son is pierced and she feels it in her soul.

See, what Simeon is saying is that this baby in his arms, he hasn't come to deliver people on the basis of their culture, ethnicity, or nationality, but on the basis of their hearts and their posture toward God.

He hasn't just come to deliver one weaker nation like Israel from another stronger nation like Rome. He's come to deliver people from their bondage to sin and godlessness. The ultimate root problem is not human oppression against each other or human bondage to one another.

[28 : 35] The ultimate root problem is human rebellion against God and human bondage to sin and evil. And so the way he will deliver us from our sin and from our rebellion is by putting our sins to death in his pierced body on a cross.

And that is where peace begins. That's where justice is found. No justice, no peace. No atonement for sin. No eternal salvation.

And this is exactly what the prophet Isaiah prophesied in the very next chapter that was on Simeon's mind. Isaiah didn't just prophesy of comfort for God's people in Isaiah 52 but of discomfort for God's servant in Isaiah 53.

See, Christianity doesn't sweep the darkness of sin under the rug. Instead, it preaches that the light of the world, the Son of God, entered the pain of darkness to do away with it for good.

And this is the good news of Advent. Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would save us not just from those who would sin against us but from the sin and darkness within our very own hearts that lead to our own deaths.

[29 : 39] Isaiah prophesied about the cross. He was pierced for our transgressions. The punishment that brought us peace was upon Him and by His wounds we are healed.

And this, this is what our eyes need to behold in order for us to die in peace. Not the completion of all our life goals and projects, not the fulfillment of all our consumeristic fantasies, nor even some arbitrary sense of self-satisfaction at the end of our lives.

None of us can ever win or achieve our own peace in the face of death. Nothing we do, no life we've lived will ever be enough to bring us that kind of peace. But Jesus' life, the life of the one who was pierced for our transgressions, the life that ended crying out, it is finished from the cross, the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him.

And by His wounds we are healed. It's His life and His death and His resurrection life. It's all of Him for all of us that truly brings us peace, even and especially in the face of death.

And this, this is the gospel. The good news that if we take and embrace Jesus into our arms as Simeon did 2,000 years ago, and if we behold Him with the eyes of faith and with a heart filled with affection and adoration, then we can all sing Simeon's song along with Him, Nunc Dimittis, even today.

[31 : 06] Sovereign Lord, you may now dismiss your servant in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation in the crucified, risen, and coming again, Christ.

Amen. Let's pray. Oh God, help us to see it. This Advent, help us to see the light of Christ in the darkness of His wounds.

and bring peace on earth, oh God, through this sacred salvation story. Bring peace through all of us who have eyes to see it, who have eyes to believe it, and who want to live faithfully within your story for the good of our neighbors and for the glory of your name.

Amen.