

I am Simeon the prophet. I realize that doesn't impress you, and I understand. My only claim to fame is that I was permitted to see and hold the Christ Child. That's why I feel honored to be able to speak to you this morning, especially since the previous speakers in your midweek Advent services were such notable figures—the patriarch Abraham; Isaiah, the venerable prophet; and David, the renowned shepherd-king. I know they all had Advent greetings; well, my Christmas greeting is, “Get Ready for Heaven!” Now, when I say, “Get Ready for Heaven,” I realize that can be misunderstood. I hope you don't regard this as morbid. I encourage you to cherish the peace of Jesus so that you enjoy life to the fullest. But at the same time, I hope you say, as I did, “Lord, I'm ready for heaven.”

But let me begin by telling you what things were like in my day. I don't know whether you realize it or not, but there's a 400-year gap between your Old and New Testaments. In that period, my country, Israel, was dominated by Greeks, Egyptians, and Syrians, until Roman legions conquered our land when I was a little boy, about 60 years before Jesus was born.

It was a chaotic time, and God's people suffered terribly. We still had the temple, but many of our religious and national leaders were appointed by the pagan Gentile conquerors. My people prayed for deliverance from the Roman rule with its false gods. We wanted and expected the Messiah, whom God had promised, to free our nation from Gentile oppression so we could freely worship the true God.

Maybe that's why my parents gave me the name they did, for Simeon means “listener.” I was one of those who listened to God's Word and waited for the Messiah's arrival, confident that God was listening to our prayers, even if we could not see his response. Luke, the author, said that I was “righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel” (Lk 2:25). He also adds that God had given me the amazing promise that I would not die until I had seen the Christ.

I remember very well the moment when I first saw the baby Jesus. The Holy Spirit had moved me to go to the temple—I went there often to sacrifice and pray—and it was there that I saw the holy family. I knew at once who they were. No one had to tell me. Joseph and Mary came to the temple with the baby Jesus for the purification rites and the presentation of the child.

You probably don't know what those ceremonies are, but they were commanded by God to his covenant people. The purification of women was a ritual prescribed for every woman who had given birth (Leviticus 12). 40 days after childbirth, she was to come to the holy place with a purification offering. Our merciful God allowed those women who could not afford a lamb, to offer instead two doves or the priest would sacrifice these on her behalf, and then she would be pronounced clean.

The other ritual carried out when the child was 40 days old was the presentation of the child. This applied only to the firstborn male child, and was a direct reminder of the Passover event. Remember, the firstborn of Israel were spared on Passover night in Egypt, when all the firstborn Egyptians were killed. God stated that every firstborn, human and animal, belonged to

him (Exodus 13). So in the rite of presentation, firstborn male animals were usually sacrificed, but if it was an especially valuable animal such as a donkey, it could be redeemed; that is, another animal such as a lamb could be sacrificed in its place. A male child, of course, was not sacrificed, but was redeemed; God commanded an animal to be sacrificed in his place. Since Joseph and Mary faithfully followed God's ways, they came to the Temple to do these things, and that's how I came to see Jesus on the fortieth day after his birth.

When I laid my eyes on the Christ Child, I broke out in a song of praise. The first words of my anthem, "Now let me depart," are translated into Latin as *Nunc dimittis*, and I understand you sometimes use that as a title for it. Interesting choice. But anyway, the words go like this:

*"Lord, now let your servant go in peace, your Word has been fulfilled. My own eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the sight of every people: A light to reveal you to the nations and the glory of your people Israel."* I have heard that you will often sing my song after coming to our Lord's Table. I think that's a beautiful thing. After you receive the Lord's body and blood in Holy Communion, you depart in peace. Your sins are forgiven, and you are filled with life everlasting. You are ready for heaven.

After I saw the Christ Child, I was ready to die and stand before God, for he is my salvation, my Redeemer. I was ready to depart in peace. I was honored to see the Redeemer foretold by God so long ago, to actually hold him in my arms. God's people had waited thousands of years to see him fulfill his promise. I beheld the fulfillment with my own eyes: Jesus. I must know, by faith, have you beheld Him? Are you ready to depart?

As I said in my song of praise, God's salvation is "a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of [his] people Israel." I hope that you never forget that. When you gather to worship, don't forget to proclaim the good news of forgiveness and life to everyone in this community. When your vision of Jesus is right, you include the rest of the world in your prayers and in your mission.

Now, I also knew that sadness would come to Jesus' mother, Mary. The Holy Spirit had given me that insight also; and so I said to her: "A sword will pierce your own soul too." I'll never forget the look on her face when I said that. I also remember thinking that to be a child of God involves suffering. That was true of God's only Son. It was true in our day, and it's still true today. If you're looking for a comfortable religion, I'd advise you to forget about Jesus. The only way to eternal life is the way of the cross.

My prayer for you is that by faith you may take the time to hold the Christ Child in your arms and say with joy, as I did, "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace...My eyes have seen your salvation."

God's children should enjoy this life, but these holy days of Christmas tell us that the best parts of this life are just a dim preview of the perfect joy God has in store for you; and so my greeting to you is, "GET READY FOR HEAVEN!"