“Nunc Dimittus?”
Luke 2:21-40

Christmas 1
December 29, 2019 Rev. Jeffrey H. Rickards

It is for me, both unusual and timely
to be with you on this First Sunday after Christmas
Unusual, because like many pastors after
the busy Advent season and three services
on Christmas Eve, I usually schedule my
last vacation for the week following Christmas.
Of course, most pastors probably won’t admit it,
but a service of carols helps keep the spirit of
Christmas around a little longer, while the
assigned texts for today-the circumcision
and naming of Jesus or the slaughter of the
innocents and the holy family’s escape into
Egypt breaks the spell of the season much
like holiday hangovers and credit card bills do.
And timely, because my time with you is
quickly coming to an end, I wanted to be
here with the faithful few who appear on
the ‘lowest’ Sunday of the year in attendance
and take this rare opportunity to preach
on this Lukan text which contains Simeon’s
haunting song which talks about death
just after a birth.

Just a few nights ago on Christmas Eve,
I questioned why Luke chose to give such
a prominent role to some unnamed shepherds
in his birth narrative of Jesus.
On this Sunday morning after Christmas,
immediately following all the candlelight’s,
carols, presents and everything else that
comes with our festive holy feast day,
what in the world is Luke doing in

talking about death.
Along side the Christmas carols we continue
to sing this Sunday, the Song of Simeon,
which comes down to us in liturgical form
in the *Nunc Dimittis*, sounds odd, dissonant,
and out of place.
So, again I question Luke and his placement
of this odd coupling of old and faithful
Temple dwellers and the shadow of future
death in Mary and Joseph's time of great joy?

In Luke's ongoing birth account, it is now
forty days after Jesus' birth- there's
that biblically symbolic number again!
After eight days, Luke records in verse 21;
"it was time to circumcise the child;
and he was called Jesus, the name given
by the angel before he was conceived
in the womb."
Now, thirty-two days later, Jesus' parents
are again performing their duty, as the
pious and righteous Jews they are,
by returning to the Temple.
This time in order to fulfill the legal and
religious obligations by offering a sacrifice
and consecrating their firstborn child
and son to the Lord.

They must have been in a solemn mood
that day, full of reverence and expectancy,
the way many new parents are who gather
around the font before us to have their
first child baptized.
It is not hard for us to imagine, therefore,
the solemn procession Mary and Joseph must've made
to Herod's great and massive Temple built
upon Jerusalem's highest mount, their awe
and their jitteriness as they purchase
a pair of sacrificial birds according to the law.

About ten years ago I met at Saint Andrew's
by the Sea in Atlantic City, a then young
and newly minted Lutheran biblical scholar,
who followed in his father's footsteps.
In an article commenting on this Lukan
passage, Stephen Hultgren offers this
background information.
The presentation of Jesus in the temple is motivated
by specific requirements of the Mosaic Law.
According to Leviticus 12, after a woman gives birth
to a son, she is impure for forth days.
At the end of that period, she is to bring an
offering to the temple, which the priest offers
as a sacrifice, effecting her purification
and return to the community.
In addition, Exodus 13 states that every first-born
male, whether human or animal, belongs to the Lord.
Thus the biblical nation that the first-born son
"belongs" to the Lord in a special way and
is dedicated to serve him.

Luke's stress on the physical and biological-
including concerns how an elderly couples,
Zechariah and Elizabeth, might miraculously
have a biological child, the conceptions of John
and Jesus, childbirth and circumcision,
and attention to purity laws as well as to
rituals proscribed in the Torah- serves to show
both Jesus' humanity and his role in
fulfilling God's promises to Israel.
All of this detail also provides a counter
argument to a movement that gained in
popularity in the second century, a movement
known as "Marcionism."
Named after Marcion, who concluded that
the God of the Old Testament or Hebrew scriptures
was a distinct god from the one Jesus proclaimed.

Marcion's heresy is still alive and well in
some churches today.

It surfaces every time someone makes a remark
about the "Old Testament God of Laws"
versus the "New Testament God of grace."
It also appears whenever people talk about
how the commandments do not apply to us.
Luke's infancy account insists that the
"Old Testament" is not to be dismissed;
nor is it some dusty book to be kept on a shelf
and trotted out to see how Jesus 'fulfills'
certain verses.
It was through interpreting the "scriptures" that
Jesus and his followers proclaimed their identity,
for there was no "New Testament" at the time.

Luke claims for the followers of Jesus the traditions of
ancient Israel and Second Temple Judaism.
As "Father Abraham" will tell the rich man
in the famous parable in Luke, the rich man
and Lazarus, "they have the law and the prophets.
They must listen to them" (16:29).
To understand Luke's Gospel, and to understand
Jesus, we do well to know the traditions that
they knew, the stories that they were told,
the laws that they held sacred.
The infancy narrative concludes when
Mary and Joseph encounter Simeon and
Anna, two elderly, righteous Jews.
We first meet Simeon, who, like his counterpart
Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist
who we also met in Jerusalem and the Temple.
"was righteous and devout" (2:25).

So it is not too far-fetched for us to imagine
Mary and Joseph's reaction as an old man
comes forward out of the shadows to scoop up
their child into his arms and prophesy about him.
Startled at first, perhaps, even a bit frightened
by the old man's enlightened and ecstatic face,
the parents yield up their child to him.
While Zechariah was likely praying for a son,

Simeon has a much broader intercessory
petition in mind: he was "looking forward"
to the "consolation of Israel," which is
translated in other version as "eagerly
anticipating the restoration of Israel."
Hearing Simeon's prophecy, the holy couple
is reminded of the events of the previous
weeks and months when angels and shepherds
entered their lives to foretell the greatness of their son.

How puzzled they must've been at the words of
what we call Simeon's "song": "Lord, now let
your servant go in peace."
The words are familiar to many of you.
In our Lutheran liturgical tradition they appear
in the *Nunc Dimittis*, from the Latin,
meaning "now send away" or "let me now depart."
This also forms the hymn song after Holy Communion
in some settings.
Simeon's words also conclude the service of Compline,
the order for prayers at the close of the day,
and they can also be said or sung at funerals,
Expressing thanksgiving to the Christ child and
an earnest plea for peace, Simeon's song
has become one of the most familiar and
beautiful hymns of the liturgy.

And yet each time I as a pastor hear these words,
I—as I imagine Mary and Joseph did-
grow strangely uncomfortable and even remorseful.
For me, the memories and images of those
whose bedsides I have been invited to offer
prayers at the time of death and the conduct
of funerals of those who have become like family,
the words of Simeon and *Nunc Dimittis*
grow strangely uncomfortable.
Listen to them again
"Lord now you 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"
Beautiful words, to be sure, but also troubling
for let's be honest about them, when Simeone
asks that he be allowed to go, he's asking to die.
There is no greater testimony of faith than a
saint, knowing that death is near, professing
at the time of their death.

Come to think about it, it is appropriate for Luke
to record this strange scene and son.
Simeon's seemingly morbid request for death,
just days after our celebration of Christmas,
points us to the Christ who is no longer a child
and the purpose for his death by crucifixion.
The birth narrative of Luke's first two chapters
prepares us for the next twenty-two chapters.
As we painfully know and maybe have experienced-
death does not take a holiday.
That truth is never more apparent that during these
holidays, when our hopes are joined with our fears,
our expectations so often tinged by our regrets,
and our reunions sometimes overshadowed by
unspoken disappointments or hurt.
And to those who have lost a loved one in the
past year, Christmas becomes a challenge.
Most of us are reminded of those who have loved
and lost by a stanza from a carol,
a favorite ornament on the tree, or some
fleeting, but vivid memory of a past Christmas.

Beloved people of God,
Simeon is no different.
He's an old man, and has been around the block
a few times, and so like us who have lived long,
we can imagine that he has tasted love and loss,
joy and sorrow, hope and fear.
And so he sings of death, not despairingly but
hopefully, for in this child cradled in his arms,

Simeon does so confidently because he now
sees that in and through this child
God will keep his promise to
redeem Israel and to save all the world.
In this Christ-child, in this babe in his arms,
God has acted once and for all
to address the question and specter of death
with the promise of life,
May each of us at our time of departure from
this life be prepared by our faith
to let go and let God.
And so we continue to treasure Simeon's song,
all these years after the events Luke records,
simply because it tells of God's great love
for us, a love that even death cannot destroy.

AMEN