

First Sunday after Christmas—December 29, 2024

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“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.”

The Gospel reading appointed for this Sunday in the Church Year gives great comfort in multiple ways. First and foremost you see, as you have been celebrating this week, your Lord has come and dwells among his people or as the Epistle reading beautifully proclaims, “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.” This is most certainly true and what you have as you are in Christ. You call God your Father and you are his sons by his grace toward you in Christ and through faith in him.

This alone is great comfort and really, it could end here. A saint is seen in the reading who knew this and rejoiced. The consolation of Israel had come and Simeon, as promised, saw him, Jesus. He beheld the Lord, the Word made flesh in his own two hands. Yet, the thing about God’s mercy and the Gospel itself is that it is never ending. God keeps giving and giving. It keeps overflowing in ways and ramifications in this life and into eternity. This is what Simeon confessed as he said those words which came to be called, the “Nunc Dimittis.”

The Holy Spirit inspired St. Luke to write, “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.’”

Simeon came into the place where God dwelled with his people but pointed to when the very fullness of time when the Lord himself would dwell among them. Now it the time had come. God entered this world and here he was right before him in this place. Simeon took up the Lord in his arms and blessed him and confessed that he, Simeon, could now depart in peace. He could depart in peace because the Lord let him do so. The Lord promised Simeon and he saw his promise fulfilled. God was and is faithful and now Simeon could depart that place, and yes even this earthly life in this vale of tears, in peace for the Christ had come.

It doesn’t end with him, though, you are no different than Simeon. In some ways, you even have it better as you have this prophetic word written and proclaimed to you. So what does this mean? It’s always beneficial for you to hear this account and for you to be reminded about what is happening in your midst now. There’s a reason you sing the Nunc Dimittis after you have received the Lord’s Supper and why it’s also included in the Commendation of the Dying and the Funeral Service. All these things are connected. Your Lord is in your midst here in this place and he is here for you and to give out the salvation he accomplished for you. Simeon held the Lord in his arms. You take upon your lips the very true body and blood of Jesus, the same Jesus held by Simeon. You eat and drink the body and blood of Christ, your Lord. Along with giving you himself, he forgives you your sins and where there is the forgiveness of sins there is life and salvation. After taking this sacrament and communing with God himself you rightly sing what Simeon said. You depart from this place in peace according to the word of God. God is letting you depart in peace, he gives you peace, because he has forgiven you and now you depart this holy church as one who has beheld the Lord and given his gifts.

When it comes to departing this earthly life, then, you do so in the same peace that you have every Sunday when you depart from the Lord’s Supper. You belong to Christ. The Epistle reading tells you, “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.” You are son or daughter of God in the waters of Holy Baptism. Through faith in Christ, you cry out to God as one who belongs with God as he is your Father, and

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you are his dear child. You are no slave who stands outside the house and inheritance, no this is not who you are, you are son and heir through God. God comforts you and gives you peace as you depart.

When you face death, this is who you are as a Christian. Death has been defeated for you, and you go into death as the victor who has life. You depart this life in peace not in terror, not in fear, not facing it as one who goes forth to condemnation. No, far from it. You go to your death in peace for you are forgiven by God who made peace by the shedding of the blood of Christ for you. And when your family gathers for your funeral. They do so knowing how you departed this life. Your casket lays before them covered in the white pall which points to and proclaims to you what was given to you and is still yours in the waters of Holy Baptism. You are clothed with Christ and are righteous before the throne of God. This confession is made before your family and friends and all the people gathered. You died as a Christian and are with the Lord and so the congregation says the Nunc Dimittis as your body draped with the funeral pall covers the casket. God keeps comforting even in death.

There is a warning in all this that God would have you take to heart as well. The danger is real to not take seriously what goes on here in the divine service and treat it as some earthly meal or simply a trivial thing that does not demand a holy reverence. You come into the very presence of God in this place. Simeon was looking to the Lord in faith as he trusted in the promises God made to him. He held Jesus in his arms in the humility of faith and as one who knew who this was, he was beholding and what this meant. This coincides with why the Scriptures clearly teach, and our Lutheran Confessions rightly confess that you are catechized, examined, and absolved before being admitted to the Lord's Supper. Simeon held the Lord in his arms and departed in peace but there are those who reject the Lord or mock him and his words who come into his presence and don't depart in peace but instead in condemnation and judgement. The presence of Christ for those who approach God in a spirit of self-justification, entitlement, self-righteousness, and any number of things instead of a godly humility, discernment, and faith is not one of peace but as the Scriptures say, "For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

The same goes for facing death. The death of a Christian is eternally different than one who has spurned Christ and his gifts. The one who refused to come and behold Christ in his word and sacraments, where he has promised to be, and now goes to stand before God face to face in death does so in a terrible and fearful way. Departing this life is agony and something to be feared. Heed the warnings and repent.

Dear people of God, Simeon's words are your words as you belong to Christ. You are in the place where God dwells. You are God's people. You are the people promised to David, "When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever."

Those words were spoken by God to the prophet Nathan to speak to David. The Father was promising to send the Son to come and what this would mean for his people. Your Lord Jesus has come, and you are his people. The Holy Spirit has called you his own and gathered you together as his people in his Kingdom, the Church, which has no end. The Savior has been born, and peace is among you and given to you for you are sons of God through faith.

Rejoice this day and take to heart all that has been accomplished for you. Rejoice in the peace that you have in Christ who has come. He has taken away your sin and has given you eternal life. Hear his word, feast at his Supper. Gather in this place receiving the marvelous things Jesus has done for you and continues to give you.

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His mercy toward you is unending and overflows in your lives as you depart in peace from this place and show this same love and mercy to one another. Christmas is here and what a joy it is to have your Lord born for you. Go through this life following in the example of Simeon trusting the promises of God and knowing his consolation is upon you and depart in the peace of Christ today and even on that final day for your Lord is here and you are his forever. Depart in peace.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.