

Third Vespers in Advent

Bulletin

Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel...

+INJ+

During this season of Advent, we have been taught by great teachers.

Two weeks ago, we were taught by the holy virgin Mary what it means for God to be the creator of all things. For just as God's word created all things in the formless nothingness in the beginning, so in the void of Mary's womb and the emptiness of her heart did his Word manifest Himself; a new creation out of nothing.

Last week, we were taught by Saint Zechariah what it means for God to be the light of all things; for God alone is *'the light which shines in the darkness,' 'that no darkness can overcome.'* Yet to be a light in the darkness, there must first be darkness, utter darkness, and only then does the light of God shine, that He might have no rival; that God's brilliant glory might share light with nothing, but rather give light to everything.

Now we draw near to Holy Simeon, the third of our wise men, who visit us bearing gifts of wisdom; let us sit at his blessed feet. He will tell us what it means for God to be the life of all things.

It is written: *"There was a man in Jerusalem... righteous and devout... who awaited the consolation of Israel."* There is something strikingly humble about this verse. He is not awaiting redemption; he is not awaiting justice; he is not awaiting the final liberation of Israel from his many enemies, the overthrow of those powers which assault God's chosen people. Nothing like that.

He is awaiting consolation; he does not expect a militant and glorious deliverer; he merely expects a word, one word, that might console his darkened and

tortured heart; one word from God that might make all of it bearable.

As with Zechariah, Simeon had much to break his heart and dim his soul. We have heard it before. His nation is subjected to tyrants; his people wander *as a sheep without a shepherd*; the whole world rejects and laughs at the Law of God; and not only that, but he grows old, the time is coming when his heart will literally be broken, and his soul literally be dimmed, or rather snuffed out.

And what then? What will happen when Simeon's life ends and he is, as the Jews would say, *'gathered to the house of his fathers.'* Of these fathers, of the line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, it was long ago pronounced by the last of the prophets: *"Judah has been faithless, and an abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem. For Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the Lord, which he loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign god. May the LORD cut off from the tents of Jacob any descendent of the man who does this!"*

Simeon indeed was such a descendent. He knows who he is: an heir to the blasphemies and unfaithfulness of his ancestors. So it was pronounced even on him, *'righteous and devout,'* long ago: *'may he be cut off from the tents of Jacob.'*

The people of Israel had married themselves to an idol, to a non-existent god; in a very real way, they had married themselves to non-existence itself. If in death, the faithful betrothed to God would finally be united with their bridegroom, the eternal *'one who is'*, and so themselves live forever, what of those betrothed to nothingness? What will their wedding be? What will their union to nothingness be? An unending un-becoming; A falling apart; "eternal fire"; "the outer darkness."

If for us there is no life after death, if there is no light in the darkness, if there is no fullness to fill the nothingness of this existence, life cannot be anything but despair. It is all meaningless; your suffering, your struggling, your anxiety is just that; suffering; struggle; fear; this is the experience of anyone standing on the edge of a bottomless chasm.

Look down, look at the empty abyss which waits to devour you whole, hear the blowing of an unfeeling wind which pushes at your back, harder and harder, day after day. You struggle against the wind, you push back, but eventually you grow weak. You grow tired, you give up, and you fall in.

The abyss will destroy any meaning you thought your life may have had; and time and death will erase any fame or affection you may have thought you had made for yourself in the minds of the living.

Such is the mind of one who faces death alone; faces the abyss alone; who has no God.

So Simeon awaited consolation; a single word from above; a single word which might put his disturbed spirit in peace.

Our infant Lord is brought into the temple. It is written that this is necessary for their purification according to the Law of Moses. But the Holy Spirit opened the eyes of Simeon to see that it was not for the purification of the child that he had come to the temple; but for the purification of the temple, the old and empty house of God, that the child had come to it.

For the Spirit again enlightens the mind of Simeon as he looks upon that infant child being carried unassumingly into the temple. His soul was torn by what was written in Malachi: *"may Judah who has married the daughter of a foreign god be cut off from the tents of Jacob."* See now how it is healed by what the same prophet uttered only a little later, *"And the Lord whom you seek will come suddenly into his temple." "Behold, he is coming, the messenger in whom you delight."*

Simeon cannot contain himself. He runs up to the holy family and takes Jesus into his arms. He does not ask permission, he does not introduce himself to Joseph and Mary. He has no time for niceties or politeness, for what he was awaiting, now he knows has come.

"Lord, now you let your servant depart in peace, according to your word."

What word was this? What is this word which now has given Simeon and all of Israel their consolation? What word is this that causes him to beg his God to depart this life, and yet not in despair, but in peace? What is this word which makes all the torments of this life bearable; which brings light to the darkness of our existence, which fills the emptiness of our hearts? What is this word that even breaks the teeth of death itself, that fills in the bottomless chasm; that renders the end of our lives but the beginning of a new one?

It is but one word: Immanuel; *'God is with us.'*

Simeon continues: *"For my eyes have seen your salvation."*

Indeed, the Spirit opens his eyes to see this one word, the word made flesh, God incarnate, who now returns to the temple He had rejected and despised centuries before; It is as if the Spirit whispers these words of consolation into Simeon's ear: "This time, God will not leave you as he had in former times due to your sin and wickedness; no amount of evil will cause him to forsake your people again; see?

He enters into His temple, just as He had promised, and with Him he carries a pledge of his steadfast love, a human body, united to himself forever; in this child God and man are forever joined, forever married, forever one; do not let your heart be troubled; rather run up to the infant and take him into your arms; touch him, feel him, and see that despite your fornication and spiritual adultery, God has loved Israel; the wedding has taken place; God has forever married Himself to mankind."

Simeon now welcomes death, for he sees that only in death will he be united to eternal life. Death is nothing but peace. His period of waiting has come to an end; his consolation had arrived.

Now dear Christians do we await our consolation, and truly look towards the end of our earthly lives; the inauguration of our everlasting life. For as long as any of us have gone to church, week after week, we have joined our tongues to Simeon's in praying that our lives would soon be ended, that our consolation would come, that we may indeed in death 'depart in peace.'

In fact we know that *'goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives,'* that *'the peace of the Lord will be with us always.'*

The flesh which Simeon bore in his hands we ever take into our body in our Lord's Supper; and comprehended in this flesh, the flesh of the infant Immanuel, is his life and work; his healings and exorcisms; his passion and bloody sweat; his crucifixion and death; his atoning sacrifice and holy obedience; his resurrection from the dead, and his ascension into heaven; and all of us with him, all of us in him, all of us in the human body he made his own 'for us men and for our salvation.'

The season of Advent draws to a close, but our entire lives are a season of Advent; a season of waiting; a season of bearing all suffering and torment and sadness and misery. But be comforted, O Israel, for:

“Behold, He is coming.”

+INJ+

Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Malachi 2:10-3:1; Luke 2:22-32.