

“Singing after the Consolation”

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)
An Advent Reflection

Luke 2:21-38

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This Advent season I've been exploring the Canticles. These are short Bible songs people sang to celebrate God. Canticles surrounded Jesus' birth.

We've heard the old priest Zechariah sing his *Benedictus*. (Canticles are known by their first words in Latin.) He and his wife had never had children, and now God gave them a son, John. John will lead the way for God's Messiah.¹

Next, Zechariah's wife Elizabeth sang her *Ave Maria*. Pregnant Mary had arrived, and Elizabeth rejoiced that the mother of "her Lord" had come to her. From Mary's womb the Glory of God will be born.

Then, Mary sang her *Magnificat*. She was poor, unmarried and pregnant — to the world, shamed. Yet God was blessing her and lifting her up. God lifts the lowly, pulls down the mighty, and changes the direction of history.

Today, we are skipping ahead. The best parts — Bethlehem, the manger, the angels and shepherds and, of course, Jesus' birth — we'll save that for Christmas Eve.

Today, we skip to after Jesus' birth, and two wise elders, Simeon and Anna.

As you listen to the reading, notice who they are. Simeon is righteous; he is faithful to God's promises. Simeon is devout; he reveres God. Anna is a prophet; she speaks God's word. Anna belongs to an ancient family and is of great age herself.

As you listen, notice where they are: God's Temple, the focus of God's presence, the meeting place between God and God's people.

As you listen, notice their longing. Simeon has longed for the consolation God's Messiah will bring, when he restores God's reign in God's world. The Holy Spirit promised Simeon he will live to see it happen. Anna has given decades in prayer and fasting: fasting in grief over what has been lost, fasting in protest because so much is wrong, fasting in hope for God will set things right.²

Now, let's hear God's Word:

¹ Each of these Advent-Christmas canticles expressed praise that was both personal (what God was doing for the singer) and prophetic (the Holy Spirit showed the singer what God was doing for the whole world.)

² Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 151

After eight days had passed [after his birth], 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.

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

*Now dismiss Your servant in peace, Master
according to Your word;
for my eyes have seen Your salvation,
which You have prepared
in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to Your people Israel.*

And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary,

*This child is destined for the falling and the rising of
many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so
that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and
a sword will pierce your own soul too.*

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

II

Anna and Simeon have been waiting for consolation. Consolation is help: help that relieves, help that rescues, help that stands beside us.

Consolation . . . when a city is besieged and bombarded . . . consolation relieves the encircled, rescues the surrounded, and stands with the silenced: "You are not alone, I am with you. I am saving you." So we wait.

Consolation . . . when their side of the bed is cold, and we can only see them in a picture, and their voice is heard no more . . . consolation relieves the pained, rescues the despairing, and stands with the weeping: "You are not alone, I am with you. I am saving you." So we wait.

Consolation . . . when the weight presses hard of yet another relationship we've rocked, another friendship we've crushed, another path of destruction we've left by our indifference, our carelessness, our meanness, or simply how good we are at messing things up . . . consolation repairs the wrong, forgives the sin, lifts the guilt, remakes the heart, and gives us life again. Consolation stands beside the Sin-full, "You are not alone, I am with you. I am delivering you." So we wait.

Simeon and Anna have been waiting for consolation. With the abiding practice of prayer, and the hungry protest of fasting, they cling to God's promise, and wait. How many mornings has Simeon come expecting, and nothing has changed? How many days has Anna hungered, and left empty? How many nights have fallen?

While all of Simeon's waiting does matter, his simple trust in the Lord matters . . . he cannot make it happen. He cannot hold what God has not yet given. It is still God's promise, in waiting. And the night still falls.

While all of Anna's waiting does matter, her simple faithfulness to God matters . . . she cannot make it happen. She cannot receive what God has not yet given. It is still God's promise, in waiting. And the night still falls.

While all of our waiting does matter . . . our trusting faith in God matters . . . night still falls.

III

Until the eternal Son is born, the Light who will not go out.

The Light comes into our darkness, and he shines! Our darkness of waiting, our darkness of night-always-falling, and he will never go out.

Simeon shows up, for yet another day. Anna arrives, for yet another day.

And God shows them what God has given.

Their waiting mattered. Their faithfulness mattered. But what changes everything, is that God has now given.

The Messiah, God has now given.

Salvation, God has now given.

Consolation, God has now given.

Jesus, God has now given.

Simeon sees that God's Salvation is expansive.

Salvation that restores the glory of God's people. Salvation for all of us, everyone everywhere. Salvation for Simeon to hold. Salvation for Anna to receive. Salvation for us to have and to hold, to receive and believe.

Theologian Lauren Winner writes this:

Simeon's faithfulness takes the cake. At least [Mary, Zechariah, and the shepherds] had visits from angels to rely on. Without so much as a nod from a passing [angel], Simeon looks at this tiny scrap of baby and sees the salvation of the world.³

Simeon sees our Consolation, and he sings his *Nunc Dimittis*. That means "Now you dismiss," the first words of his song. He has been a sentry, keeping watch all these years, looking for the first sign of consolation. He has trusted God's promise that he would see. Now, he has seen. Now, his work is finished. Now, he can go. Now, God can dismiss him, for Simeon has peace. His Consolation has come.

IV

Simeon sees our Consolation, holds him in his arms, and celebrates God. Then, he hands him back to mother Mary, and Simeon speaks to her.

He speaks to her of opposition. Mary's child, God's Consolation, will be battled by many. For many, Jesus will threaten their power. For many, Jesus will upset their understandings. For many, Jesus will be a disappointment. He will not be the consolation they were looking for. He will not be the salvation they had in mind. Jesus will be opposed.

Simeon speaks to her of revelation. Mary's child, God's Consolation will show the deepest truth of each of us, and we will squirm. The Light will shine in the darkness, but we love the darkness more. We hide in the shadows, even from ourselves, even from God. Jesus will be a crisis.

Simeon sees that God's Salvation is divisive.

³ Lauren F. Winner, "Simeon's Faithful Proclamation" on the blog *The Hardest Question* (December 26, 2011). <http://thq.wearesparkhouse.org/yearb/christmas1gospel-2/>

Simeon speaks of pain — Mary will be wounded to the core of her being. As for her son . . . God's Salvation, God's Consoling, comes at a cost. Jesus paid the cost. He bore in himself the suffering of all who need to be consoled. We who need to be consoled from oppression and violence; for us Jesus was oppressed and violated. We who need to be consoled from grief and aloneness; for us, Jesus wept and was abandoned. We who need to be consoled from sin and guilt; for us Jesus took upon himself our sin and bore the weight of our guilt.

Simeon speaks to Mary of falling and rising. With his life and crucifixion, Jesus falls for us. With his resurrection and glory, Jesus rises for us.

Jesus is our Salvation, our Consolation. So with Anna and Simeon, we can go in peace.