

Sermon by Bob Sessions
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Coming of Age

I'm going to celebrate a big landmark this summer: my 80th birthday. We'd planned to have a celebration in Decorah where my oldest son and his family live, because it is about halfway between Chicago and Minneapolis and would be a central location for our other two sons to join the celebration. But that plan has been scrapped because of an even bigger family event: our son Owen and his wife Melissa are expecting a baby girl in early June. We'll gather in Minneapolis to make it easier for them and so that everyone can meet the new arrival about a month after her birth.

I know that I won't be the star of the show at my birthday bash. But I don't mind at all. In fact, I'm delighted to share the spotlight. Like Simeon and Anna at the temple in Jerusalem, the new grandchild feels like a miracle we have long been waiting for.

Celebrations marking major life transitions are part of every culture. They happen when babies are born and when youths enter

adulthood, when people marry and when they die. They're vital to maintaining families, communities, and religious traditions.

Today, we turn to a pivotal moment in the early life of Jesus—his presentation at the temple, his coming of age event. This passage captures a profound encounter between divine promise and human faithfulness. It's a story of obedience, revelation, and hope that resonates with our own life journeys.

Mary and Joseph's journey to the temple was an act of obedience. They were faithful to the Law, ensuring that Jesus' life began in accordance with God's commands. Their offering—a pair of doves or pigeons—indicates their humility and modest means. Yet, this simple act of obedience became a channel for divine revelation. How often do we underestimate the power of obedience in the ordinary? Like Mary and Joseph, we are called to live faithfully in the small, seemingly mundane acts of life, and it is here that God's grace happens for most of us, most of the time.

Too often, though, we turn our ordinary acts of religious and daily discipline into the thing itself--it's as if through this motion, this

discipline when done with proper piety, is all that's required. But don't forget the heart. The reason to focus on doing ordinary acts well is to clear away our egos and to be open to God's grace. It's not about doing or saying or believing something and expecting a reward. Believing something won't open the gates of heaven for you; but opening your heart will.

The focus of the story lies on Jesus' arrival, or presentation by his parents, in a place he seems already to belong, and which will continue in some sense to be his. And it is the two prophetic figures Simeon and Anna, rather than the priests who were recipients of the redemption price, who welcome Jesus to his true home in the Temple.

Simeon is a "righteous" and "pious" man but holds no office, although the repeated references to the Spirit (vv. 25, 26, 27) help us recognize his actions and words as prophetic. Simeon's hymn of thanks and joy, known from the Evening Prayer of many traditions ("*Nunc dimittis*"), adds to the set of hymns Luke has already presented in the infancy narrative. The tone of the song suggests eager longing and its fulfillment, celebration that the appearance of Jesus is God's work, and that the child himself is the Messiah (v. 26).

As in the later parts of Isaiah and elsewhere in prophetic literature, this new light is not merely for Israel, but for the nations; Jesus' presence here in the holy city is a sign of universal salvation. Yet the epilogue to Simeon's praise is more ambiguous; his word to Mary, that Jesus will be opposed and that a sword would pierce her own soul, is ominous. This message to her is personal, but representative; she will experience something that Israel itself will also undergo. The salvation Jesus brings will be rejected by some and embraced by others, ironically because of its universal scope.

Simeon's words thus highlight three key truths:

- **Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise.**
- **Salvation is for all people.** Simeon proclaims Jesus as "a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Israel."
- **Following Jesus involves both joy and cost.** Simeon's prophecy to Mary about a sword piercing her soul foreshadows the suffering of the cross.

Are we waiting on God with the same faith as Simeon? I know that when Lori and I learned of the upcoming arrival of our granddaughter at Christmas, we didn't expect their announcement.

But we had been hoping for it. And in that moment, our lives were changed forever. Like Simeon, we again were reminded of the need to hold fast to hope, trusting that God's plan is unfolding even when we cannot see it.

Anna, a prophetess, had spent decades in worship, prayer, and fasting. When she saw Jesus, she gave thanks to God and spoke about Him to all who were waiting for redemption. Anna's life exemplifies unwavering devotion. Her faithfulness positioned her to recognize the Messiah and share the good news. In other words, faithfulness positions us to be open to grace. And to be ready to celebrate the unexpected.

The passage concludes with a glimpse of Jesus' growth: "And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him." This verse reminds us that Jesus' life, from the very beginning, was marked by God's grace and purpose.

In several Native American tribes of the Great Plains, young men traditionally engaged in a lengthy coming of age ritual. Soon after they entered adolescence, one night they would be taken away from their

teepees by a group of men and taken to an isolated place where they learned a variety of things essential to being responsible men. When they returned, after months of training, in recognition of the changes the boys underwent, the women of the village pretended not to know them. They were no longer boys with limited responsibilities, but were now ready to assume the roles and responsibilities of manhood.

Like Anna in the Bible, the young men's mothers, sisters, grandmothers and aunts were thankful for the boys' growth and abilities as they took on the mantle of adulthood. I can imagine that they awaited this day of grace, of the transformation of their boys, with the kind of faithfulness that Anna had.

Just as Jesus and the Native American young men matured in wisdom and knowledge, we are invited to grow in our faith and deepen our relationship with God. Lori's and my impending grandparenthood is expanding our hearts and opening us to wonderful possibilities. The very possibility of our granddaughter is changing us in ways we don't fully understand or realize. I expect that most of the changes will be

seemingly “ordinary” on the surface, but our hearts will undergo profound changes.

Luke 2:22-40 is more than a historical account; it’s a call to live lives of obedience, faith, devotion, and hope. Like Mary and Joseph, Simeon, and Anna, we are invited to encounter Jesus and participate in God’s redemptive plan.

Let us leave today inspired to:

- Embrace obedience in the ordinary, to realize that most of our connections with God and our fellow humans happen in everyday time and activities, not in extraordinary spiritual experiences.
- Wait on God with unwavering faith.
- Realize better the power of rituals like coming out parties: birthdays, births, graduations....

May we, like Simeon, see God’s salvation and, like Anna, declare it boldly. Amen.