

In our lectionary – the schedule of readings selected for each Sunday – we try to hit the main points, the chief teachings of Bible, throughout the course of the year. And so with few exceptions, we only hear these selections once a year.

Today's Gospel reading is a little different, though. While much of it is only heard on this first Sunday after Christmas, there's a part in it that we hear almost every week. It's that song that Simeon sings when the Virgin Mary hands him the infant Jesus. Christians have been including that song in worship for a very long time. Our use as Lutherans, singing it after the Supper, goes back right around 500 years. And before that, the Church had been using it in various settings since the fourth century.

So clearly, a lot of people have considered these words the Spirit sang through Simeon and thought they were worth hearing often. But what makes them so? Let's walk through them verse by verse and see what wonderful truth the Lord has given to us through the song of this faithful man.

*“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word:”*

Simeon begins by addressing the Lord. It's a title of power and might. It brings to mind the Lord creating the heavens and the earth, the Lord splitting the Red Sea apart, the Lord sending fire from heaven to consume Elijah's sacrifice, the Lord devastating armies by divine wrath, the glory of the Lord unable to be witnessed even by prophets in visions. That is the Lord.

And you know who else is the Lord? The little baby held in Simeon's arms, swaddled by his mother, rocked by his adoptive father. The baby who might have been dozing, or cooing, or crying. That baby is the Lord.

And to that Lord, that baby, Simeon confesses that he is His servant. He's not holding some tool he can use. Simeon doesn't think that, because this Lord has humbled Himself in such a way, he somehow has mastery over Him.

No, Simeon confesses that he is there to serve this baby, to do the will of this Child who can't even yet speak to him. It seems totally backward, and yet in the plan of God, it's absolutely true.

In this verse, Simeon also gives thanks that the Lord is now letting him depart in peace. Why would Simeon say this? Had he been really worried that, if he happened to leave the temple at the wrong time or step away to grab a bite to eat that he would've missed this wonderful event?

No, Simeon is an example of great faith in God's promises. The peace he is talking about is the peace of forgiveness, peace between God and man. Simeon knows that, not only is he a servant, but that he hasn't always been a faithful servant. He knows that he, like all men, has transgressed the law of God, being a rebellious servant to a faithful Master.

But Simeon knows that God has promised in His word to send a Savior to restore that peace. He, and faithful Anna, are among those who have waited for that peace, for the consolation of Israel. And now, they have been given that peace. From where?

*“For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,”*

Simeon knows that this baby is in fact the salvation of God. How does he know this? The Holy Spirit miraculously revealed this truth to him. And yet, the Spirit doesn't reveal something totally new here, a revelation out of thin air.

Nearly all that was revealed to Simeon had come much earlier, through the Scriptures, which the Holy Spirit had also given. Reading, hearing, studying those Scriptures, Simeon would have heard over and over again about the promised Messiah. Indeed, that's really the main point of what we call the Old Testament. Simeon knew that this Messiah was the seed sent to crush the serpent's head. He was the blessing promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He was the Prophet like unto Moses, who would speak the words of God. He was the Son of David who would sit on a throne that would be eternal. This was the salvation the Lord had foretold, the salvation that Simeon and all the faithful Old Testament believers had looked for.

Now, the Holy Spirit simply provides that last little bit: “This baby, that's Him!” There's nothing obvious to mark little Jesus as such. Simeon beholds this truth through the eyes of faith.

*“Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people.”*

The sending of this Salvation was a long time in coming. The Lord had done much throughout the history of the world in preparing this. It wasn't just to the faithful that these events were seen and told. It was prepared before the face of all people.

Some had opposed its coming. Those outside the people of God constantly sought to crush these puny upstarts and their strange worship of just one God. The Egyptians enslaved them. The Philistines raided them. The Assyrians slaughtered them. The Babylonians exiled them. The Greeks mocked them. The Romans taxed them. Yet as these kingdoms and empires rose and then inevitably fell, the promise of God endured. His faithfulness would never end.

His faithfulness remained even when those who received the promise were unfaithful in return. From the earliest, the people were tempted to chase after other gods, often by their own kin who had already gone into idolatry. Worshiping the idols would let them fit in better, get along with their neighbors, prosper economically. And idol worship was a lot more enjoyable for the flesh.

Though God had been preparing His salvation, and declaring it through the prophets, many of Israel ignored it. And so God poured out His wrath on them, through fiery serpents, through famine and drought, through the aforementioned Gentile powers. He would not be mocked by those who were opposed or indifferent to the Salvation He was preparing.

Yet for those who waited, those who trusted, the Lord never failed to sustain them. When they were bit by serpents and called out to the Lord, He caused Moses to raise up the bronze serpent, that those who looked at it would live. When famines came, the Lord sent ravens carrying food, jars of oil and flour that never ran out. When cries of repentance came up and idols were smashed, the Lord raised up mighty judges and faithful kings to deliver His people.

And for those who fell asleep watching the signs of preparation, waiting for their fulfillment, their faithful Lord brought them to His heavenly kingdom. Generations of Simeons and Annas came and went, all looking for the promised Salvation – and none were disappointed in the end.

*“A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.”*

The Lord’s salvation was prepared before all people, and it was for all people. The Child Simeon held is the light of the world. Apart from this Child, all walk in darkness. The darkness of sin casts shadows over thoughts, words, and deeds. It keeps man from knowing the right way to walk. In the darkness men trip, and stumble, and finally fall into the pit of hell.

But the Light has come! “In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.” This Child will lead people from all nations away from the lies that have held them captive for so long, bringing them into the light of truth. This Child, brought to the temple, the place of sacrifice, will give His life so that we may live.

This Child will bring all nations into His one nation, the true, eternal Israel, the Israel of faith. Simeon holds the fulfillment of the promises given to the patriarchs. Jesus is the glory of Israel, both in that He is reason why God chose Abraham hundreds of years before, and that through Him all may be brought into the people of God.

All this wonderful truth we are blessed to proclaim every time we sing this Song of Simeon. We confess that He is God and Lord, and we are mere servants. Yet He has come to give us peace, which He promises and declares to us in His word.

It may not seem that our ears have heard the words of the King of Kings when we hear the Bible, nor does it seem that our eyes have seen the Salvation of God when we receive Him in His Supper, but then neither did it appear to be the Lord God Almighty whom Simeon held. We behold Him by faith, as Simeon did.

Faith lets us see the fulfillment of His preparations, done before the face of all people. By the light of faith, He strengthens us to put away the works of darkness and rejoice in the glory of the true Israel.

When Simeon finally had to hand the baby back to Mary, he could depart in peace, for He had beheld the Christ. When you depart from the service, and even from this life, you can do so in peace, for you too have beheld the Lord’s salvation.

What more can be said, but “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit!”  
Amen!