

## “A Song of Trust for the New Year”

January 1, 2017

*The First Christmas Songs series*

Join in if you know these songs:

*I want a hippopotamus for Christmas...*

*All I want for Christmas is my two front teeth...*

Or the more recent - *All I want for Christmas is you...*

Many popular Christmas songs reflect our consumer mentality – what we want for Christmas. If we put those up against Simeon’s song, we’ll be challenged. Simeon knew what he needed – the Messiah promised of God from ages past – and it happened to fall in line with what he wanted. He had a deep desire to see the fulfillment of God’s work. He would see the Messiah sent from God, and when he finally did, he found deep and lasting peace. His song is called “Nunc dimittis” from the Latin translation – “now let depart.”

Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem to follow civil law and register for the census, and now they follow religious Law – from Leviticus – to present their child to the Lord. So they go to Jerusalem.

The Gospels don’t record a lot about Jesus’ early life, but we know that he was circumcised eight days after he was born. And this is the next big thing 40 days after his birth – his first trip to the Temple! It’s one of his first outings. What would be a normal “rite of passage” becomes a moment when God is revealed in a new way!

Maybe it seems strange that Mary and Joseph go through the normal stuff, considering that Jesus is the Son of God, but for me, it’s a reminder that Jesus is fully human. Yes, he is the Messiah, but he’s also born into a family and raised as a Jew by Jewish parents.

Mary had to go to the Temple to follow the Law around purification. She and Joseph are faithful and obedient, and while they’re there, Simeon is there, too. Just two words describe him – righteous and devout. Right away, we know that he’s someone special. He’s righteous – he has right aim in his relationship with God. He’s devout – faithful to worship in the Temple and faithful in prayer.

Perhaps that’s why Simeon is so certain about the promise. He’s filled with the Holy Spirit. Luke says that it’s the Spirit that revealed the promise to him. It’s the Spirit’s work that brought him to the Temple that day. And he’s so sure of God’s faithfulness that he takes the Christ child in his arms and praises God. Think of a moment when you’ve seen an older person holding a brand-new baby. That’s what’s happening here. The two ends of earthly life – beginning and end – and the hope and peace.

I wonder how others looked at Simeon. I always assume that he's older, but we don't really know. What we do know is that he's been waiting and hoping and trusting in God. We know that Mary and Joseph hear Simeon's song and marvel at what he sings.

Perhaps he confirms their hope in what God was doing through Jesus. Along with the others who have sung in the whole nativity story, Simeon encourages them with his words, but also offers a realistic picture of what's ahead. Our story of salvation isn't just about a baby who is born to save, but a Lord who invites us to follow him daily and a Savior who will die for the sake of the whole world.

And this song isn't just for the Jewish people. Simeon says that Jesus is a light to the Gentiles, too – to all the world! Light is so powerful, and we see that clearly when we celebrate Christmas – when we light candles and hold them up high to remember that the Light of the world is here. God is with us!

Today marks a new year in terms of how we measure time. And every day is a new opportunity to praise God and trust God. We hear that in Scripture: "God's mercies are new every morning. Great is God's faithfulness." But how does Simeon's song help us to step into this new year in a new way?

There's been a lot of talk about how 2016 was such a tough year – a contentious presidential election, divisiveness, beloved entertainers lost too soon, and more personally, many of us are praying that this year will be better – less struggle, less grief, less difficulty – and more hope.

Maybe it helps to look back at how we've been sustained and held up by God's grace working through those around us. I experienced that the day after Christmas. My grandma died just over a year ago, and my oldest sister, Anne, gave my family a special gift. She was inspired in a dream and wrote a poem to honor my grandma, and a part of it was a witness to God's grace in the midst of her own grief.

I was inspired by our Tuesday morning Bible study. You've already heard Marcia's witness to God's faithfulness, comfort, and love in the psalm that she wrote. And you'll hear another psalm on Children's Sunday that speaks to God's faithfulness.

I received a note from a young family that attends our church. Their 3-year old daughter decided the play church and preach with her new microphone that she got for Christmas. They sent a video of her saying, "God says there's good in everyone." Inspired words from a little girl!

Friends, we might be waiting on God for answers to the tough stuff of life. Maybe you're waiting for God and hoping for something – relief from pain, remedy for illness, relationships that are healed or new relationships that are life-giving, or a new job or opportunity to come along. Simeon's song reminds us that sometimes we're called to wait and hope and trust.

Simeon's waiting was not in vain. He knew that the words from Psalm 27 were true: "Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord." Easier said than done, I know, but there's our challenge. There's the call to trust in the Lord even when we're not sure what's ahead. There's the invitation to be confident in God's promises and firm in God's purposes for us.

In our Methodist heritage, John Wesley began a tradition of a covenant renewal each year in the mid-1700's. It was a time when people would commit to God, and usually it was offered at the beginning a new year. In your bulletin, you have a copy of what's become known as Wesley's Covenant Prayer. And it's a powerful as we worship on New Year's Day and consider Simeon's song of trust and peace.

Let's pray this together:

*I am no longer my own, but yours.*

*Put me to what you will, place me with whom you will.*

*Put me to doing, put me to suffering.*

*Let me be put to work for you or set aside for you,*

*Praised for you or criticized for you.*

*Let me be full, let me be empty.*

*Let me have all things, let me have nothing.*

*I freely and fully surrender all things to your glory and service.*

*And now, O wonderful and holy God,*

*Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer,*

*you are mine, and I am yours.*

*So be it.*

*And the covenant which I have made on earth,*

*Let it also be made in heaven. Amen.*

This isn't an easy prayer to pray. It challenges us to put our trust in God and calls us to be available to God. The word "surrender" is a tough word for us – to invite God to be in control when most of us want to believe that we can control it all.

One of our charter members, Ken Ploughman, passed away this week. He and his wife, Shirley, were married for just shy of 70 years. For me and for many, their faithfulness to God and each other is a powerful witness. Shirley said to me, "Ken's at peace, and so am I." And I thought of Simeon – trusting in God's promises and praising God.

I pray that we could wait, hope, and trust like Simeon – and know that God is faithful.

Thanks be to God! AMEN.