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CHRISTMAS BLESSINGS AND THANKS-GIVING  
 Luke 2:22-38; Christmas 1C; December 28-29, 2024

The Gospel of Luke tells us most of what we know about the birth of Jesus: the conception and birth of John the Baptist, who would prepare the way of the Lord; the angel's annunciation to Mary of the conception of God's Son in her by the Holy Spirit; the circumstances of Mary and Joseph being in Bethlehem for Jesus' birth; the angels and shepherds; and, today, the Holy Family in Jerusalem for Mary's purification sacrifice following giving birth, and the first-born Son's redemption, according to the Law of Moses. (Supposedly, in the song, "The Twelve Days of Christmas," the "five gold rings" of the fifth day of Christmas, which is Sunday/today, represent the five books of Moses, the *Torah*, the Law.)

It was while Mary and Joseph were in Jerusalem with Jesus to do as prescribed by the Law that they encountered Simeon and Anna in the temple. This section of Luke two is steeped in Old Testament themes and concepts. Luke notes the  **blessing** (εὐλογέω) and  **giving thanks** (ἀνθομολογέομαι) done by Simeon and Anna. Though the words "blessing" and "giving thanks" in English appear to have nothing in common, they have the same root, λόγος, Greek for "word."

The biblical concepts of us "blessing" and "giving thanks" involve words spoken to God and to people. In our text today, Simeon speaks words of blessing both to God and to Mary and Joseph. Anna speaks words of thanks-giving to God and words about Jesus to people. Both blessing and thanks-giving are based on what God has done. So, Simeon blesses God for what God was doing in Christ Jesus, and then blesses Mary and Joseph with that same blessing. Anna gives thanks to God for sending His Son into this world, and then tells people that God had redeemed them as He had promised.

What does this have to do with us? Our celebration of Christmas – and our whole Christian life for that matter – is about blessing God and others, giving thanks to God and before others for what God has done for us in Jesus. With Simeon, we bless God for sending Jesus and share that blessing with others. With Anna, we give thanks to God for Jesus and share with others our reasons for giving thanks.

What does Luke say about Simeon blessing God, Mary and Joseph? What had God done?

**Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the Law, he took Him up in his arms and blessed God.**

God had promised Simeon that he would not die until he saw the promised Messiah/Christ. Guided by the Holy Spirit, he recognized the baby Jesus as God's Savior when Mary and Joseph brought Him to the temple. Simeon **took Him into his arms and blessed God**. (Personally, I find the concept of "blessing God" hard to grasp. How can we "bless" God, since it is God alone "from whom all blessings flow"?)

I find it helpful that the New Testament word for "blessing" (εὐλογία) has come down to us in English as "eulogy," speaking good words about someone, especially a loved one who has died. Sermons at Christian funerals are "eulogies," but not primarily of the deceased person. The only "good words" that matter when Christians have died are the good words of Jesus Christ, who saved them, the One in whom the Christians who died had faith. At Christian funerals we bless God/eulogize God/speak good words to God for the work He did of saving people by faith and taking Christian souls to heaven until the day of the resurrection of their bodies.

What else did Simeon bless/eulogize God for, beyond seeing the Lord's Christ before he died?

**"Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace  
according to Thy word,  
for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation,  
which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people,  
a light to lighten the Gentiles  
and the glory of Thy people Israel"** (LSB 199-200).

Simeon blessed God for allowing him to see the Lord's Christ, which meant that he could now **"depart in peace"** to be with God forever. Simeon was ready to die after his long wait for Jesus because he had seen God's **salvation** for all people. Jesus came as Savior of the Jews, God's **people Israel**, and **Gentiles**, the nations. While holding Jesus in his arms, God Himself in human flesh, Simeon blessed God.

His words are well-known to us as the Lutheran Divine Service's Post-Communion canticle, the *Nunc Dimittis*, Latin for "now You dismiss." After receiving the Lord's Supper, we bless God for Jesus' body and blood, which forgive our sins, strengthen our faith, and promise that our bodies will be raised from the dead on the Last Day.

Having received God's flesh and blood into our mouths in the Sacrament, we bless God for saving us and making us ready to depart in peace at any time. The dismissal blessing that the pastor gives after we receive the Sacrament reminds us of this: "The body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ strengthen and preserve you in body and soul to life everlasting. Depart ✠ in peace."

Having blessed God, Simeon went on to bless Mary and Joseph. **And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary His mother, "Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."**

These words of blessing cut two ways. Simeon notes that people will be divided over the Christ who had come. John noted this in our Christmas Gospel: the Word made flesh **"came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him."** This is what Simeon expressed by the **"fall...of many"** and a **"sign that is opposed."** Not everyone believes in Jesus as their Savior, and for their opposition is their **fall**.

But to those who believe in Jesus as **revealed in their hearts**, it means their **rising** again to life. So John noted: **"But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God"** (1:11-12). God's children receive this Word of blessing in their baptisms into Christ and through faith.

Simeon noted what it would cost Jesus' mother, Mary, for us to be blessed: **and a sword will pierce through your own soul also.** For us to be blessed by God, Jesus had to suffer and die on the cross for our sins. Mary would witness her Son's crucifixion, a sword piercing her heart. A heart with a sword through it is depicted in the "Visitation" stained glass window under the belltower. This sword-pierced-heart symbol reminds us of the cost Jesus paid on the cross for our sins, as well as the pain it caused Mary to watch her first-born Son suffer and die there. God blesses us, so we bless God for Jesus' saving death and resurrection, and we bless others with that Gospel Word, a blessing that cost God and Mary their Son, which we should never forget.

What about Anna's giving thanks to God and sharing her reasons with those who were waiting in hope for their Savior? **And coming up at that very hour [Anna] began to give thanks to God and to speak of Him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.** The word for "giving thanks" to God is found only here in the Bible, but is closely related to the often-used word for confession, especially confessing faith in God. Anna's "thanks-giving" to God acknowledged what God was doing in Christ Jesus. She confessed her faith in the Christ Child as her Savior and the Redeemer of the world.

Whenever we confess our faith, it is a confession spoken to God and to the world. We thank and praises God for who He is as our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, and all that God does for us. And the thanks and praise we give to God we do before the world so others can hear it and be blessed with faith in the true God.

So, with Simeon, let us take up the baby Jesus in the "arms" of our hearts, blessing God and each other for what He has done to save us. With Anna, let us give thanks to God, confessing who He is and what He has done for us in Jesus, telling everyone of the redemption we have for His sake. Amen.