

Sermon for Christmas 1B Luke 2:22-40

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No one really wants the consolation prize. You know, the prize contestants get because they don't want people crying on TV when they lose. And winning something, anything, feels better than nothing. Even if it is not what they have their hearts set on. I remember it happening this way from watching game shows as a kid...the contestant would have it all on the line, \$10,000 for a new car, or an exotic vacation. And with a wrong answer, a failed roll in a game of chance, or picking the wrong door, all would be lost except the consolation prize. The at-home version of the TV game show, so you could continue to relive your disappointment over and over again from the comfort of your own living room. No one really wants the consolation prize. They always took it, but no one really wanted it.

Maybe that is, except, Simeon from our scripture reading. Now, there's a lot about Simeon's back story we don't know, like all of it. What we do know is that he is old, he spent a lot of time in the Jerusalem Temple, and filled with the Holy Spirit, he waited for the consolation of Israel. watched as people made their way in and out, performing all the usual tasks and sacrifices. But even while performing the usual tasks, no one thought these were normal times. Or maybe said better, no one thought these were the best of times. Too much wasn't right with the world, and so Simeon watched and waited until the time when the Holy Spirit would reveal to him the plans of God for comforting his people.

Which is kind of a sad place to be in. He is waiting for the consolation gift. To be comforted in their pain and misery. It is as if they were once again slaves in Egypt crying out to God to remember them. Or exiled in Babylon, away from their promised homeland and communities, in bondage to a foreign power. And as Roman soldiers stand guard outside the Temple walls, he doesn't have to imagine what his ancestors endured. He knows their cry, he knows how distant God can feel at times. It is his reality. He has spoken the same prayers as generations before, and now he watches and waits for the time when God will remember his people Israel. When God will once again console them.

And Simeon knows that God will. He knows it because he heard over and over again in the scriptures of God doing just that. God always shows up when they are in need. And God's Spirit is with him in that moment, reminding him of those promises, reminding him to whom he belongs. But I still find it sad that what he waits for is consolation.

Because I want more than to be consoled. I want the main prize of God's full mercy and grace, not the at-home version of the game where lip service is placed to how deep God's love for this world is. Isn't there more to God's promise than consolation? Then the parting gift? But maybe,

comparing the promises of God to games shows designed to trick and test us isn't the fairest of comparisons.

Because, some days, what Simeon needed the most was to know that he was remembered. That he isn't enduring the challenges of this world alone. Likewise, we don't need our lives to be perfect, as if they should be featured in Home and Garden Magazine, but instead, to know the times when it is trying, we hold onto the comfort that we aren't alone, God is with us. To remember that in the moments when the world seems to press in. When sin and death take hold, and it seems that evil wins in our lives and the relationships around us, to be consoled is but the first step in remembering our identity in God as children, baptized, forgiven, and called to live into God's new kingdom.

On Christmas Eve, at the services I gave the message, I told the story of Janet how Christmas was never the same for her after the death of her husband, Leroy, on Christmas Eve. How Christmas is a reminder that God does not neglect us when the world seems the bleakest.

But there is more to the story. There are losses, and not just through death, that when they come, test us into forgetting our identity. As if so much of who we are is based on being a spouse, parent, child, or sibling, when those relationships are lost, so is how we see ourselves, which makes part of the process of grief about rediscovering things about ourselves.

The process of grief isn't about forgetting or dulling pain, it is about continuing to let the same passions and cares be expressed in new ways. For Simeon, he was holding on to an idea of what Israel was. He was holding onto one particular way that God led the people. He wanted to talk to God like Abraham did. He wanted to be led by a pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day. He wanted to experience God in the same way that others before him did. And surely, there were signs of God's presence all around him as he sat in the Temple day after day. But it wasn't enough. He was still looking for consultation because his identity was bound up in remembrance of what God had once done when the king of Israel sat upon the throne of David.

Ultimately, Janet discovered that she was still who she'd always been. She could still love and care for others, just as she did for Leroy. She could use her passions and gifts, her love of cooking, and share meals with others going through their own trials, or just needing a connection. She learned to knit for the first time to make prayer shawls. Nothing had stopped her before, but she and Leroy had their own ways of serving. And now, finding new ways of living out her faith, was a way to honor all that had come before and remember that the hope she found in Jesus never went away.

Simeon's journey may have looked pretty different, but they share a big similarity, God is the foremost in making them who they are because it is God who has created, who has made us for one another, but most importantly has made us for God's own sake. Simeon is overcome with joy upon the arrival of this infant, of Jesus, into the world. Long before Jesus DOES anything spectacular, long before he teaches large crowds, heals the sick, dies on the cross, or rises from the grave, Jesus is the sign that God is there.

Jesus is the sign that who we are, is bound up in who God is. Israel's identity is bound to who God is, not in the status of their king. Simeon's identity is bound to who God is, as the one who doesn't give out consolation prizes but in whose presence we find the greatest gift of peace and grace. Janet's identity is not found ONLY as that of a spouse, or mother, or sister, but is first as a child of God.

And this child, the Christ, Jesus who has been born to us. We find our identity in him because he is God among us, not as a consolation prize, but as the fulness of God's love to restore all things, through forgiveness and the promise of new life.