

What Would You Need To See?
Luke 2:21-40; Psalm 148

Psalm 148

¹Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD from the heavens;
praise him in the heights!

²Praise him, all his angels;
praise him, all his host!

³Praise him, sun and moon;
praise him, all you shining stars!

⁴Praise him, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens!

⁵Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for he commanded and they were created.

⁶He established them forever and ever;
he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

⁷Praise the LORD from the earth,
you sea monsters and all deeps,

⁸fire and hail, snow and frost,
stormy wind fulfilling his command!

⁹Mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars!

¹⁰Wild animals and all cattle,
creeping things and flying birds!

¹¹Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!

¹²Young men and women alike,
old and young together!

¹³Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven.

¹⁴He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful,
for the people of Israel who are close to him.

Praise the LORD!

Luke 2:21-40

²¹After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

²²When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³(as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), ²⁴and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.

²⁷Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation,
³¹which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”

³³And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.

³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

³⁶There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

³⁹When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him. ■

The Sermon

They walked into the intimidatingly vast structure in the heart of the city, which was the capitol of their nation and the center of their religion. They were a young man and a very young woman, cradling an infant barely five weeks old.

The tradition that impelled them to go there that day was rooted in the distant past, dominated their lives in the present, and was the only hope for their future. The tradition rumbled through the nation's history, and rolled through an individual's life, like thunder in a vast and awesome sky that tells each individual that the rain is here, so prepare for the wadis to run and the crops to grow and your fields to require the work of your hands.

The instruction they were following, rooted in the ancient past and alive and well in the everyday present, included Exodus 13:1: "The LORD said to Moses: Consecrate to me all the firstborn; whatever is the first[, of both] human beings and animals, is mine."

And today it was about the rules for purification as recorded in Leviticus 12, a code which sound bizarre today, and seems like something that's rooted in men's abject terror of women and the mysterious workings of their God-given bodies; namely,

"If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean seven days; her time of purification shall be thirty-three days; when the days of her purification are completed, she shall bring to the priest a lamb for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering. The priest shall offer it before the Lord, and make atonement on her behalf; then she shall be clean. If she cannot afford a sheep, she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering; and the priest shall make atonement on her behalf, and she shall be clean."

(I've just left out a lot that's even more specific about what was said to make a woman ceremonially unclean.)

Even today, a number of resources that talk about what Mary went to the Temple to do—current resources for Bible scholarship—don't mention Leviticus 12, which is strange enough.

Instead, on the issue of bringing turtledoves or pigeons for sacrifice, they often point instead to Leviticus 5, which has nothing to do with childbirth at all: it's just the instructions for when you're guilty and you know it.

In other words, there are study resources still in circulation today that propagate the mistaken idea that new parents (mothers, specifically) needed to go make sacrifices at the Temple—because they had sinned.

And the Church continues to pray, Come, Lord Jesus; we need you here as quickly as we can get you.

So, after everything they have already been through, the young couple with the newborn baby now make their way into the holiest place in their world, to do what the tradition commands.

They come having been told by an angel that this entirely human child was, like every other human child, absolutely unique; and *unlike* every other child, this child was parented by the Holy Spirit, and is, uniquely, the Son of God.

They come having been assured by their religious and cultural establishment that *they are sinners*—particularly the young mother, by our age classifications a girl, whose only say in this whole circumstance was to say “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word,” when the angel had told her—hadn't asked her approval, had just *told* her—what was going to happen.

I can picture them absolutely slumped over, with the weight of the whole world on their shoulders—maybe the weight of the whole universe—walking into the Temple with wide and not-fully-comprehending eyes, cradling in their fragile arms a holy mystery.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel.

The Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would not see death before he had seen the Messiah.

On the day when Mary and Joseph brought their 40-day-old baby to Jerusalem, Simeon was guided by the Spirit to come to the temple.

“Simeon, faithful servant, now is the time
for which you have dedicated your life
to waiting.”

Is there anything about which you think to yourself,
“If only I can make it long enough to see that, my life will be complete”?

Anybody who grew up in central Illinois has heard, countless times over the course of their lives, that Chicago Cubs fans “have been waiting since 1908” for their team to win the World Series again. It’s the longest championship drought of any major American professional sports team.

When that annual statement came up again this year, as the Cubs were once again rewarding our need for things to be predictable, it occurred to me that there are probably not a large number of Cubs fans who have been waiting since 1908. Probably that number is zero. There aren’t many people around who have been doing anything since 1908.

What is your lifetime dream?

What would make you say, once you had seen it, “Now, I know that I have seen what I needed to see”?

I was part of a community where the local church leaders had decided to have a Thanksgiving service; it had happened in that town in the distant past, but longer ago than most people’s recent memory. No one had any idea how many people to expect would attend, but the clergy got together and thought, let’s give it a shot and see what happens.

Just for the service, we put together a community choir with members from all the different churches. The choir loft in the church where we gathered faced the congregation, so the choir members took their places early for a short practice, and then the people started filing in for the service.

A member of my church was seated next to a woman who had been a prominent member of the community for decades. It was a rare treat for that church member to listen, as one worshiper after another filed in, to the

whispered commentary of the pillar of the community whom she was sitting next to.

Somebody would come through the narthex doors, and the woman would go, “Well, will wonders never cease!”

Somebody else would come in and sit down.

“As I live and breathe! I never thought he’d set foot in church again.”

Ten seconds later: “Well, look who’s there. Now I’ve seen it all.”

To listen to that commentary you would think none of the 200 people who showed up for that service had ever come to any church before in their lives.

My friend almost expected the woman to say at some point, “All right, I can go in peace.”

What is the one thing that you would need to see in order to feel that you have seen what you needed to see in this life?

I would submit to you that that is not a morbid question whose answer kind of says, “All right; you’ve seen that, now you’re done.” I don’t think it’s a question about death, so much as it is a question about your life, and what it means, and what matters to you and your life.

And any question about your life necessarily is a question about the one who gave you this life, who brought you into being, who imagined your soul into existence.

People would one day ask, of the baby whom Mary and Joseph brought into the Temple, “Who is this man?”

The question that came before, during, and since that time is: Who is this God?

And, for that matter: what does this God want with me?

When Mary and Joseph brought their baby, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God.

His words, which the Church has called the Song of Simeon, have been used for generations in the Church of England as a dismissal at the end of the day for Evening Prayer or Evensong:

Lord, now you let your servant go in peace:
your word has been fulfilled.
My own eyes have seen the salvation
which you have prepared
in the sight of every people;
a light to reveal you to the nations,
and the glory of your people Israel.

Lord, now you let your servant go in peace.

Peter O'Toole, rest his soul, in his very twilight years, got one more crack at winning an Academy Award in 2007 with a movie called *Venus*. He was, at this point, even older than his years. There are countless actors and theatre buddies with stories about going out for a little drink with dear Peter in London and waking up two days later in Cairo or Paris or Toronto and having no idea how they got there.

Those wild days long since left behind, O'Toole went out on one last promotional tour to talk up the last great movie role he would ever have—one written for a very elderly person—and inevitably the talk, with Letterman or on the Tonight Show or any of a dozen other appearances—would turn to thoughts that had kind of a valedictory undertone.

He was asked at one point what he thought would eventually be written on his tombstone, and he talked at some length about an old coat that he had had, which had been with him through a great deal of that carousing and wildness, and which you could imagine was not the most savory garment in the world after all that.

So he sent it to the cleaners in London, and when he got it back, by way of apology for not being able to deliver a brand-new quality coat back to him, a note was attached, which read: "It distresses us to return work which is less than perfect." That, he said, was what he wanted as his own benediction.¹

The late blues giant B.B. King had recently said, “I don’t feel that no big stone should be put over my head, saying he did this, he did that. I believe I’m just ordinary. And I’d like for people to think of me that way, as just a guy that tried.’ And someone...who ‘wanted to be loved by other people, because he loved other people.’”ⁱⁱ

There used to be that show where James Lipton would interview a famous actor for an hour, and at the end of the hour, he had a set of questions that he asked every guest. One of those questions was something like, “If God exists, what do you want to hear God say to you when it’s all said and done?” And I remember especially the actor Anthony Quinn. When the host asked, “If God exists, what do you want to hear God say to you?”, Anthony Quinn thought for several seconds before he gave his answer: “Tony...I understand.”

It had been revealed to Simeon that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus in, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God:

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”

And Joseph and Mary were amazed at what was being said about their son.

Then Simeon blessed them and said directly to Mary,

“This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel,
and to be a sign that will be opposed
so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—
and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Some commentators think that last line probably refers to “Jesus’ devaluing of natural family ties”ⁱⁱⁱ later in the gospel, but no mother, and hopefully no father, needs any scriptural allusions to know what it means.

People who are not parents love and feel and empathize just as intensely as anyone else. But no one is more vulnerable than a parent. When someone becomes a mother or a father, there is someone whose welfare is now infinitely more crucial to you than your own, whose preservation is a matter of life and death *to you*.

Maybe we see in the vulnerability of motherhood a glimpse of the Almighty, all-powerful God. In that vulnerability, we begin to know something about the depth of our creator's love for us.

There was also a prophet, Anna, of great age. She never left the temple, but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. When Simeon gave his blessing to Mary and Joseph, Anna came, and began to praise God, and spoke about the baby to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

The prophet Anna was constant in her faith and steadfast from her young adulthood, through her long life, into her golden years and beyond. Simeon, the righteous man, always believed the salvation of Israel would come, even after long centuries when God's people had every opportunity to doubt, to forget, to give up hope.

Anna and Simeon never stopped living under the assumption that God is the most important reality in our life and in the life of the world, regardless of circumstances, regardless of the length of time they remained in hope and expectation.

Fred Craddock used to quote Franz Werfel, saying that for those who will not believe, there is never enough proof, and for those who believe, proof is irrelevant.^{iv}

Anna and Simeon had the audacity to keep living under the certainty that God would fulfill every promise.

It affected the way they lived their lives.

It affected the way they treated other people,
the way they contributed to the needs of the suffering,
the things they said and did,
the regularity of their prayers,
the integrity of their decisions,

the generosity and positivity that defined their lives.

Sammy Potts, former president of Barber Scotia College, used to say that one day there would be a stone with his name and two numbers on it. The two numbers, he said, he couldn't do anything about. But the dash in the middle was up to him.

An infinitely vulnerable young couple came into the Temple
clinging gently, carefully, but tightly to a holy mystery
which was the object of their deepest, most devoted love.

What would you need to see
that would make you feel like your life was complete?

What does God want you to do to help make that vision a reality?

And when Simeon says,
“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,”

Do you believe him?

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ⁱ Told at least once: on *Late Night with David Letterman*, while promoting his 2007 movie *Venus*.

ⁱⁱ David Fricke, “B.B. King: Remembering the Henry Ford of the Bended Guitar String—and the Blues’ Greatest Ambassador.” *Rolling Stone*, June 18, 2015; p. 52.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hammond & Busch in the Norton Critical Edition of *The English Bible: King James Version—The New Testament and Apocrypha* (2012; p. 137, n. Luke 2:35); see also the *HarperCollins Study Bible* (1993; p. 1960, n. Luke 2:35) and elsewhere.

^{iv} Fred B. Craddock quoted this in his address to APCE, “Hope when Cynicism Is Easier,” in Atlanta in February, 1995; he cited the introduction to Werfel’s *Song of Bernadette*, but I didn’t find it in the version I consulted.