

Sermon on Luke 2:21-40
CCRC, 31 December 2023
When You're Waiting for Consolation

Dear Friends of God,

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Simeon was

waiting for the consolation of Israel

At that time, Israel needed some consolation. They were in a bad way. Their hopes and dreams had no connection to reality. Their expectations were not being met.

At this time the Jewish people were living in what is known as the second-Temple period. The first Temple had been demolished during the exile. The second Temple was the one built when the exiles returned, during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah and Zerubbabel.

But despite all their hopes of a renewed and wonderful life in the land, nothing really came of it. They understood that they were the people of the one true God. They knew that they were graciously chosen to be his people and as his people were to be a light to the nations. But something was deeply wrong.

Physically and geographically, they were in the Holy Land, centered in Jerusalem, the city of Zion. But theologically and politically they were still in exile.

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- The promises of God had yet to be fulfilled,
- the wrong rulers were still in power,
- the age of the messianic blessing had been delayed, and
- God has yet to act in a decisive way.

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Sure, they lived in the land, but why is the pagan in charge of the land of promise? Sure, they had all the symbols of their faith – the temple, the law, circumcision, the land, festivals, synagogues. But why hasn't God decisively brought in his kingdom? This is the land of unrequited dreams, the land of spiritual malaise and smoldering frustration.

They needed comfort. They needed action. They needed hope. They needed the consolation. And by consolation, the Bible means God's promised kingdom and all the comfort, confidence and strength that is to come with it.

God had set Simeon to waiting for that consolation. He promised that Simeon would see it.

But others couldn't wait. They wanted to do something now.

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The Zealots offered the consolation of armed conflict. They believed that the people didn't have the consolation of the kingdom of God because they haven't risen up. Let's trust God to fight our battles and openly revolt against the pagan oppressor.

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The Essenes offered the consolation of withdrawal. Let's set up a parallel kingdom in the desert, outside of the current realities. There we will find consolation through withdrawal, prayer, and strict holiness.

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The Pharisees offered the consolation of engaged, public holiness. If only we could be holy and pure, if only we could rid the land of unrighteous people like prostitutes and tax collectors and evildoers. Strict observance of the law will enable God to act and bring the consolation of God's kingdom.

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The Sadducees said we have to make the best with what we have; let's be realistic; let's work with what is on the ground. Work with the powers that be and seek to influence them toward our goals and hopes. Then the consolation of the kingdom would come.

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But Simeon had another plan. He waited. He was not aligned with the Zealots, the Essenes, the Pharisees, or the Sadducees. Yet he longed for the same thing as they did. The only difference was the strategy. Simeon had a vision from God that he would see the consolation of Israel, so he waited for it at the Temple. Simon personified faithful, hopeful, expectant Israel. He was "looking forward," "waiting." We assume he was an old man by this time, but we don't know. We don't know how long he had been waiting. The only thing we need to know is that Simeon was the one who would see it. The consolation would come in his lifetime and he would recognize it when it came.

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And in this baby Jesus, Simeon saw it. Among the usual crowds, Simeon spotted the unusual. He saw in this baby the salvation of God. He saw in this baby the one who would bring in that kingdom of forgiveness and wholeness and right living before the face of God. He saw in this baby a light that would shine for all the nations to see. Surely a new day was coming through this child. He recognized the coming of the kingdom of God in a powerful new way.

But Simeon saw something else. Not everyone would see this child in the way he did. Not everyone would see him as the consolation from God.

Simeon points to controversy.

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This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many will be revealed.

When this child grew up, he spoke to the hopes and fears of the people. But it wouldn't be what they wanted to hear.

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And you wonder, what would Jesus say that would cause so much controversy?

Jesus mostly spoke about the kingdom of God. His preaching was filled with the idea that Israel's story was reaching its climactic, dramatic fulfillment. God was on the move, about to act decisively in time and history. Matthew records Jesus' theme for all his sermons:

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From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." Matthew 4:17

Jesus announced that the kingdom was "near" and "at hand," "in your midst." He told stories and parables about the kingdom of God.

So far, so good. When he preached that in Nazareth in his home synagogue, reading from Isaiah about good news to the poor and the acceptable year of the Lord, people initially loved it.

First century Jews would listen to this with a lot of interest. Their deepest hope and dream was that God would bring in his kingdom. They were looking for a new exodus, a new messianic age, the dawn of a new era. Finally, finally, it is starting. At this point Jesus was entirely comprehensible. Here is a prophet of God rising up to show us what to do. As Luke records it,

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All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. Luke 4:22

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But there was a scandal about his message, too. Jesus said that the Kingdom of God is near, at hand, in your midst. Jesus spoke about other people belonging to this kingdom, of God passing by those who refuse to believe. Well, we don't know about that, Jesus. We are the children of Abraham. Immediately after Jesus spoke some words they didn't want to hear, Luke says this:

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All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way. Luke 4:28-30

Clearly Jesus could cause the rising and falling of many even on the same day.

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Why didn't the people accept his message about the kingdom of God?

As Brian McLaren put it, to a Jewish hearer in Jesus' day, "the kingdom of God" may have been an accessible and evocative metaphor, but "at hand" would have come as a shock and a contradiction to what everyone thought.

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Everyone thought that the kingdom of God could not happen now; it could only happen then—*later*, after the Romans were ejected or eliminated, which in turn couldn't happen (for the Zealots) until *later*, after the Jews were militarily mobilized and led by a great military liberator (or messiah), which couldn't happen (for the Pharisees) until *later*, after all the prostitutes and drunks and other undesirables were either reformed or otherwise eliminated. Put together, these conditions were so hard to imagine actually occurring anytime soon that they were considered (by the comfortably adjusted...Sadducees) completely improbable, no practically impossible. The kingdom of God? Maybe in some distant someday. At hand, here and now? *No way!* Brian McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*

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That's a fairly convenient point of view, really. Think of our situation today. If you are waiting for something else to happen before the kingdom of God is in place, what does that do for your life now? If you believe that war should cease or that poverty should be eradicated, or that the environment should be cleaned up—but only later when God ushers in the kingdom—what ethic will control your life now? It doesn't really matter what I do. I really shouldn't have to worry about doing anything about it because God will fix it when his kingdom comes. It all comes later, and I'll just live my comfortable little life, or create my own little kingdom now.

But what if the kingdom is closer than you think? What if someone said, "now is the time!" Open your hearts and open your checkbooks. Shut down your weapons factories, redistribute your wealth, open your doors to others. That would be scandalous. It would be hard to imagine that such a prophet would be well received. What do you mean the kingdom is near? We can't see any evidence of it. We liked it better when it was far off.

No wonder they wanted to push him off the brow of the cliffs near Nazareth. No wonder he got under the skin of the powers.

And what's more, this kingdom is not the kingdom they were expecting. Jesus alters the traditional stories of the kingdom of God. He has all the wrong people living happily ever after. He mixes up the characters and changes the ending. Yes, God is going to act. But it won't be anything like they expect.

Israel expected to be vindicated before her enemies. But Jesus points out that she is under threat of judgment for pursuing a path of violent resistance to Rome. And instead of a gloriously rebuilt Temple at the centre of everything, God is about to lay waste the holy city and destroy the Temple utterly—words that came true in AD 70.

And instead of God bringing his kingdom to those who are pure and holy and obedient to the strict interpretations of the law, he will open the door to all sorts of shabby characters—prostitutes, tax collectors, Samaritans

And instead of the kingdom coming gradually through human effort and manipulation, it came solely through one person: Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus proclaims that all the long and twisting stories of God's coming kingdom will finally come to a central point, or rather a person: Jesus. All that he represents, all that he teaches, his life, his death and his resurrection – that is the basis of the kingdom of God. Not politics, not religion, not economics.

As NT Wright puts it:

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This retelling of the Jewish story includes a redefining of the true people of YHWH. True Israel consists of those who repent of their own kingdom agenda to follow Jesus, trusting his kingdom message and embracing his way of salvation. He preaches and authorizes a forgiveness that sidesteps the centrality of the sacrificial [system]. He acts in mighty deeds that symbolically express a kingdom being inaugurated in his own life and ministry. He tells stories that subvert a typical Jewish reading of the way things are and ought to be. He marginalizes the all-important Jewish symbols of temple, land, family and Torah. It is no surprise that such a person was considered crucifiable. N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*

Not only did they speak against this sign, they also crucified him and killed him. As John writes in his gospel,

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He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. John 1:11

Yet to those who received his message, who accepted him as the messiah, Jesus has made all the difference in the world.

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So we see Jesus being presented in the Temple. He is received by an elderly Jewish man who represents all the expectation of Israel. He speaks a prophetic word that came true in Jesus' life. He has caused the rising of many in Israel.

But what about us? We are not living in first century Jerusalem nor do we have the same religious or political situation.

Yet Jesus' message is profoundly timeless and translatable into every culture. It's amazing how someone who came to minister into the urgencies of a Jewish religious, cultural and political Jewish situation can still speak to you and me today in a 21st

century secular world. It's amazing how his message can be brought to every tribe and nation and tongue and still speak into their situation.

We don't really speak about kingdoms anymore. We have democracies and republics and constitutional monarchies. This language of the kingdom seems so ancient.

Call it what you want. The party of God, the dance of God, the mission of God, the dream of God, the story we find ourselves in, the symphony of God, the invasion of God or the counterculture of God—these are all ways of speaking about God's kingdom, his divine involvement in our world. Jesus has come into this world and he claims it as his own. He speaks into this world his life-giving word and he moves among this world to draw to himself those who have faith and trust in him.

Even today his teachings subvert our world. His teachings of self-giving love, forgiveness, compassion, dying to self, holiness, acceptance, repentance are still able to get under our skin and still able to transform our lives. To some his words are foolishness and threatening. To others his words are life-giving and transformational. But we still hear the voice of Jesus into our situation.

So here is the consolation Simeon got to see. What he saw transcends time and culture and continues to speak to you and me today. The kingdom is near. It is here and it is coming into this world in Jesus. Repent and believe!

AMEN