

In the spirit of Christmas, we continue to think about the Christ Child and His significance to the world-then and now. Having just considered Christ's birth narrative yesterday, this morning we skip ahead 40 days to ponder one of Christ's earliest earthly experiences. Our Gospel reading centers on Simeon, that aged temple priest who had been promised by the Holy Spirit that he would not taste death until he saw with his own eyes the Lord's Christ. We are not told how long he had been waiting for the fulfillment, but upon seeing the Christ Child he joyously proclaimed: "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your Word." He was finished for all things were now complete. The consolation of Israel, which had been promised by the Holy Spirit came not in strength but in weakness, not in glory but humility, not in power, but meek and mild. This 40 day old baby was the One destined for the rising and fall of many of Israel. And Simeon being a man of great faith and piety, believed the promise. So he took the child up in his arms, blessed him, and said "I am ready to die". Upon seeing Christ with his own eyes there was nothing left for him to do or see on this earth. So important was Simeon's testimony that by the fourth century his words were added to the Order of Worship. The Church from ancient times has recognized the significance of what Simeon said and has memorialized his words into a canticle hymn of praise. It became known as the *Song of Simeon*. The Church continues to this day to sing the song of Simeon as part of Vespers and Compline. The Church placed his words at the ending of the day as a way of saying that we can go to sleep each night knowing that our eyes have seen the salvation of the Lord in the birth of Christ. We can go to sleep each night as if going to our deaths so that we might go to our deaths as if going to sleep. So each night before we meet death, we confess that this world holds nothing else for us for we have seen what's important in the person of Christ. In this way, Simeon's words become our words. This is where our worship life touches our day-to-day life. For the words we recite and sing are more than just parroting back phrases or simply rattling off memorized sentences, they touch upon the deepest concepts of God, the world, and what it means to be human.

This is why as Lutherans we continue to follow the ancient order of worship, which dates back to the time of the apostles and established by the earliest Christians. For we live according to the legacy established by these great thinkers. We stand upon their shoulders. We enjoy the fruits of the labor. But lest you think we Lutherans have made no contribution, consider how Martin Luther himself labored to give the church back her worship after

it had fallen victim to grave abuse. He specifically designed a German service of worship for his congregation in order to remove a lot of the old Roman rites and superstitions, which had crept into the Divine Service over many generations. He did a lot of subtracting, but one of the only things he added was to place the Song of Simeon after the Lord's Supper. As far as I can tell, Luther was the first to do this, and that's where it remains to this day. The *Nunc Dimittis*, Now Depart, is sung immediately after we receive the Lord's Supper. We will sing this hymn today. Week after week, the words of our post communion hymn follow our Gospel reading from St. Luke. So let's close this morning by considering the poetic beauty of the hymn's placement after the Lord's Supper. As Lutherans we believe in the real presence. We believe that when we take the Lord's Supper each week we are truly partaking of Christ's body and blood—in, with and under the earthly elements of bread and wine. This is no mere symbolism or representation for us; nor is it just a Memorial Supper where we remember something that happened long ago. We believe that when Christ said, "This is my body; this is my blood" He said what He meant and meant what He said. Because of this, we hold the Lord's Supper in the highest regard. For in the act of communing, we celebrate the joys of Christ's birth up close and personal. The birth narrative of Christ unfolds before our very eyes. This altar becomes our Bethlehem, for the literal meaning of Bethlehem is 'House of Bread'. Poetic, really, when you think about it. The Bread of Life was born in the House of Bread to give His flesh as bread for the life of the world. With the angels we rejoice, with Mary we ponder, and with the shepherds we make haste to our own Bethlehem to see this marvelous thing which the Lord is doing, to behold the wonder of God. The elements of bread and wine are but the swaddling clothes that are wrapped around this truly present Jesus. Your hands are but a manger, cradling the Word made flesh. In fact, so real and close is Christ to us in the Lord's Supper that we can say the exact same words that Simeon said in the temple that day. For into our very hands has been placed the consolation, the fulfillment of all of Scripture. Into our hands has been placed the revelation and glory of God Himself. With such a gift, with such a fulfillment, what is this world to us, what is really left for us but to commend our spirits to the Lord and proclaim to God on High: "Let Your servant depart in peace for our own eyes have seen Your salvation". Amen.