

## **“It Is Enough (*Dayenu*)”**

**Luke 2:22-40**

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Look at the old man Simeon with the baby Jesus in his arms. He speaks, “Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation.”

But what has Simeon seen, really? It is just a little child in his arms. How can he say he has seen salvation? How can he say he is ready to depart this life in peace, to die now? What has Simeon seen? It is just a baby.<sup>1</sup>

The first year Debra and I were married we spent Christmas with Debra’s family. After opening gifts on Christmas morning we gathered in the living room for a time of family sharing. On such occasions Debra’s mother always had a question for the family. That day the question was something like, “What are you most grateful for from this past year?” We went around the circle, each of us responding to the question.

We came to Debra’s dad, Milton. I remember him sitting there on the couch as if it were yesterday. He was a big man, a macho-Texan kind of guy with a gruff-looking exterior but a teddy-bear heart. As he spoke, his lips began to quiver and his voice trembled. He said, “I’m grateful to see both of our children launched from home, grown into young adults, both of them married. To see them out on their own and happy is what my life has been all about.” Then he paused and said, “From here on, anything else is just icing on the cake.”

How could he say that? We were just young newlyweds. What did he mean, “Anything else is just icing on the cake”? Milton was only 57 years old when he said that. He died five years later. We have always remembered his words, “Anything else is just icing on the cake.”

See the old man Simeon with the baby Jesus in his arms. “Let your servant depart in peace,” he says, “for my eyes have seen your salvation.” He is ready to die. But what has Simeon seen, really? It is just a little baby.

Yesterday we put our daughter Kari on the boat after a week here at home with us for Christmas. We stood on the wharf watching until the boat rounded Brant Point and disappeared from sight. We had a wonderful week with her. We didn’t want to see her go. Yet of course we wanted her to go. We wouldn’t want it any other way. We’re glad she’s grown up now, out on her own, and happy. It’s what our lives have been about. The words of Debra’s dad now echo in our ears: “It’s enough. Anything else is just icing on the cake.”

I see my own mother standing by the back door as she always did when we were leaving home after a Christmas visit. “Well, I hate to see all of you go,” she would say. “But we

had a good Christmas, didn't we, and we have much to be thankful for." It was her way of saying, "It's enough. Anything else is just icing on the cake."

See the old man Simeon standing with the baby in his arms. He is grateful. It is enough, he says.

It was not long after Jesus' birth. It was not long after the angels left the shepherds and went back into heaven. It was not long after the shepherds returned to their fields from Bethlehem, praising God for what they had heard and seen. It was while Mary was still pondering in her heart all that had happened.

Joseph and Mary brought the child to the temple in Jerusalem to fulfill the requirements of the law for Jesus' presentation and Mary's purification. Luke tells us that the old man Simeon was righteous and devout. For many years he had been looking forward to the "consolation of Israel"—the coming of the Messiah. Luke says the Holy Spirit rested on Simeon. When the young parents brought in the baby, the Holy Spirit revealed to Simeon that this was not just another ordinary baby. In that moment Simeon took the child in his arms and praised God, saying, "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, 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."

Simeon's prophetic word was then confirmed by an elderly woman named Anna, who also had spent her time in the temple fasting and praying, waiting for Messiah.

Luke gives us a picture of two aged saints, Israel at its best: devout, obedient, constant in prayer, led by the Holy Spirit, longing and waiting for the fulfillment of God's promises. All they saw was a baby. But it was enough. Simeon and Anna looked into the child's face and knew, they just knew, that God was doing a new thing, that Messiah had come.

Luke gives us here a picture of all those who wait and hope and trust in God's promises. It is a picture of faith that waits and watches expectantly for the new thing God is doing. Old Simeon and Anna would not live to see who Jesus would become, all that would happen to him. But they knew enough to point to the future and say, "This is the One."

It isn't only a moment of unrestrained joy. Luke also gives us a moment of realism, foreshadowing future pain and suffering. Simeon blesses the young parents and says to Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, to be a sign that will be opposed....And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

The picture Luke gives us is a picture of faith. Faith is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen," the writer of Hebrews says (Hebrews 11:1). All Simeon and Anna had was a baby. But it was enough.

In some ways that's where we find ourselves too. Pastor and writer John Stendahl says,

"We too are people who have seen something but not its full unfolding....What we have, in a sense, is hardly more than [Simeon and Anna] had. We have the scriptures that school us in hope and attentiveness. We have stories and covenants and signs. We have

moments, or the memory of moments, when the tender compassion of our God has come close enough to see and feel....”<sup>2</sup>

In this world of suffering, evil and violence, there are times when we have little more than Simeon had. But what we do have is enough to go on, enough to believe. We may hunger and thirst for more, but we are grateful for what we have. We have enough to say, “Lord, let your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation.” In small, ordinary, everyday ways, at big turning points in our lives, or in times of loss and crisis, we have seen God’s presence. We’ve seen enough to know, to believe, to trust. We can go in peace now. “The rest is icing on the cake.”

In the Jewish tradition there is a great Passover song sung at the Passover Seder. The song is called “*Dayenu*.” The word *dayenu* in Hebrew means “it would have been enough.” The song is about the gifts God gave the Jewish people. There are fifteen stanzas recalling all the gifts God bestowed on Israel. The words go like this:

“If God had [only] brought us out of Egypt...*dayenu*, it would have been enough!” “If God had [only] supplied our needs in the wilderness for forty years, *dayenu*, it would have been enough!” “If God had fed us the manna, and had not given us Shabbat, *dayenu*, it would have been enough!”...“If God had given us the Torah, and had not brought us to the land of Israel, *dayenu*, it would have been enough!” “If God had brought us into the land of Israel, and not built for us the holy temple, *dayenu*, it would have been enough!”

The song celebrates God’s gifts by saying that if God had only given one of these gifts, it would have been enough. Each gift of God is precious; all of them together are overwhelming. The song’s chorus joyfully repeats the word *dayenu* again and again: *dai dayenu, dai dayenu, dai dayenu, dayenu, dayenu, dayneu*. What God has done for us, even in one gift, is enough.

That is the spirit of the old man Simeon who stands holding the future in his arms. He has seen and touched the gift. It is only a child, but *dayenu*, it is enough. That is the kind of faith to which Luke calls us in this story.

At this turning of the new year, think back over your life. What were those times and places, those moments, when the tender compassion of God came close enough for you to see and feel? Who are the people through whom God has touched and shaped your life? When have you known God’s presence in some loss or sadness, some moment of wonder or joy? When has God been there?

Christmas is over. The trees are coming down, pitched outdoors for pick-up, or stored in dark attics and basements for another year. The lights, bows, ornaments, ribbon, and wrapping paper are stored too. The candles have burned low another year, the greenery dried out, the leftovers are in the freezer. Families are back home, kids almost back to school. Soon it will be life as usual again with a lot of gray January and plenty of winter yet to come.

Christmas is over, and here we are on the first day of the new year. Who knows what the future will bring? Who knows what will happen in any of our lives, our families, among our friends, during the year ahead? Who knows what will happen in our world?

We all stand there with Simeon. All he held in his arms was a child. But he stood there believing God's gifts and God's promises.

Debra's dad, Milton, said it well that Christmas Day years ago. "From here on, anything else is just icing on the cake." *Dayenu*...the blessings of God were already enough. Debra and I felt the same putting Kari on the ferry yesterday and standing there on the wharf watching the boat disappear from sight. Whatever the future holds, *dayenu*. The blessings of God are already enough.

That is the faith-filled wonder and gratitude to which the aged Simeon and Anna call us.

Whatever's happening in your life right now, wherever you are on the journey of faith, whatever the future holds.... Whatever your hunger, thirst, or longings.... Can you say with Simeon, "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation"? Can you say, "*Dayenu*. Thank you, God"? Can you say, "The rest is icing on the cake"?

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>John Stendahl, "Holding promise," in *The Christian Century*, December 4-17, 2002, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup>Stendahl, "Holding promise," p. 17. I am indebted in my sermon to John Stendahl for the basic theme "it is enough" and for the connection of Simeon to the Passover song, *Dayenu*.