

The Rev. Canon Richard Lief  
Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 84; Philippians 2:5-11;  
Luke 2:22-40

I am honored to be with you today, and next Sunday as your celebrant and preacher - in-between your interim rector, Fr. Strane, and the arrival of your new rector, Fr. Hargreaves, and his family. In retirement, I am serving as an honorary canon at St. Paul's Cathedral.

My wife Carolyn and I have a close connection here at St. James. Several years ago, she served this church for four years as your parish nurse. And I served one day a week for about eight years as your hospital chaplain. We both have fond memories of our ministries with you.

Alleluia. Unto us a child is born.  
O come, let us adore him. Alleluia.

A few days before Christmas, Carolyn and I participated in the Annual Episcopal Community Services Friend to Friend Christmas party. The Friend to Friend program offers assistance to those who are mentally disabled.

A dozen members from the Cathedral brought food for the occasion. Among our group was a good friend who happens to be a tenured professor of theology at USD. Unfortunately, she has just gone through radical cancer treatment.

In this midst of a crowd of sixty people cornered into a relatively small agency space, our friend offered to hold in her arms a five-month old child. She did so that the child's mother could get something to eat.

I was touched by this poignant scene. Our friend was joyous. Here was hope. Here was a peace that passed understanding.

And now, in Christmastide you and I ask: "What child is this who, laid to rest on Mary's lap is sleeping? Whom angels greet with anthem's sweet, while shepherds watch are keeping?"

This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing; haste, haste to bring him laud, the babe, the son of Mary."

In our Gospel reading, Simeon and Anna knew exactly who the child was, and rejoiced. Here was the consolation of Israel. Here the hopes and dreams of all the years, in Simeon's arms. Here was a very old man holding the fulfillment of his years. And here was elderly Anna proclaiming that the hope of her people was right there in front of their eyes.

Mary and Joseph had come to the Temple to fulfill their religious obligations. A woman after having given birth was obligated to present herself for purification. And a male child was to be circumcised 8 days after birth, and then dedicated to God. Mary and Joseph were there to fulfill their Jewish religious duties.

The pressures of modern life have reduced the significance of ritual observances in the lives of most people. Busy schedules, dual-career marriages, after school activities, the entertainment industry, the use of our smartphones, tablets, computers and other technical devices easily distract us.

For many, religious rituals are reduced to church attendance only at Christmas and Easter, and at socially required ceremonies such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals. However, even in the midst of these fleeting ceremonies, people do get a hint, a glimpse beyond the rat race.

But sadly, the marking of both daily and special events with rituals that recognize the sacredness of life, and the presence of God in the everyday, has receded from many people's awareness.

Daily experiences are reduced and impoverished. There is little time to reflect on the mystery of life itself.

For Mary and Joseph, ritual duties were not an intrusion into their lives, but an expression of their deepest awareness and commitment. They lived within the covenant community. They

sought to fulfill their vows as practicing Jewish people.

Simeon and Anna, as devout people who spent most of their lives in prayer, were thus aware of the events of their time. They were keenly aware of the yearning of God's people to be free from the Roman oppression of their day. They were looking for the consolation of Israel.

In my imagination, I see them sensing the purity of heart in the devotions of Mary and Joseph. With an overwhelming sense of prophecy, they saw in the young Jesus, the hope of the future.

Devoted contemplatives see way beyond themselves. They can sense God's spirit as it moves in the ordinary to bring about the extraordinary.

Simeon expresses his joy in the familiar words of the Nunc Dimittis – Lord now lettest thy servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen the glory of the Lord.

His constant prayer in the temple was completed, the hope for his people had arrived.

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant  
depart in peace, according to your word.

For mine eyes have seen thy salvation.  
which thou hast prepared before the face  
of all people.

To be a light to enlighten the Gentiles  
And to be the glory of thy people Israel.

Simeon's dream had been fulfilled. He could now die in peace. There is joy, even in the face of death, when one has seen the source of life.

Simeon's job as a sentinel for the Messiah was done. The Lord could now take him home. He was the faithful servant who was at one with God's purposes and plan -even as his time was up.

And, Simeon and Anna are two old and wise prophets of Jewish piety who speak not only for

the nation of Israel, but for all humankind. Jesus is to be the fulfillment of not only of Israel, but for the whole human race.

But there is more wisdom to come. There is a note of foreboding that Simeon must leave with Mary.

Not everyone will accept the precious babe born in Bethlehem where the shepherds and wise men were in attendance, and the gentle animals were cooing their care.

Simeon cautions that a sword will pierce Mary's heart. Jesus will be the cause of division – destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel. Some will respond to him and others will oppose. The road to promise and fulfillment is not smooth.

To identify with Jesus will bring pain because many will reject him as he reveals the thoughts of many hearts. This is the sword that will break Mary's heart.

The Christ child will not always remain in the manger. Jesus confronts this world with a challenge, which it does not want to recognize. He is a sign that is spoken against – a sign to us that we must begin to reckon now with God's purpose for our lives. Jesus is the one who confronts human affairs with the measurement of God.

We know these measurements. Jesus treated the poor and needy as though they mattered as much to God as the educated and privileged. He said you would find your life by losing it for the sake of God's Kingdom.

It was too much for some people. If people listened to him, they would have to go through a drastic readjustment. It was all about compassion.

Jesus is the heart of compassion – he preached good news to the poor, he fed the multitudes, healed the sick, raised the dead. But he spoke against hypocrisy and oppression as stumbling blocks to his works of compassion. The rulers of

his day were afraid, for compassion leads to justice issues. They finally conspired to crucify him.

But Jesus is the Messiah, the hope of his people, and of the world. He is the Messiah who will never, never, die. His kingdom is forever.

The spirit of Christ creates a more sensitive conscience. It brings old evils under judgment, no matter how deeply they have been entrenched. And not only that; it can create the faith that believes in, and the courage, which will pay the price for a better future.

The ultimate power of the spirit of Christ puts down the mighty from their seats and exalts those of low degree. Those influences which stand in the way of justice and human solidarity will crumble, and only those which are in tune with God's far reaching purpose will prevail.

The men and women who make the greatest difference in people's lives are not always the conspicuous ones. The glory of Israel through all its long history was in its spiritual minorities. Simeon, Anna, Mary, Joseph.

The promise of the future can come through the undaunted minority who keep believing in the redemption of Jerusalem... that is, the ultimate penetration of society by the saving purposes of God. Such belief and vision can work like leaven whenever there are courageous people.

Simeon and Anna proclaimed that the Messiah was in their midst, the hope of all humankind. They were humble, simple, folk who paid attention, who offered their prayers, devotion, and listened to the silence where God speaks. They proclaimed what they knew to be God's truth.

Simeon and Anna represent the pious ones who declare that Jesus is the one who will bring salvation. Simeon sings the Nunc Dimittus and Anna proclaims and offers thanksgiving.

As we enter the new year may we, too, listen in prayer and thanksgiving, and proclaim, in word

and deed, the arrival of God's Kingdom through Jesus, the author and founder of our faith. With Simeon and Anna, we have seen the glory of the Lord, who brings peace where there is no peace, and overcomes all evil with his everlasting compassion.