

Nunc Dimittis – Now You Dismiss

Luke 2:22-40 (NIV)

²² When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”), ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.” ²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. ²⁷ Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: ²⁹ “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. ³⁰ For my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.” ³³ The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, ³⁵ so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” ³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. ³⁸ Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. ³⁹ When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.

Here we are, two days after Christmas. It’s Sunday and time for worship once again. Coming so close after Christmas, did you come today thinking, “Do I really need to be here today? Can I just be dismissed and go home because I just did church two days ago? Can we maybe take a holiday and get back into the church routine in 2021? We can even make it a New Year’s resolution!” Adult or child, there can always come that moment of impatience and exhaustion that leads you to say, “Can we go now?”

Luke records another believer’s statement of dismissal in our Gospel reading today, but it’s so very different in attitude. Mary and Joseph brought baby Jesus to the Temple to perform the rites required by the Law of Moses, God’s commands to his people. By doing so, Jesus is actively obeying God’s law even as he is just days old. At the same time that Jesus is keeping God’s law, there is a righteous and devout man in Jerusalem named Simeon. “It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: ‘Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.’” (verses 26-32)

Throughout the centuries, Christians have given a title to these recorded words of Simeon; we call it the “nunc dimittis.” Nunc dimittis is a Latin phrase meaning, “now you dismiss.” It is permission from Simeon that he can be done. Now, don’t think that Simeon is requesting that his life end at that very moment, that he wanted God to make him drop dead or something. No, he’s saying that whenever his death comes, he’s ready to die happy because he has seen the fulfillment of God’s promise to bring consolation to Israel and all the world. The Messiah, the Christ, the Savior of all humanity has come. He has seen it with his own eyes, just as the Lord promised. He held salvation in his arms. There is nothing more that Simeon wants or needs. So, with nunc dimittis he is saying, “God, whenever you think is right, you can let me go now. I’ve seen your promise fulfilled. I’ve gotten to see and hold my Savior, the Savior of the world. I am so happy and at peace. I’m ready to go when you are.”

“The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about [Jesus].” (verse 33) And why wouldn’t they? They marveled when the shepherds had come on Jesus’ birthday and praised God that the Savior was here. Then they went and told others. But I’m not sure that Mary and Joseph were ready for anyone at the temple to recognize who this Child is. Maybe they were marveling at these words because Simeon was having them take a step back and realize that this baby, who looked just like any other baby, was actually God in flesh, salvation prepared in the sight of all nations.

As they’re marveling, Simeon blessed Mary and Joseph and then said to Mary, “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 hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” (verses 34b-35)

There were certainly moments of concern and heartache for Mary over her son throughout the years, as any mother would have. But as far as a sword piercing her soul, it’s hard to think of any other moment fulfilling Simeon’s prophecy other than when she watched her miraculously conceived son unjustly and cruelly hang on a cross, bleeding from his gruesome wounds, mocked by onlookers, the man who had raised people from the dead was now dying himself. Why is he being tortured so? Why such blind

hatred of the one trying to save you all? He never did anything to harm you! Did Mary standing and looking at her son on the cross remember Simeon's words and think, "Nunc dimittis. Let me go. I can't stand it anymore. Dismiss me from this sight and this pain."?

New Year's is just days away. When the clock strikes midnight on Thursday evening, we can finally put 2020 in the rearview and have a fresh start. I think it's nearly a universal cry of nunc dimittis to 2020. Get it out of here. Dismiss this year and all the hardships, this pandemic, wearing masks, social distancing, daily COVID infection and death counts. Get rid of it all! Let it depart. Nunc dimittis!

As the days of ending 2020 and starting 2021 approach, I'm bracing (and maybe embracing) that when the clock strikes midnight on New Year's Eve, we will still be told not to gather with people outside of our immediate households. We will still be told to wear masks in grocery stores, churches, etc. We will still be told to stand 6 feet apart. It will not be a finger snap on New Year's Eve at midnight and all of the sudden we won't sanitize at church anymore, that we will add back in all the chairs that used to be in the sanctuary, that everyone who has chosen not to come to church in person will all of the sudden be back.

There is a part of me that wonders: What if 2021 is worse? What if the COVID numbers escalate, hospitals are filled, people are denied care, more people die, and the vaccine doesn't fix the situation? What if there is an earthquake here in a larger magnitude? What if there are more than one of the scale we felt in 2020? What if there are more tragedies and events that drive people over the brink and the world pushes further into anarchy?

You know that when you rhetorically ask, "What else can go wrong?" something actually can. We live in a broken world, broken by our sin. No matter how positive of an attitude or how much effort we put into it, we will not create a utopia here, let alone by a clock striking midnight on December 31. This world will always have something else wrong happen. That makes us want to say, "Nunc dimittis! Let me go, God! I'm done. I'm tired. I don't want to go on any longer. I want to go home. I want all this to be over."

We say, we pray, "Nunc dimittis," and yet here we all are. Granted, we've said it a whole lot differently than Simeon did. But much like what Simeon said to Mary, so God says to us. Simeon told Mary that a sword would pierce her heart because of what would happen to her child. God says, essentially, that this world will pierce our hearts too.

Jesus said to his followers, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Matthew 16:24) Deny yourself. Deny this request of nunc dimittis to the days of inconvenience, the days of heartache, the days of trials and testing, of just wanting to be done and not deal with any of it anymore. Instead, take up a cross, your cross. Go, and suffer as you follow Jesus. Take up the burden that comes to your life because you follow him. This is a daunting, even frightening, command from Jesus. I would like to tell you that when the clock strikes midnight on New Year's Eve that everything will instantly be better and 2020 just becomes a punchline and a meme, but 2021 might have a heavier cross for you and me to take up.

So, how are we to keep going in this world knowing that a sword will pierce our hearts? Through the Word of God, you and I have seen the salvation which he prepared in the sight of all nations. We got to celebrate and revel in the fact that God indeed kept his promise after thousands of years. We get to live with the truth every day that God truly took on human flesh and lived under his own law to complete it for us. We get to live each day knowing that Jesus denied himself, denied his human nature which told him to take an easy way out that avoids suffering, and instead took up his cross, knowing that it would pierce his mother's soul. He allowed his heart to be pierced in doing so, even literally as the soldiers checked with a spear to see if Jesus had actually died on Good Friday. "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed." (Isaiah 53:5) This Child was pierced for all of us, that we all would have the peace of the forgiveness of our sins, the healing of his perfection covering over us, and the gift of living with God forever in heaven.

Because we have the Christ Child who was pierced for us, our nunc dimittis changes to be more like Simeon's. "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel." (verses 29-32) We can go in peace with God because Jesus' heart was pierced for us. Instead of asking to just be done with this world and all its brokenness and problems, God gives us a reason to live and hope as we continue to go on each day. We live with the peace that only he can offer, a peace that we are not fated to live in a broken world forever.

So, Lord, nunc dimittis in your time and according to your plan because we have peace with you. While we wait for you to dismiss us, give us the strength and endurance to deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow you. Keep that peace constantly in our hearts and minds as we endure the rest of 2020 and whatever will come in 2021. When it is your time, when you know it is right, dismiss us in peace because we know that you are the salvation prepared in the sight of all nations. Amen.