

Surfing, Searching, Spirit, Savior, Self

Luke 2:25-35

December 31, 2017

John Song

Good morning Columbia Pres, and happy New Year's eve. The final day of 2017. A day where we reflect on everything that's happened in the past year and see how our lives have changed. For many of you, 2017 was an exciting year filled with new beginnings. Marriages, births, maybe for some of you a new church. Baptism, church membership, life in community, new friends, some of you new mortgages. You are filled with many things to celebrate and rejoice in. And still with all that has happened this year, the day moves on. We go tomorrow and it will be January 1st; it's that next horizon. The newest challenge. We want ourselves to grow; we want ourselves to search for that *thing* that's going to be that missing piece of fulfillment. That thing that's going to make us feel secure, happy, content, peaceful. But one thing that won't change -- at least here at CPC -- is the fact that every time we gather here, we are reminded of something greater than that, which will bring us external happiness. We are reminded of the greatest joy that we have in Jesus Christ. We are reminded of the hope of the Gospel. So let us come, let us adore him as Randy just sang, and let's turn our Bibles to Luke Chapter 2, verses 25-35.

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶ And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ²⁷ And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, ²⁸ he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

²⁹ "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,

according to your word;

³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation

³¹ that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles,

and for glory to your people Israel."

³³ And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴ And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this

child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed ³⁵ (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.) Can we pray together before we dive into God's word.

Father, thank You for this passage which is given to us by your voice speaking through the Holy Spirit to reveal Christ, and reveal our hearts as well. Father we pray that this Word that is living and active would pierce our own hearts, place us out of our spiritual apathy and lead us to challenge us to the majesty of Christ in 2018 and beyond. May He be our treasure now. In Jesus' name we pray all these things. Amen.

Well, with 2017 now come and gone, I am reminded how different our lives are now, especially, you know, if we even reflect -- maybe not just in the past year but in the last ten years or so, particularly when it comes to the way that we acquire and absorb knowledge. You see, before we had smartphones -- and I'm starting to realize that I'm getting older now when I say it like "back in my day", but -- before we had smartphones, there was always a curiosity about the world that we didn't have answers to, we didn't have access to in our day to day wanderings and dreamings. You know, you'd be walking down the street and sort of like some big questions would pop into your head, wouldn't they? It would be like, "Oh, what year did Baskin Robbins start making ice cream?" or you know, "Oh, how tall is Prince Harry or The Rock?" You know? And we would walk, and we would be content in not knowing, we would just say, "Oh well, I guess this is just one of those mysteries that I'm just gonna have to go about not knowing" but well -- of course, nowadays that doesn't quite matter as much anymore, does it? We have the 'glorious revelation' of a smartphone that we can surf and find the answers to life's most silliest questions and the musings of our minds. We have the Google search engine, we have the Alexa app, Google home, Wikipedia, just about every sort of resource at our fingertips to help us find what we're searching for, at least on a surface level. We can find a certain amount of intellectual curiosity fulfilled instantly. And that got me thinking, even as we are reflecting on this year, 2017, about what the world was searching for. So Google does an annual report in which they release all the facts and figures of people, the places of what the world was searching for in 2017. And the results were pretty interesting to see the priorities we have as humanity. A humanity that's still searching for answers. And if you were to look at the top five things that were searched for in 2017 in fact it would almost seem like sort of this random set or collection of things that have nothing to do with each other. Hurricane Irma, iPhone 10, iPhone 8 (that was number 3), Matt Lauer, Meghan Markle. I mean, that doesn't seem

to give us a clear picture of what we value, does it? We like weather, technology, morning talk shows, and future princesses. We don't -- that doesn't seem to give us a clear pattern of what we are all about. But if you look and examine further, when you look underneath the surface of what we search for, you will see to begin to understand what we care about. For example, in America, one of the most searched things was how to make solar eclipse glasses. You know, because we cared about that, right? How to buy bitcoin: financial security. In Australia, where there is a growing Korean population, two of the most searched things were "what is MSG?" and "what is kimchi?" In Canada, where health is a major concern, one of the most searched things was "what is the apple cider vinegar diet?" (Don't ask me!) In South Africa, one of the most profound things that I saw on this list was "what role can the private sector play in poverty alleviation?" while in America one of the most searched things was -- we just want to know how many calories are in a unicorn frappuccino.

You know, the reason why things like this are so appealing when we look at sort of metadata, is because they give us this insight to the deepest longings of the human heart. In essence, we surf because we're searching and we haven't found rest until we have found, you know, the best cookie recipe, or you know, why people do what they do, or you know, where's the best bubble tea in Columbia, Maryland -- I mean, we are just still searching.

Well, we come to our text today, and the desire to be filled and find rest and peace -- well, it's here as well. We have a man named Simeon, who like many of us was searching, only his search was a little bit different than our external searchings of fleeting happiness. He was searching literally his entire life for that which he would know would give him peace. The searching wasn't rooted in trends, hotlists, intellectual pursuits, or even what the intellectual thinkers of his day were proposing. His searching was that which he knew would bring his heart peace -- what he knew would bring peace to the entire world. You see, this man Simeon was given a revelation of the spirit -- a revelation of the spirit that a child would be born into the world to bring the long-awaited peace and salvation that so many of the people of Israel had waited for. They waited for so long, in fact, that many in Israel began to doubt whether this child would even show. And like so many of us when we become impatient, they began searching for other means to find their peace. Law-keeping, holding up the religious order, holding up the traditions of the temple. They stopped even believing that this salvation would arrive. But Simeon, a man who by all accounts in Scripture wasn't a priest, who wasn't a dignified leader or an established religious force, he wasn't a ruler or a king of anything of note -- he was just simply a man that was filled with the revelation of the Holy Spirit that told him that he would see the consolation of Israel before his death. That this promised Savior

would be born in Bethlehem -- that the searching and waiting was to be found in this temple in Jerusalem where a family would be dedicating their baby to the Lord. Now you have to ask yourself this question to Simeon and just even in the narrative as Luke presents it: what could give a man such confidence to believe in something so absolute?

I mean, especially in this day and age, we are often skeptical of people telling us any one thing that would make us feel complete peace and rest, and we have every reason to have this skepticism in our society. Every sales pitch, advertisement that we see on television only confirms our biases against sort of quick fixes and proposed happiness. It all seems so utterly naive, simplistic, reductionistic, trivial. And indeed, especially in our society, they are. Because they are often based in the subjectivity of the person who makes the claim. I mean, your opinion on -- you know, let's say, the best cookie recipe, and all these things, what policy on gun control makes the most sense to reduce violent crime, what is the status of racial reconciliation in America -- these answers that we have are not easy. They require complexity, and nuance. And in fact, it's almost hard to have absolute confidence even in what's the best way moving forward.

And yet Simeon has this objective certainty about this child and about the peace that He would bring. Why? Because it's based on this revelation that is given to him. The Bible refers to the source of this revelation coming from the only objective standard of truth that could ever be. And that is found in the most ultimate being, the very person of God himself. This is what leads Simeon to believe the things that he believes about that he would not see death before he saw Christ. This isn't just some pipe dream. This isn't just some sort of flaky understanding of the Holy Spirit -- this is God revealing Himself in His word, to Simeon. You see, every revelation of the Spirit, just as it did for the Israelites walking through the wilderness, just as it did through the writers of Scripture, every single revelation of the Spirit leads us to a picture of Christ who is our peace. In other words, there is so much confusion surrounding the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit isn't just some impersonal force, it's not an "it" that somehow leads you to act on the decision. The Holy Spirit is God himself, the person of God, working in you and through you to reveal who Jesus Christ is in every area of your life. And so when you begin to understand the revelation of the Holy Spirit as the extraordinary God, sometimes working through some very ordinary means in your life, then you can begin to take away the sort of mysticism and superstition that is often thought about when we think about how the Holy Spirit operates in minds and hearts today. The Holy Spirit isn't some sort of magic spell that we conjure up, or not a mythical being that follows us, like a ghost. It's not like -- Harry Potter fans - it's not like a Patronus, you know, around here, or anything like that. It's just God himself taking us to Jesus

Christ. Just as he did with Simeon. And you think about this -- to the most ordinary places. The temple. Just a place of worship. And the most ordinary of rituals, a purification ceremony, a circumcision. A sign and seal of the covenant. These ordinary things the Holy Spirit was working in Simeon to bring about an extraordinary God. Now, some of you at this point may have questions as to "Well, that's all fine and dandy for Simeon, but where can the Holy Spirit most be readily found here today?" Where do we see the Holy Spirit working? I mean, for many of us, we yearn for an experience of maybe even just a small whisper. Maybe we are saying "God, God, okay, I don't need like you know a booming voice from heaven that sounds like Morgan Freeman, just give me something! Just give me a small whisper of the Holy Spirit. Just tell me what this is all about."

So we try and guess. We try and take maybe the positive and negative experiences of our life and sort of try to become ghost hunters when it comes to the Holy Spirit. But I would say to you that if you long to see the Holy Spirit speaking to you, there is no greater source of that than what is to be found in the way the Holy Spirit speaks through this book. The Word of God. The revelation of the Holy Spirit. God's written word.

Stop trying to guess what the Holy Spirit is trying to say to you. Look into this living and active Word that reveals to us God's will and you will find when you do so, just as Simeon did, just as every generation of believers has in the past. You will find life, purpose, meaning, the confidence in knowing for sure what God's plan is, as certain as anything that you can find on your smartphone.

But what is the ultimate revelation of the Spirit? What is the ultimate, the climax of the Word itself? Well, it comes in the revelation of the Son -- the second point in your outline. We find Christ -- in the pages of Scripture -- we find Christ, He's the end goal. He's the centerpiece of everything that we see in God's written word. He is the end goal of our lives just as it was Simeon's. When the revelation of the Spirit comes in the Word of God, we find what we are searching for and then more, because we have found the ultimate source of purpose and truth in the child born to us. Simeon finds Christ in the middle of this Jewish custom where a newborn baby and his mother are ritualistically being declared clean. This is why Mary and Joseph are in the temple. Jesus was offered to be sworn as a dedication to God. Jesus would then receive the sacrament, the sign and seal of circumcision -- which we regard, by the way, as being replaced by baptism in the New Testament -- and if you were with us several weeks ago, Jesus was declared as being a part of the covenantal community, and in fact there were all these sort of ritualistic things that would be involved with that. Mary and Joseph had to dedicate two turtledoves -- that's where we get that line in the song the

Twelve Days of Christmas -- as a sacrifice for a burnt and sin offering for Mary and Joseph because they couldn't afford a lamb.

Here he is, just in this ordinary ritual, this ordinary dedication, find this ordinary guy Simeon, which is righteous and devout, and he finds what he is searching for. He finds everything that he's been waiting for; the culmination is Jesus. That's right: Jesus. Just the Savior. Many of us wonder, well Simeon, isn't there anything else? Anything else that could have supplemented your happiness; anything that could have brought you more peace? And this is a reminder, by the way, for all of us here in church today. Being a church Christian I think it's safe to say here, that, if you have grown up as a believer, that you understand at least cognitively, that Christ is the ultimate search, the end goal of your life, right? But practically, in day-to-day living, maybe you fall short of this ideal. The biggest lie that we buy into, that Satan feeds us, the biggest lie that our culture feeds us is that Christ, yes, is enough, but what would really make things even up a notch is if we had what was hanging over that next horizon. If only we could get that promotion. If only we could get that person whose opinion matters so much to validate us. If only your acceptable viewpoint and philosophy on life and in culture would be mainstream and accepted. If only your house could be bigger or if only your children could be more better behaved. If only you weren't so busy, then Christ could be enough. If only my mic would stop feeding back, then Christ would be enough. (laughter)

Or -- maybe you want to take this even further into religiosity: If only the church could be like this. If only my pastors could be this way. If only my church community could be like this, then Christ would be enough. Then I could worship. Then I would be obedient. Then I would run away from my sin. Then I would stop pursuing idols. If only I had Christ plus *blank*, then it would be enough.

That is the lie of Satan. And it's so important for us to hear -- to go back to God's word to remind us that our greatest joy, our satisfaction, our treasure, is to just be found in Christ alone. His goodness, grace, His mercy, and His Love. The hope of redemption and salvation. The one that will satisfy the wrath of God. The one who will forget our iniquity and [remember] our sin no more, as far as the east is from the west. Nothing in this world will take the place of Him. That is why Christ is called the consolation of Israel. He is the one to bring the glory of God and the salvation and the hope of the world. This would be the delight that Simeon could see and know that he could live out the rest of the days in peace. And so what does he do? What we all do when we find what we are looking for. Verses 29-32. He sings a song. He bursts out into song. He sings a song about the peace that he feels knowing that he could die seeing Christ now. He sings about Jesus being the

light of revelation for the Gentiles and the Israelites -- that Jesus would break ethnic boundaries that would prevent those from hearing the good news of Christ -- that God would bring about peace between the enemy and the victor here through the coming of the Son. Even though Israel doesn't have vocabulary for this stuff, they still think that they themselves are just the people of God.

Simeon inaugurates for the first time in Luke's Gospel that the boundaries of hatred and war are over. There are no enemies based upon the colors of one's skin or what flag represents our country; there are no enemies based upon the size of your bank account or the title that's on your business card. There are no enemies based upon what foods you eat and the manner in which you eat them. For all those who confess Christ as Lord, we have unity and oneness in the Gospel of grace. We have peace in what we have searched for in the person of Jesus Christ. This is what makes our unity here so special. This is what makes our worship gathering, as ordinary as they are, so extraordinary. That we have all these people here in this room who are worshipping and united together for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is what made last Sunday evening, in our lessons and carols, so special. Where we just find these ordinary moments that take our breath away.

Simeon can't help but sing a hymn of worship and praise at the revealing of Jesus Christ. He was so captivated by Christ's coming that he could not help but rejoice and worship. And you gotta understand you see here the force of this passage, the peace that Simeon feels. The word that is used for "peace" in verse 29 is like the peace -- in the original language, it's a peace that, like a servant finally being released from his master. Right? His journey is ended; his final destination is reached and now he can live in the peace, in the freedom and the joy of knowing that he is now -- whatever he was bonded to, he has now been released from. It's the peace and the culmination that comes in every big victory. Alright, like Alabama singing the fight song after a touchdown. Pastor Randy, right? Peace comes, and it comes as joyous news in this song.

But let me ask you a personal question. What prevents you from embracing this peace today? What anxieties are ruling over your heart? What bitterness do you still hold against God that is keeping you from enjoying the presence of His Son and the fellowship with His body? What is preventing you from knowing the peace that passeth all understanding? You see, because when Simeon sees the revelation of the Son, he also has a word for Mary and Joseph -- a word of blessing. The song that he sings and the words that he gives is undeniably not just something that reveals -- through the revelation of the Spirit -- revealing the Son, but it also reveals our own hearts. It also

reveals the revelation of the self. After he sings this song and leaves Joseph and Mary to wonder about "what child is this" as we just sang about, he goes on to give a different type of blessing than just the singing of a hymn. He tells Mary that the blessing that Christ's life would bring would reveal the nature of the hearts of those who hear about Him. He tells Mary that even Mary's own heart -- a sword would pierce through her own soul as she lays witness to Jesus' life.

Now, scholars debate about what that actually means. What does that sword really mean? There's about ten different interpretations about what that sword to Mary would be. Some suggested that Mary is a martyr -- although we don't really have much Scriptural proof for that; that's what they think Simeon is talking about. Some think that Simeon as he's describing the sword that will pierce Mary's own soul, is talking about how Mary would actually share in the sufferings of Jesus Christ, whether physically or mentally. I think the correct way to view the sword that would pierce Mary's soul in this passage -- one thing I think that's most consistent is that as Mary would see Jesus' life, as she would see people's hearts being revealed -- the Pharisees that would oppose Him, the Gentiles that would embrace Him, the ones who would be screaming "crucify Him; crucify Him" -- that all these trials of Christ would bring about the blessing of suffering into her life. You see, not all blessing is joy and not all blessing is happiness. The blessing sometimes comes in tragedy. The blessing sometimes comes in mental anguish. The blessing sometimes comes in pain. But this sword that would pierce her own soul would bring about a revelation of the self that would call us to respond to Jesus Christ; that would call us to respond to who He is.

One of my seminary professors, Dr. Paul Jung who teaches New Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., in his Gospel class, he talks about how if you really want to understand the four Gospels -- Matthew, Mark, Luke and John -- it all really boils down to just one simple question, and that is "who is Jesus Christ to you?"

Who is Jesus Christ to you? That is the heart of the answer of what each of these Gospel writers are trying to address. And here Simeon in his blessing to Mary, he's merely repeating the same thing. He's merely saying that this Child will reveal the hearts of many; will force people to ask and to answer the question, "Who is Jesus to you?"

So, believer, today, how would you answer that question? And by the way, can you say more than just simply one thing about it? We have to be really careful not to just be totalizing of anyone view of Jesus Christ -- as important as his qualities are -- we have to be careful not to put one attribute of Christ above all things because herein lies the difficulty when we

do that -- is that we sort of narrow-mindedly put Jesus in an understanding of our own making. He becomes a Jesus of our own fashioning. For example, if you think of Jesus as just a friend, then maybe Jesus will never be disapproving of your lifestyle or your choices. Or maybe if Jesus is only a jealous God, then for you Jesus becomes a mirror of guilt in which you can never enjoy what Christ has given to us in Christian liberty. Or if Jesus is only love, but never the God of justice, then we lose out on the understanding and context of how true love can really even exist, and the pursuit of righteousness. If Jesus is simply about the Law, then Jesus will never be a joy to us. If Jesus is simply a ticket to heaven, and nothing more, then, to quote the writer J.C. Ryle, heaven will seem miserable to you because Jesus will be the only thing to enjoy there. When we read the Word of God, and the Spirit that leads us there, and the revelation of the Son, we are faced each and every single time with the complexity of Christ, and it forces us to examine ourselves, and it forces us to examine what we are really searching for. St. Augustine in his Confessions writes

"Men go abroad to admire the heights of the mountains, the mighty waves of the sea, the broad tides of rivers, the compass of the ocean, the circuits of the stars, yet pass over the mystery of themselves without a thought."

That mystery can be found in Christ -- and of course, Augustine's conclusion: our hearts are restless until they find our rest in You. Who is this Jesus to you today? Do you know that the Holy Spirit is calling out to you through His Word? The Word preached, the worship sung, the fellowship of believers. He's calling out to you to examine this question deeper. Do you find your joy and delight in Him? Do you know peace in just the sight of Christ, just as Simeon did?

Columbia Presbyterian Church, it's my hope for us, more than anything that we do here, as we end 2017 and move into a new year, that the peace of Christ would rest in each and every single one of your hearts, and that you would search and search and search until you find Him.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you for your Spirit-led Word that leads us to Christ. We thank you for the way that it challenges us to examine our own hearts. We thank you for the way in which you use the most unexpected of saviors, Lord, to reveal to us our idols, to reveal to us, Lord, our own failures and weaknesses, and to help us to see that true peace can only be found in the death and resurrection of Your Son on the cross for our sins. Father, thank

you for your Word given to use today. And we praise you for this time together. In Jesus' name, Amen.