

Introduction

The psalmist calls on the natural world, celestial bodies, fire and earth, creatures, and all humanity, to praise God. The voices of Simeon and 84-year-old Anna join the chorus today, recognizing what God is doing in Jesus. Simeon's song is often sung after communion, for we have seen God's salvation in the assembled community and have held Jesus in our hands in the bread. Then, like the prophet Anna, we tell of Jesus to all who look for the healing of the world.

Prayer of the Day

Almighty God, you wonderfully created the dignity of human nature and yet more wonderfully restored it. In your mercy, let us share the divine life of the one who came to share our humanity, Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

First Reading: Isaiah 61:10--62:3

To the people who returned to Jerusalem after the exile, the prophet proclaims that God's salvation will fully come to pass. Jerusalem will become a shining light to the nations and righteousness and praise will spring up as surely as the earth puts forth vegetation.

¹⁰I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

¹¹For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

^{62:1}For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,
until her vindication shines out like the dawn,
and her salvation like a burning torch.

²The nations shall see your vindication,
and all the kings your glory;
and you shall be called by a new name
that the mouth of the LORD will give.

³You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD,
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

Psalm 148

¹Hallelujah! Praise the LORD | from the heavens;
praise God | in the heights.

²**Praise the LORD, | all you angels;
sing praise, all you | hosts of heaven.**

³Praise the LORD, | sun and moon;
sing praise, all you | shining stars.

⁴**Praise the LORD, heav- | en of heavens,
and you waters a- | bove the heavens.**

⁵Let them praise the name | of the LORD,
who commanded, and they | were created,

⁶**who made them stand fast forev- | er and ever,
giving them a law that shall not | pass away.**

⁷Praise the LORD | from the earth,
you sea monsters | and all deeps;

⁸**fire and hail, | snow and fog,
tempestuous wind, do- | ing God's will;**

⁹mountains | and all hills,
fruit trees | and all cedars;

¹⁰**wild beasts | and all cattle,
creeping things and | flying birds;**

¹¹sovereigns of the earth | and all peoples,
princes and all rulers | of the world;

¹²**young | men and maidens,
old and | young together.**

¹³Let them praise the name | of the LORD,
whose name only is exalted, whose splendor is over | earth and heaven.

¹⁴**The LORD has raised up strength for the people and praise for all | faithful servants,
the children of Israel, a people who are near the LORD. | Hallelujah!**

Gospel Reading: Luke 2:22-40

Luke's narrative continues with stories that emphasize Jesus' connection to Judaism. His family is devout in its observance of the law, and Jesus himself is recognized as one who will bring glory to Israel.

²²When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, [Joseph and Mary] brought [Jesus] up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³(as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), ²⁴and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;

³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation,

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

³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel."

³³And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.

³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

³⁶There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

³⁹When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Prayers of Intercession

Joining our voices with the song of the angels, let us pray for the church, the world, and all who are in need, saying “Hear us, O God,” and responding, “Your mercy is great.”

A brief silence.

Night and day, all creation praises you, O God. Strengthen your church across nations, denominations, and traditions. Fill us with wisdom and unify our proclamation of your forgiveness and mercy. Hear us, O God. Your mercy is great.

All creation is holy to you, O God. You cause the earth to bring forth its shoots and gardens to spring up. Protect hibernating animals and frozen lands that wait earnestly for longer days of awakening and growth. Hear us, O God. Your mercy is great.

The nations are upheld by your hand, O God. Cause righteousness and praise to spring forth, inspiring leaders to serve with compassion and integrity. Send your spirit of discernment upon legislators grappling with complex decisions for the sake of the common good. Hear us, O God. Your mercy is great.

Send the spirit of your Son into our hearts, O God. Come quickly to hearts that race with fear, hearts that break with grief, and hearts that long for wholeness (especially those who we name now aloud, or silently on our hearts... [pause]). Reveal your power to heal and to save. Hear us, O God. Your mercy is great.

Adopt us into your family, O God. Bless our elders with the peace and joy of Simeon and Anna. Strengthen those who have retired, those who work in older age, and those in need of income, food, company, or health care. Connect young and old across generations. Hear us, O God. Your mercy is great.

Let us depart in peace, O God, according to your word. For all your saints, we give you thanks. Prepare our salvation in the sight of all your witnesses of every time and place. Hear us, O God. Your mercy is great.

God of mercy, come quickly to us with grace upon grace as we lift these and all our prayers to you, in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

A reflection for the First Sunday of Christmas...

Go in Peace

With Simeon and Anna we receive consolation (Luke 2:25) and good news: Jesus frees us to go in peace. God's Word is incarnate, and we have seen the light of our salvation (2:29-32). "Go in peace" is our call to action—a reminder that we are freed from sin and death and sent out to share that good news with the world. "Go in peace" is also our prayer as life ends—a reminder of a love more powerful than death.

And yet . . . right along with these words of peace come troubling words from Simeon. The infant Jesus will be a source of turmoil for his people and his family. The words "and a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Luke 2:35) must have been the opposite of peaceful and comforting to young mother Mary. Luke even includes the detail that Mary and Joseph offered the least expensive purification sacrifice, a reminder that Jesus was born into poverty (Lev. 12:8). Even in the presence of God's incarnate peace, all is not well with the world.

This is where we enter the story, full of questions. How do we experience God's peace in our broken world? Faced with the reality of war, poverty, hunger, destruction, and loss, how do we speak of peace? How do we live God's peace in our lives? Like Simeon and Anna, we have faith in God's promise of peace because we have faith in the promiser. As Simeon and Anna witnessed, God's word has been, is, and will be fulfilled.