

OLD FOLKS

A SERMON FOR THE SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS
DECEMBER 28, 2014
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
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PSALM148
LUKE 2:22-40

We Americans seem to want to start celebrating Christmas earlier each and every year. And we stop celebrating on December 26. In our house, growing up, the tradition was to keep the Christmas decorations up until New Year's Day. And the record player played all of the Christmas albums: Bing Crosby, Gene Autry, I think there was even one by Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey and their orchestra. Later on we added Perry Como and Dean Martin and Andy Williams.

In jolly old England, the festivities continued for twelve days after Christmas. You knew that. You've heard, and maybe even sung, the song.

The twelve days led up to Epiphany, which commemorates the visit of the wise men to the stable, and the giving of the gifts to the baby Jesus.

Our story this morning, if tradition was upheld, probably took place a week after the birth of the baby, so it is appropriate for this day. The dedication at the temple took place either seven or eight days, depending upon one's way of counting, after birth. It was probably associated with the ritual of circumcision, although that is mentioned in the verse previous to our text. Luke, a Gentile by birth, shows an amazing unfamiliarity with Jewish customs, confusing the rituals of dedication and purification. But these were topics that a man, even a physician, might not be comfortable discussing with a woman, even a woman as open and forthcoming as Mary.

What is important isn't when they took Jesus to the temple, or really why. What is important is what happened there.

Two of the old folks who hung around the temple saw the baby, and recognized Him for who He was!

The first, Simeon, may have been a priest or a rabbi. But he was certainly a man looking for the birth of the Messiah. God had promised Simeon that he would not leave this earth until he saw the Christ.

Now for some people, coming face to face with Jesus, knowing that it was now time for this life to be over, might result in a different reaction. Some might run away, try to hide, refuse to gaze upon the child. Not Simeon! He took the baby up in his arms, and blessed God, and issued those words known as the "Nunc Dimittis", "Lord, now lettest thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word."

Many times, in the years of my ministry, I've uttered those words at the bedside of one of the "old folks" in the church I was serving, and not just old folks, but young folks who had come to the end of life's journey.

Simeon is saying, "Lord, having seen Your Christ, the Savior, I am ready to go!"

And Simeon blesses the Holy Family, warning them of the pain they will suffer, and then disappears from the pages of scripture and history.

Now there was one more of the old folks in the temple.

Her name was Anna. She was probably what we would call homeless today, but had taken up her lodging in the temple, where she stayed day and night, fasting and praying. Of course, her fasting may not have been self-imposed. Many who are homeless, poor, elderly, go to bed hungry every night.

Now it says in the text that Anna had lived to a great age. She was eighty-four. If you are eighty-four or older, that may not seem so great to you. She had been married for a brief, childless, seven years, and had probably lived as a poor widow for around sixty years.

And Anna responded to the presence of the baby Jesus by giving thanks to God, and by speaking of Him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Now we know that old folks love babies, children in general. And babies and children in general seem to know it, and warm to the love that they feel.

When our son, Kris, was a little tyke, I used to take him with me on nursing home calls, and to see the shut-ins and the elderly. There was a wonderful woman of great years named Anna Dick who lived across the creek from us, and on an occasion or two, Kris would wander away, cross two streets and a wooden footbridge, to visit his friend, Mrs. Dick.

Anna Dick kept a drawer full of toys, and when we visited her last, in a nursing home in her native South Carolina nearly twenty years ago, the cabinet with the toys in the bottom drawer was right there in her room, for any child who came to visit her to play with.

Old folks need babies. Babies need old folks. All of us need the Lord Jesus Christ. Which is why I go to see the old folks, and have for more than forty years. Like Simeon and Anna of old, they sometimes see Jesus more clearly than the rest of the world around them. And they can teach us about Jesus.

I've been going to see old folks for so many years that I've become one of them.

Simeon and Anna remind us that it is the job of the old folks to lift up the Christ child, to tell little children and families and young parents with babies that God so loved the world that God sent the only begotten Son into this world, that whoever believes in Him, old or young, should not perish, but have eternal life.

Simeon and Anna lived a long time on this earth waiting to see the Messiah, the Christ. And when they saw Him, they were ready to go. Their task was accomplished. Seeing the Christ, they were ready to enter into eternal life.

Dear hearts, the message of the gospel is that whenever we see the Christ, whether it be as a little child, as a teenager, as a mature adult, or as one of the old folks, we enter into eternal life and that moment, and will live forever with Him in His kingdom that surely awaits us.

And to Him be the glory, the power, the dominion and the praise, in the church and in the world, now and forever more. Amen.