December 29, 2024
First Sunday after Christmas
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Luke 2:22 – 40

DEPART IN PEACE.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

It seems that for the secular world the ***"Christmas season"*** begins in early November and stretches until Christmas Day – but not a day longer. They quickly move on to making New Year's resolutions and worry about what the coming year might bring. But from the earliest days of the Christian Church, the season of Christmas has lasted twelve days – beginning on Christmas Day and lasting through January 5th, with the season of Epiphany beginning on January 6th.

On each of the twelve days of Christmas, the Church not only celebrates the birth of the Christ child, but it also commemorates individuals who God used in special way to accomplish His will in the world. By commemorating these individuals on what we call Feast Days, the Early Church was teaching that the Good News of the birth of Jesus should be reflected in the lives of all believers. So, before delving into our Gospel text this morning, I want to mention the three major Feast Days we've missed since Christmas morning.

On December 26th, the second day of Christmas, the Church commemorates St. Stephen, the first martyr of the Christian Church. (Acts 6:8–8:2) Scripture records that Stephen was a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. (cf: Acts 6:5) He remained steadfast in faith and preaching of Christ Jesus, even in the face of an angry mob. Stephen is a ***"martyr in will and deed."*** He was not only ***willing*** to die for his confession of Christ – he was ***"in deed"*** stoned to death for that confession in Jerusalem. He departed this life in peace with the sure and certain confidence of the resurrection on the Last Day.

On December 27th, the third day of Christmas, the Church commemorates St. John, Apostle and Evangelist. John was one of the first disciples called by Jesus, (cf: Matthew 4:21–22) and along with Peter and James, was part of Jesus' "inner circle" of disciples. It was to John whom Jesus entrusted the care of His mother Mary as He died on the cross. (John 19:26–27) In commemoration John is called a ***"martyr in will, but not in deed."*** John was certainly ***willing*** to die for his confession of Christ, but God spared his life. He was exiled on the island of Patmos, imprisoned, and beaten for the faith. Tradition says he is the only one of the Apostles to die a natural death in old age.

Yesterday, December 28th, the fourth day of Christmas, the Church commemorated the Holy Innocents, those male children under the age of two who were slaughtered by King Herod's order. (cf: Matthew 2:16–18) These innocent children are considered ***"martyrs in deed, but not***

in will." Neither they nor their families knew why they were slaughtered, that Herod feared that one of them *might be* the Christ. Their deaths on account of Christ prefigured the martyrdom of all who would bear Christ's name.

St. Stephen, St. John, and the Holy Innocents point us to the Third Petition of the Lord's Prayer: ***"Thy will be done."*** Jesus teaches us to pray this in the Lord's Prayer (cf: Matthew 6:10) and He prays it Himself in the Garden of Gethsemane just prior to being betrayed and drinking from the bitter cup of the Father's wrath against sin. (cf: Matthew 26:39–42) In Luther's explanation to the Third Petition he says:

> ***"God's will is done when He breaks and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature…"*** (SC, Art. III, 9)

The murders of Stephen and the Innocents, and the exile of John, are tastes of the bitter cup of wrath that Jesus received from the Father as God worked in His hidden wisdom to break and hinder the evil plans and purposes of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature. He has spared no expense to keep us firm in His Word and faith. He works in all things – even in trial and suffering – to bring about good for His people and glory for His kingdom. (cf: Romans 8:28)

So as you pray ***"Thy will be done,"*** remember the many ways God has answered this prayer for His people. St. Stephen teaches boldness and confidence in confessing Christ. The Holy Innocents teach that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. (cf: 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11) So we shouldn't take our sin lightly but repent and keep watch. Finally, St. John shows us what it looks like to endure suffering and hardship, holding steadfast to the faith while we wait for God's kingdom to come.

As the New Year begins and you pray ***"Thy will be done,"*** you don't know what God has in store for you this year: comfort and joy – or trials and tribulation. All we know for sure is that today is here ***right now***… yesterday is history… and God never promised us tomorrow. But God did make an interesting promise to a man named Simeon.

In our Gospel lesson St. Luke tells about a righteous and devout Jew living in Jerusalem named Simeon. (cf: Luke 2:25–35) The Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he wouldn't die until he saw the promised Messiah with his own eyes. One day the Holy Spirit led Simeon to the temple, which was heart of Jewish worship. It's the only place where sacrifices required by the Law could be performed. So, as you can imagine, it's a beehive of activity with a constant stream of pious Jews bringing their animal sacrifices for a myriad of reasons. Lots of men, women, boys and girls of all ages, coming and going. But even with all the hustle and bustle, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Simeon recognized the forty-day old child as the Messiah. And:

> **"**[Simeon] ***took him up in his arms and blessed God…"*** (Luke 2:28)

The Second Person of the Holy Trinity who participated in creation had entered His creation to bring salvation to all peoples… Jew and Gentile alike. (cf: Luke 2:30–31) Not only had prophesy been fulfilled, but the Holy Spirit's promise to Simeon had also been kept. (cf: Isaiah 7:14; Luke 2:26) Simeon beheld the Messiah with his very own eyes. At that very moment, as far as he was concerned, he'd lived life to the full. His bucket list was complete. He was ready to depart in peace and go to heaven.

And as if to confirm that Simeon's words are true, Anna, an elderly, pious prophetess:

> ***"… began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem."*** (Luke 2:38)

Like the angel who appeared to the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks, Simeon announces good news of great joy. (cf: Lk 2:8–11) The Savior was in their midst. And like those shepherds, Anna continues the proclamation of the Good News that shepherds began at the birth of Jesus. Anna had spent many years at the temple, worshipping with prayer and fasting. Scripture doesn't say how long Simeon waited in faith to see the Christ, but when Mary and Joseph presented the baby in the temple, his wait was over.

The walk of faith is a long and difficult road. Faith runs contrary to every bit of human knowledge and wisdom. But as Christians:

> ***"… we walk by faith, not by sight."*** (2 Corinthians 5:7)

As believers in the Christ Child who was born in a stable and would die on the cross, you're not called to trust in the things you see and feel, but in what's revealed to you in God's Word. That's where you find God's promises… the conviction of things not seen. (cf: Hebrews 11:1)

Unfortunately, in this world, walking by faith is an invitation for persecution. In our text, Simeon prepares Mary and Joseph – and you and me – of the persecution to come. (cf: Lk 2:34–35) Although the Christ Child is only 40 days old, Simeon foretells of the division that the Child will bring. (cf: Mathew 10:34) While some like St. Stephen and St. John will stand firm in faith of Jesus, others will fall into unbelief. And still others will be opposed. Simeon even foretells that Mary will herself, suffer anguish at her son's suffering and death on the cross. (cf: John 19:25–27)

Because of your faith in Jesus, you're liable to be hated by friends. It's even likely that some family members will turn against you, but that's the cost of discipleship. That's the life of bearing the cross of Jesus. (cf: Matthew 16:24–26) For those all who're in Christ Jesus, life will be anything but peaceful. As St. Paul says:

> ***"… the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."*** (1 Corinthians 1:18)

In the waters of Baptism you were marked with the sign of the cross as one redeemed by Christ the crucified. The mark of the cross mark angers the devil and makes you a target for the devil and his stooges. He'll use every weapon of sickness, worry, and guilt to crush you. While you live as a child of God in this sinful and broken world, life is a constant struggle against the devil, the world, and your sinful flesh.

So at a time appointed by God before the foundation of the world, God acted to fulfill His promise of sending a Savior to rescue you. (cf: Galatians 4:4–5; Ephesians 1:4) Jesus, born of Jewish descent, was born under the Law so He could keep the Law perfectly on your behalf and to redeem you from the Law. He kept the Law in His circumcision on the eighth day. He kept it

in His presentation at the temple on the fortieth day. And He continued to keep the Law every day…. perfectly… all the way to the cross, where He paid the wages of sin for all mankind.

There were a lot of people in Jerusalem on the day that Jesus was presented at the temple. Lots of people at the temple… but only one recognized Jesus for who He truly was. That's because the Holy Spirit is the only one who reveals Jesus.

Today, many still don't recognize Jesus. They don't recognize Him as the light of the world because they prefer to live in darkness. They prefer to forsake the Good News that Jesus brings into the world. But the Holy Spirit has revealed Jesus to you. The Spirit has called you by the Gospel, enlightened you with His gifts, sanctifies you and keeps you in the true faith.

By faith you have received adoption as sons of God the Father. (cf: Galatians 4:6) By meditation upon God's Word, the Holy Spirit strengthens your faith and assures you that you are God's child, redeemed by Jesus Christ and made heirs of His heavenly kingdom.

In our text, Simeon is ready to depart in peace because he had witnessed God's faithfulness. He's ready because he knows that God's promise of a Savior to redeem him and all mankind his sin has been kept. He is ready because for the sake of Jesus, whatever Simeon faces from that day on, peace has been made with the Father through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

Today you stand with Simeon, St. Stephen, and St. John, ready to depart in peace. By faith, ***you too*** have beheld your Savior. The Holy Spirit has revealed Him to you. Not through some mystical vision or sign in the wilderness, but by God's inspired Holy Word. His Word announces that the baby Simeon held in his arms would grow to one day bear your sins upon the cross, reconciling you with the Father. You have beheld Him in His Holy Supper where He promises forgiveness of sins. It is the Lord's Christ who suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried on your behalf. As you daily pray ***"Thy will be done,"*** you have every confidence that because of Jesus' death and resurrection, whatever you face from this day on, it all ends in eternal life.

Commend tomorrow to the Lord, trusting in His mercies and trusting that He will indeed work all things together for your good. Commend tomorrow to the Lord, for today you drink from the cup of salvation, Jesus very blood shed for you for your salvation. Depart in peace for the sake of Jesus, because like the martyrs who've gone on before, whatever you face on this side of heaven, you are at peace with God.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, Amen.