### “The Consolation of Israel” Steve Finlan for The First Church, December 31, 2023

**Galatians 4:4–7**

4But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. 6And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” 7So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

**Luke 2:22–40**

22When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. . . 24and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.”

25 Now 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 . . . 28Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, 29 “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; 30 for my eyes have seen your salvation, 31 which 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 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.”

Welcome to First Church today, the first Sunday after Christmas. I send you tidings of great joy, and wish you all had a wonderful Christmas and safe travels, if you went anywhere.

The reading from Galatians is from Paul the apostle, who traveled far and wide throughout the Mediterranean, spreading the joy of the good news of Jesus Christ. The reading comes from a letter he wrote to a church he founded in what is now central Turkey. It is filled with many reasons for spiritual joy.

Paul uses an interesting metaphor for salvation. He is saying that salvation is like being freed from slavery and being adopted as a son. It’s a surprisingly radical image.

He is picturing the rigid following of the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) as being like slavery, a situation of difficult and demanding service. The Pharisees promoted the following of Torah to the letter. Paul says that when God sends the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, we are no longer slaves but children of God.

In the previous chapter of Galatians, he had used a different but similar metaphor. All of us were like children under the control of a disciplinarian or a chaperone. He said “the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith” (Gal 3:24–26). In other words, you are like an adult who has outgrown a chaperone. With adulthood come many new freedoms and challenges. For now we learn to self-discipline, with the Spirit’s guidance.

So in Galatians 3, it is Christ Jesus and faith that deliver us from a condition of slave-like service and turn us into children of God, growing in faith. In Galatians 4, it is the Spirit that converts us into children. These are parallel images rather than contradictory images, I think, because *with* faith comes the Spirit, and with the Spirit comes a strengthening of faith. So “faith” or “the Spirit” will change what we are, change us from unfree into free.

Before, he says, “we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world” (4:3). But now, he continues, God sent his Son “so that we might receive adoption as children” (4:4). It’s a little complex, but you will get the basic idea if you hold onto the idea that God sent his Son and also the Son’s Spirit, which create a profound change in believers, changing them from minors into adults, or slaves into heirs. The Spirit gives us the power to call God, “dad,” or “Abba.” We develop an intimate *relationship* with God.

If you get a mental picture of this transformation, you have the basics of Paul’s teaching. I do not see the same transformation in the story of Simeon, but I *do* see the intense anticipation of a faithful person being met with a revelation by God, which does profoundly affect Simeon. For years, Simeon has been “looking forward to the consolation of Israel,” that is, waiting for the Messiah. He has been a faithful Israelite. Now, as an elder, he has an experience of the Holy Spirit, who reveals to him that he will *see* the Messiah (Luke 2:25–26). He is then “guided by the Spirit” to go to the temple. He is there when Jesus is brought into the temple (2:27).

Seeing the baby Jesus is such a meaningful experience for him that he proclaims that he, Simeon, is being dismissed in peace (2:29); in other words, he can die happy and fulfilled, since he has seen the one who will embody God’s salvation. “My eyes have seen your salvation,” he says (2:30).

And Simeon knows that Jesus will even reach the Gentiles, for he says this salvation has been “prepared in the presence of *all* peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (2:31–32). He also foresees that tumultuous things will happen in the Jewish nation, that this child will be the occasion “for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed” (2:34). The child’s life will have an effect on the inner life of many. Also, a sword will pierce Mary’s soul (2:35), meaning she will experience heartbreak.

He speaks as a poet and prophet who foresees the ups and downs that are coming, including a difficult time for Mary. It must have been a very dramatic moment. It says Joseph and Mary “were amazed” (2:33). Simeon would have been a likeable character, a devout Jew, a deep thinker. God honors people who have shown persistent faith. For Simeon had strong faith before there was any sign of a coming Messiah. But then he was allowed to greet the Messiah at the latter’s circumcision ceremony. It was a remarkable affirmation.

Sometimes God arranges pleasant celebrations, honoring people’s faith and putting forward the Messiah for our attention. God also arranged that the baptism of Jesus would be a memorable public occasion, many years later. Usually God operates more silently, unspectacularly, but we see momentous events happening, sometimes in ordinary ways. Perhaps you have been witness to a miracle in *your* life.

Love came down at Christmas, and God arranged that a number of people would take notice and celebrate the occasion. This is God’s way. He uplifts those who have persevering faith. Simeon and Anna had such faith. So did the Magi, who traveled so far to see the Messiah whom they discerned in their studies.

Trust that God honors persevering faith. Don’t expect immediate answers, but expect answers, and wait faithfully. Celebrate answered prayer when it happens. Be ready to receive extraordinary moments. Thanks be to God.