### “The Falling and Rising of Many” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Jan. 1, 2023

**Luke 2:21–39**

21 After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

22 When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him 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 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, 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; 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.”

36 There 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 for seven years after her marriage, 37then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped 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.

Welcome to First Church on the first Sunday of the New Year, the first Sunday after Christmas! The days leading up to Christmas are so often filled with excitement, with planning, preparation, and anticipation. When I was little I didn’t understand the preparation time so well, and the waiting seemed to last forever.

It’s not much easier, as an adult, to wait. Our gospel story today introduces us to two adults, Simeon and Anna, who are waiting, waiting with hope and patience for the Messianic promise to be fulfilled. And the promise is fulfilled in what would usually have been a very ordinary event at the temple. After childbirth, and after a period of purification, a mother, along with the father, are supposed to present the child at the temple and offer a lamb for a burnt-offering and a bird as a sin-offering. Joseph and Mary only offered two birds as a sacrifice, a reduced offering that was allowed for the poor (Lev 12:6–8).

Now Simeon was a righteous man who hung around the temple perpetually. At this time, he was granted a revelation that he would see the Lord’s Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, he was able to recognize that the baby that Joseph and Mary were presenting was that Messiah. And he proceeded to deliver an amazing tribute of praise and prophecy. He has some vision of Jesus’ life and can see how he will affect others. He knew he would reach Jews and Gentiles. He would cause “the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed” (2:34). Jesus will change the world, but there will be opposition against him. Simeon also foresees Mary’s suffering and says “a sword will pierce your own soul too” (2:35).

While they’re still in the temple, another independent prophet-like person named Anna is also granted a vision of the child’s significance, for she begins prophesying “to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (2:38) about the greatness of the baby being blessed that day. There were probably not many people present in the courtyards to hear what Simeon and Anna said, but it somehow was very important that the occasion of this baby’s purification be announced.

At the very least, it was a spiritual gift given to Simeon and Anna themselves, devout persons who deserved to be blessed. It was God’s way of saying to each of them: “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matt 25:21 RSV). Simeon seems to receive it as a great and final gift from God to him, when he says “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace . . . for my eyes have seen your salvation” (2:29–30). The reference to being dismissed is a euphemism for dying. He’s saying: “I can die in peace now, you’ve shown me your salvation.”

I’m going to guess that God granted these visions to this pair for their benefit. It was a way of honoring hope and perseverance. Perseverance is one of the spiritual virtues, and the subject of one of the parables, about the unjust judge and the importunate widow, where the widow’s persistence wears down the resistance of a judge reluctant to hear her case (Luke 18:1–8). Perseverance is a difficult virtue to maintain, for it involves years of waiting. Imagine how our patience is tested even for something as trivial as waiting for a light to change. It requires immense faith and hope, to stick with something for which one has been waiting for years. Simeon and Anna were waiting for “the redemption of Jerusalem” (2:38), and God wanted to reward their perseverance and fulfill their hope.

Is there something in which you have had to persevere for long years? Did you have to wait to finally pass exams and graduate after many days and years of studying? Perhaps you have persevered in sobriety. Sobriety has to be maintained one day at a time, sometimes one lonely and dry day at a time, over the course of many years. One will notice health rewards almost immediately, but will still crave the excitement, the short-term pleasures, of drinking. To stay sober for years is not easy. And I think it involves faith, too, the faith that something meaningful and pleasurable and completely unrelated to drink, will happen in one’s life.

It’s not just the overcoming of alcoholism that requires perseverance. All of us, I think, have to practice perseverance and faith in the matter of humbly making an honest living, as opposed to the quick rewards of doing dishonest things or engaging in criminal enterprises that can bring rapid monetary rewards. Some of us may be practicing unappreciated perseverance in our work lives. I know many teachers are very dedicated to helping their students to learn, teachers whose efforts rarely receive a thank you.

I want to stress that God wants to reward the perseverance and hope that we practice over long periods of time in our lives. We may not completely understand the value of our efforts of patience and perseverance, until we have a clearer vision in the afterlife. What about in *this* life? Do we ever get a Simeon and Anna moment in our lives? Yes, I think we do. It can be rare, but it *does* happen. Sometimes an employer expresses overdue gratitude for a job well done. Sometimes appreciation will appear from an unexpected quarter of your life.

My wife Karen had an experience of appreciation in this lifetime. One of her most difficult students, who gave her a lot of resistance in class and who was barely able to pass the course, came back years later to tell Karen that he had joined the military and had turned his life around. He said “Thanks, and sorry I was so much trouble for you.”

It happened for me after I had written several books on atonement, and I was not feeling terribly well appreciated by the academic community. Then I suddenly received an invitation from Sweden to come to their country with my wife, all expenses paid, and present a couple of academic papers. It was an exciting and enriching trip that formed some long lasting friendships.

A few years later I received an offer from England, from Oxford University Press, to write a bibliographic article on atonement for them. These for me were evidence of Jesus’ saying, “Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and in their own house” (Matt 13:57). But they have honor in some *other* countries!

So hang in there, doing what *you* believe is God’s will for you to do. Persist in your efforts. Believe that there will be results, because what we do now, the good that we do, ripples out from us, creating ever-enlarging waves of hope, kindness, and love. These, the fruits of the spirit, are not always visible. Like the wind, they may not be seen, but the effects are real. So, too, are our efforts to follow God’s will and have a spiritually-guided effect on those around us. Know that your loving actions are not wasted, and what you do to bring God’s love to others really matters. Persevere!