

**The Handoff**  
A Sermon for Every Sunday  
The First Sunday after Christmas Day  
*Luke 2:22-40*

Today's Gospel lesson seems perfect for the end of a year, almost any year but perhaps especially this one. It's the story of an old man holding a baby in his arms and saying, "Now I can go," and it reminds me of nothing so much as one of those cartoons you might see that depict the outgoing year as an old man and the incoming year as a newborn baby. In fact I saw one yesterday that showed an old man with a wreath of holly on his head, holding a baby in his arms. I thought, "That's perfect for this text! Here in the Christmas season you've got an old man who looks like Santa Claus, but he's holding this baby, and gazing on it so tenderly, that it could be Simeon holding the baby Jesus." And there was something about the look on his face that was perfect, too, as if he could finally hand off the burden of responsibility to the next generation.

Because Simeon was old.

Maybe not as old as Anna, but he was old enough to remember how things used to be before the Romans conquered Israel in 63 BC. I'm guessing he was in his seventies or eighties when this story took place. He would have been a young man when Pompey and his army laid siege to the city of Jerusalem. He would have heard the stories about how the Romans finally broke through the walls of the city and killed 12,000 Jews, and how they did what was even worse than that by desecrating the temple. Apparently Pompey himself walked into the Holy of Holies in his muddy combat boots. No one was supposed to go in there; not any Jew and certainly not any Gentile. Only the high priest

and then only once a year, on the Day of Atonement. Pompey had desecrated the holiest place in Israel and the Jews would never forget it. If I'm right, Simeon would have been a young man in those days, maybe too young to fight the Romans, but not too young to remember. In today's text Luke says that he was one of those looking for the consolation of Israel. *Consolation* is defined as "the comfort received after a loss." Simeon was looking for comfort. He was clinging to the promise of a Messiah, someone who would rout the Romans, set things right in Israel, and sit on the throne of David. He himself had been promised that he would not see death before he had seen the Messiah.

And then Joseph and Mary came into the temple with their newborn son, and somehow, without any angels singing "Glory to God in the highest," Simeon knew that this was the one. He took the baby into his arms and said, "Now, Lord. Now I can die in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation." Simeon knew that Israel was going to be OK:

Christ the Savior was born.

But let me turn my thoughts toward those of you who are listening to this sermon. I wonder if there are any Simeons or Annas in your congregation, people who can remember the good old days of the church and who may be wondering what's going to become of it. If your church has been around long enough I'm guessing there was a time when the building was full on Sunday mornings, or nearly, because there was a time in this country, back in the fifties, when going to church was simply the Sunday morning thing to do. I call it the "churchgoing boom" and it coincided almost exactly with the Baby Boom (1946-1964). The war was over; soldiers and sailors came home and married their high school sweethearts; they moved into houses with white picket fences

and began to have babies, lots of babies. Those parents wanted their babies to grow up in the church just as they had. They came by the hundreds, by the thousands, and soon churches were scrambling to find enough nursery space, and then enough Sunday school space for all those babies, all those children! And because their parents were coming to church too they needed bigger sanctuaries. They built them, or added additional services, and for a little while at least those sanctuaries were full, or nearly. And then, for a number of reasons, things began to change.

In a book called *Resident Aliens* Will Willimon suggests that things began to change not in 63 BC, but on a Sunday evening in 1963. He writes: “Then, in Greenville, South Carolina, in defiance of the state’s time-honored blue laws, the Fox Theater opened on Sunday. Seven of us—regular attenders of the Methodist Youth Fellowship at Buncombe Street Church—made a pact to enter the front door of the church, be seen, then quietly slip out the back door and join John Wayne at the Fox. That evening has come to represent a watershed in the history of Christendom, South Carolina style. On that night, Greenville, South Carolina—the last pocket of resistance to secularity in the Western world—served notice that it would no longer be a prop for the church. There would be no more free passes...no more free rides.”<sup>1</sup>

Willimon says that while it may seem trivial to date the collapse of Christendom to that Sunday evening in 1963 he would also say that before that night he didn’t have a choice between going to church and going to the movies. “The church was the only show in town. On Sundays, the town closed down,” he writes. “You couldn’t even buy a gallon of gas.” The most exciting thing that happened all day was the traffic jam when everybody was trying to get to Sunday school. Some of you can probably remember

when things were like that in your town, but they are not that way anymore, are they?  
And you have to wonder: what happened?

Maybe Willimon is right, maybe it's because the Fox Theater opened on a Sunday night. Or maybe it's because everything started opening on Sundays—bowling alleys, and grocery stores, and shopping malls. Maybe it's because the Baby Boom eventually came to an end, or because so many of those babies grew up and went off to fight in Vietnam. Maybe it's because inventions like air conditioning and television made it a little too easy to just stay at home on Sunday mornings. Or maybe those people are right who say it's because we “took God out of the public schools” (although I don't think so). Whatever the reasons, the cultural forces that used to push people through the front doors of the church began to pull them back out again and we entered a period that I've been calling the Great Panic—that time in the late sixties and early seventies when sanctuaries began to empty out as if somebody had pulled the plug in the bathtub, and church leaders began to wring their hands, wondering what was wrong, and how they might fix it.

It was about this time that a couple of youth ministers from Chicago decided to start a new church, and they started by doing a survey—by going around and asking people why they weren't coming to church anymore. The people said the music was outdated, the sermons weren't relevant, and they didn't like to dress up on Sundays. So, Bill Hybels and Dave Holmbo started a church called Willow Creek that met in a theater, where people could listen to contemporary Christian music, sermons that were edgy and relevant, dramas that brought home the central point and, best of all, they didn't have to dress up. The church was a phenomenal success. In fact, within just a few years, some

15,000 people were attending services that weren't exactly Christian worship in the way that we know it, but were certainly seeker-friendly.

Soon everybody was trying to emulate the success of Willow Creek. The so-called Church Growth Movement produced “community” churches in almost every city, featuring contemporary worship that included live bands and singers who performed like pop stars; gifted speakers who strolled out onto the platform wearing golf shirts, who peppered their sermons with real-life illustrations, and talked about things like how to deal with the stresses of everyday life and how to raise happy, healthy children. Some of these churches used drama, others used video, but all of them tried to make a break from the old way of doing church—from the hymnbooks and prayer books, the pipe organs and priests. And again, people responded. They began to leave their old churches and come to these new ones.

What some of us missed in all of this was the shift from a model in which people came to church out of duty, devotion, or habit to a model in which we tried to make coming to church attractive to them. It's a subtle shift, but can you guess what happens when you start trying to make coming to church *attractive*? You start thinking about what people *like*, and how you can give it to them. Do they like coffee and doughnuts? Well, let's give it to them. Do they like contemporary worship? Let's give it to them! Do they like preaching that relates to everyday life? Let's give it to them. The problem, of course, is that some churches are better at this than others. Some have more resources than others. And, so, a few churches in town become megachurches while the rest simply struggle to survive. Please don't misunderstand me. I don't have anything against relevant preaching, I don't have anything against contemporary worship, and I *certainly*

don't have anything against coffee and doughnuts, but when you make up your mind that you will do whatever it takes to get people to come to church, then you will get just the kind of church you deserve: a congregation of fickle religious consumers who will leave you as soon as the church next door opens up an espresso bar.

And here's the truth: some people aren't going to come to church no matter what you do. In 1960 roughly half the US population was going to church on a regular basis. By 1971 that number had dropped to 41 percent. In 2002 the number had dropped to 31 percent, but in 2005 a team of sociologists did the same survey but used a different question: instead of asking people, "Do you attend church regularly?" they asked, "Did you go to church last Sunday?" and this time the percentage fell from 31 percent to 22 percent of the population. The last number I heard was 17 percent, but that was several years ago, and well before the onset of the current global pandemic. I hope that by now you have plotted a mental graph, and if you have you can see that if things continue for the next fifty years as they have for the last fifty years, churchgoing in America will drop right off the chart.

In England, which seems to be twenty to twenty-five years ahead of us in terms of secularity, an estimated three percent of the population goes to church on Sunday—*three percent!*—and those waves have been washing up on our shores for years now. Which makes me think this is a perfect time to re-examine the church's mission and purpose. One of the questions we need to ask is this: "Is our mission and purpose completely wrapped up in our building?" I hope not. I've been in a church that couldn't give up its big, beautiful building, even when the congregation had dwindled down to almost nothing. As a consequence, every dollar they took in, every ounce of energy they

expended, went toward that building. It became their mission, and the neighborhood around them was neglected so they could take care of the building. And, oh! That building was beautiful. It was one of the most beautiful places I had ever worshiped. But it was like a glittering edifice built on top of a trash heap, with homeless people sleeping on the front porch and church members stepping over them to come inside and worship in that beautiful space. It makes me wonder what they were worshiping.

But let me get back to Simeon.

He was old, remember? Old enough to remember what Israel had been like before the Romans came, to remember what it had been like when it was free. Those were the good old days, and Simeon and others like him had been praying for deliverance ever since. When Joseph and Mary walked into the temple with that baby in their arms Simeon said, “Now, Lord! Now I can die in peace! For my eyes have seen your salvation!” What would it take for you to say that about your church? What kind of reassurance would you need that things are going to be OK? Is it not enough to know that God is with you, and if God is with you all will be well?

The truth is that the holiest moments in Israel’s history happened while they were in the wilderness, worshiping God in a tent. The truth is that most of their sacred scriptures were written down and preserved while they were in exile, in Babylon. There’s really no way to know what might happen to your church in the days ahead, but I believe this: if God is with you then, in the words of Julian of Norwich, “All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.”

Let me close with a word of encouragement from my own experience. On March 11, 2020, I was on vacation with my wife. If she hadn’t looked at her phone I might not

have known that the World Health Organization had just announced a “global pandemic.” I spent the next couple of days on the phone with church leaders trying to make a decision about what we should do on Sunday and eventually we encouraged everyone to stay away. Still 92 people who hadn’t gotten the word showed up. We tiptoed through that worship service and then told everyone to go home. We didn’t open the doors of the church for the next seven months.

Now, if you had told me beforehand that we were going to stop gathering for seven months, and that we were going to stop passing the offering plate under people’s noses, I might have said we should all just quit, that there’s no way a church could survive that kind of disruption. But here’s the good news: we didn’t quit, and we have survived. In fact, we have done better than survive. Our members have learned how to access worship on our webcast. They have gathered as couples and families, maybe invited over a close friend, and sung the hymns at the top of their lungs. They have learned how to give online. It didn’t happen overnight, and there were a few anxious weeks, but now their gifts come in more regularly than ever. Our financial future looks to be secure.

I hope you’ve had a similar experience at your church, but even if you haven’t I hope you have learned that the church is more than a building, and that its future rests not in the weekly attendance and giving figures, but in the hands of the One old Simeon met in the temple that day.

Christ, the Savior.

—*Jim Somerville* © 2020

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<sup>i</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: a Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know that Something Is Wrong* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), pp. 15-16).