



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

January 2, 2022

# Falling and Rising

Dr. Jo Forrest

© 2022 by Dr. Jo Forrest and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: January 20, 2022

On this second Sunday in the season of Christmas, Mary and Joseph have left the manger and entered the sleep-deprived existence all parents of newborns feel.

Our reading for today recounts their eighth day. In accord with the Torah, they take Jesus to the temple to seek a blessing for his life. Albeit filled with fatigue, we can envision the feet of his proud pappa barely touch the ground.

Given that both Mary and Joseph received angelic visions of Jesus' divine purpose and shepherds related their encounter with angels who sang the same message, couldn't they skip this since he was conceived by God? And yet, perhaps they craved some assurances for what lay ahead, for their son, and for themselves.

As we read this story, I invite you to stand in the distance as they meet an old prophet, Simeon, who is mysteriously drawn to the temple.

*Dear God, Bless these ancient words again with your holy spirit. Quiet the noise around so we hear the story as if we were there. May these words startle us and invite us to be a part of Jesus' story, so we continue his work. Amen.*

### Luke 2

<sup>25</sup> 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.

<sup>26</sup> It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.

<sup>27</sup> Guided 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,  
<sup>28</sup> Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

<sup>29</sup> "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word;

<sup>30</sup> for my eyes have seen your salvation,

<sup>31</sup> which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

<sup>32</sup> a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

<sup>33</sup> And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.

<sup>34</sup> Then 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 <sup>35</sup> so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

One of the ways I read scripture and prepare sermons, is to visualize the characters in the story. Pretend you are the casting director for a movie or stage production. What physical characteristics of an actor would speak the part? Or

who can embody this role with the mannerisms and attitude that put flesh and muscle on the bare bones of the text?

If I had a conversation with that character, I'd ask what they were doing before the action began in the story and how lived differently after the scene.

I also picture the character sitting next to you in the pew. The last thing I want is for us to leave the sanctuary and have that character hang their head and shake it while muttering to me, "you blew it," particularly if they spoke honest words and I watered them down or missed any subtleties.

The goal of this mind game is to breathe life into ancient words, intimately encounter these people, their experience with the divine, so that we are inspired to pick up and carry the work of faith into our time and place.

So, let's imagine together: who is Simeon?

We know he is devout. Someone who is devout studied the ancient scriptures and laws to bring the Torah into daily practices. As a simple example, if he were to dine out, he'd expect everyone to pause and pray before anyone takes the first bite, even if it felt uncomfortable in a crowded restaurant in the presence of others who don't care about faith.

Perhaps you know someone like this, or you are the patriarch whose faith is never intimidated by culture.

To be described as righteous implies he balances justice and mercy.

Justice convicts the perpetrator with appropriate punishment. To jump over justice and proceed directly to mercy, without acknowledging the wrong and deliberately avoid penalties, cheapens the gift of grace. Righteousness also invites forgiveness to heal the soul, so the bitterness does not continue to eat away at either party. Both are needed to remain in relationship with God and one another.

Although Simeon is righteous, I am not sure how this characteristic is personified, physically, except that navigating the tension between justice and mercy demands endurance to pursue both ends at the same time. Such pursuit always invites criticism, will cause the brow to furrow, and weather their face over the decades. Never a quick decision, the tenacity to pursue righteousness, also strengthens the backbone.

Can you picture anyone now? A magistrate. School guidance counselor. Social worker.

Simeon looks forward to the “consolation” of Israel. He believes God will provide a person to console, to comfort, to advocate for the people. All his life, he’s been oppressed by Herod and the Romans and wants divine rule, respecting the dignity of all humanity.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *Light of the World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019), 101-102.

At the turn of the new year, we look back at events and the legacy of those who died in 2021. Does anyone come to mind who faced the brutality of combat and transformed that experience into the fuel for them to seek peace? Maybe Simeon is someone like Colin Powell or Bob Dole.

Luke's gospel tells us the Holy Spirit rested upon him. Visualize someone willing to walk among the nastiness of what lies in the gutter with the steely determination to not succumb to defeat or lash out in anger. Someone who defies the odds and remains steadfast as God's agent in this world.

Gregory of Nyssa, from the early 4<sup>th</sup> century, describes this type of yearning by "constantly going on in the quest and never ceasing in ascent, seeing that every fulfillment...continually creates further desire."<sup>2</sup>

This hard and holy work comes to life only through God's will. Now with the frailty of years draped over him, the Spirit sends him to the temple. He takes the baby Jesus into his arms and sings: he can rest in peace.

In the face of this child, Simeon sees salvation for Israel and all people. He knows his life's labor meant something, and God's work will continue into the next generations. Simeon's song, also known in Latin as the *Nunc Dimittis*, is a benediction, sung at the end, end of the day, end of one's life.

But he does not stop with a rosy outlook.

---

<sup>2</sup> Jean Danielou, *From Glory to Glory* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's, 2001), 45.

Before Simeon exits the scene, he blesses Mary by saying, “this child is destined for the falling and rising of many.” Notice the word order; “the falling and rising.” Usually, we expect the rise and fall. The rise and fall of the business tycoon or politician. The rise and fall of a company or family fortune. We all want to enjoy the rise and jump off before the fall.

Simeon knows that Jesus reverses this: we fall before any rise. Consider Jesus’ teachings as an adult:

“Those who lose their lives for my sake, will gain it.”

“Unless a grain falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

Jesus did not fly directly up into heaven once danger flared. He suffered and died, and then God raised him to glory. Simeon felt the glory of God within his arms and the weight of the work for all destined to follow him.

Does this picture of Simeon bring anyone to mind?

Although I thought of several saints in my life or heroes in our world, news articles this week kept reminding me of the same man. One known for rigorous study of faith and academic credentials. Prophetic and imaginative preaching. Singing. Someone willing to pursue righteousness through justice and mercy. Not affiliating with one political party over another, and always advocating for the people.

The easiest way for me to imagine Simeon is to think of Desmond Tutu.



Recall the image of the diminutive man with a pixielike dance and singing with the masses. His legacy speaks to the tender embrace of children and the fierce courage of the spirit. Long before his death, Tutu was described as the moral conscience of South Africa. Awarded a Nobel Peace prize in 1984 for his stance on nonviolence, he advocated on behalf of the Blacks for the end of apartheid.

When Tutu introduced Nelson Mandela as the president of South Africa, he said “God, if I die now, I don’t really mind,” echoing Simeon’s sentiments of a life’s work fulfilled. And he kept going.<sup>3</sup> Later, when the Black government enriched a small minority, he criticized them with “many, too many of our people live in grueling, demeaning, dehumanizing poverty.” His served on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and brought to life concrete actions of the theological ideal of righteous through restorative justice.

While praising Tutu’s legacy, scholar Michael Eric Dyson writes, Restorative justice seeks to bridge the gap between humanity and cruelty. It is the kind of justice that aims to bring offending people back into the fold by trying to restore some sense of ethical connection and moral belonging.<sup>4</sup>

Tutu’s vibrant and practical work in this type of justice stands as a testament at a time when we seem so intractably divided

---

<sup>3</sup> Marilyn Berger, “Desmond Tutu, 90, Whose Voice Helped End Apartheid, Dies,” *The New York Times*, December 27, 2021, A8.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Eric Dyson “We Need to Listen to Archbishop Tutu About Forgiveness,” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 30,2021.

with one side claiming a moral superiority and complete unwillingness to engage in the tough work of listening to the other. Restorative justice is a way we fall from our righteous indignation with the hope we may rise together.

When we imagine the lives of real, flesh and blood humans, like Simeon and not Tutu, we grasp our capacity to do the tireless work began long before us, carried out by the faithful over the centuries, that now rests in our hands.

To be with and follow Jesus is the blessing offered to us all. The stakes are not trivial. Not just modest behavior changes to be 10% happier or 20 minutes a day three times a week to be 20% healthier. It is all or nothing. This blessing demands that we are willing to fall for only then will we feel the strength of God to raise us together into new life.<sup>5</sup>

You've imagined all sorts of people standing in the temple named Simeon. Now imagine you are holding the child. May it be so my friends.

---

<sup>5</sup> James C. Howell "Luke 2:22-40, Theological Perspective," *Feasting on the Word*, Ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010) 166.



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road  
Pittsburgh, PA 15241  
412-835-6630

[www.westminster-church.org](http://www.westminster-church.org)