

Pastor Don Nelson

Sermon: December 20, 2009  
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

**"THE KING OF LOVE"**  
**Luke 2:22-38**

What do we *really* want for Christmas? What are our souls thirsty for? What do our hearts desire most?

Don't we crave empathetic love that rejoices in our joy and grieves in our grief? Wise love that understands us? Beautiful love that opens our eyes to all that is {Php 4:8, NLT} **"true... honorable...right... pure... lovely... admirable... excellent and worthy of praise"**?

Don't we yearn for enduring love that does not depend on fleeting feelings? Ennobling love that accepts us at our worst, yet equips us to be our best? Forgiving love that keeps no record of wrongs? Gentle love that pursues and entices us, but does not overpower us?

Don't we long for someone to see us as we really are (warts and all), and still love us – and *go on* loving us when we fail, foul up, or fall flat on our faces?

Human beings can provide this, to a degree. My wife fulfills a substantial portion of that longing in my heart, for which I am unspeakably grateful. But though Beth loves me in all those ways, far better than anyone else, her love is not 100% perfect and complete. No mortal person's is.

Is the kind of love we all hunger for a baseless fantasy or impossible ideal?

☐ Please turn with me to Luke 2:22-38.

Scripture devotes just a few, brief lines to Simeon and Anna. Our crèches don't include a figure of either one. Few church goers remember them (or even know who they

are). Yet this man and woman point the way to the perfect love we need.

○ Verses 22-24 set the scene for what follows.

☆ The place is the Temple in Jerusalem.

⌚ The time is the 40<sup>th</sup> day after Christ's birth.

◆ The occasion is Mary's ritual of purification.

■ Under OT Law {Lev 12} a woman who gives birth to a son is ceremonially unclean, and remains in that condition for a total of forty days. On the 40<sup>th</sup> day she is required to bring a lamb as a burnt offering and a pigeon or dove for a sin offering. The priest sacrifices them and she is ceremonially cleansed.

■ Leviticus 12:6 stipulates the offering of a bird and a lamb, if at all possible; but lambs are expensive. Verse 8 allows that if the parents are poor, the mother **"is to bring two doves or two young pigeons ...and she will be clean."** That is what Mary does. She and Joseph cannot afford to buy a lamb.

The apostle Paul is not using figurative language when, in Philippians 2:7, he writes that Christ **"made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant."** The Son of God literally exchanged the splendor of heaven for a harsh, hand-to-mouth existence.

⊕ He did it because it was his Father's will.

Christ's poverty is a sign of God's profound love.

☞ (As an aside, Mary's offering is evidence that the wise men did not visit on Christmas night, or even within the first 40 days after his birth. Had they done so, she would have used a little of the gold they

brought to buy a lamb and a dove, instead of the two birds.)

○ In verses 25-35 we meet Simeon, who is waiting eagerly (probably impatiently) for the Messiah. **"The Holy Spirit [is] on"** Simeon, and has assured him that he will see **"the consolation of Israel"** before he dies.

Prompted by the Lord, Simeon goes to the temple, seeks out the baby Jesus, cradles him, and praises God.

Simeon prophesies that Jesus is the catalyst by which many will be destroyed and many exalted. How people respond to Jesus will reveal their hearts toward God – and this, he warns, is going to break Mary's heart.

Simeon's talk of salvation, revelation, glory, falling and rising, a rejected sign and a piercing sword is unsettling; yet he cuts right to the heart of the matter: God's love for humankind.

Most Jews envision a Messiah of regal majesty and worldly power. They anticipate the day when He will rain fire from heaven, destroy Rome and compel the Gentiles to grovel at his feet.

✝ Simeon declares that there will be judgment; but it won't look anything like that. Rather, the Messiah will judge the world by serving in humility, suffering unjustly, and dying in our place. All who receive him will be saved, Jew *and* Gentile alike; but all (Gentile *and* Jew) who reject his surprising lordship condemn themselves and have no place in the kingdom of God. {Jn 3:16-18a}

**For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not**

**send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already.**

✧ Simeon testifies that Jesus will walk the way of the cross as ordained by the Father. Christ's service, suffering, and death are potent signs of God's profound love.

○ In verses 36-38 we meet Anna, when she approaches the Holy Family in the temple, gives **"thanks to God and [speaks] about the child to all who [are] looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem."**

✧ Anna is a prophet. Two things to keep in mind: ① including Anna, Scripture identifies only five female prophets by name (there were others, but they are not named); ② Inspired by the H.S., a true prophet speaks on behalf of the LORD and in obedience to him.

✧ Anna is from the tribe of Asher.

Ancient Israel was divided into twelve tribes. Asher's territory ran along the Mediterranean Sea from Mt. Carmel on the south to the Litani River on the north.

The Asherites were classic under-achievers for much of their history ~ they never contributed a judge or hero to the nation; they were highly susceptible to pagan corruption; and by the time of King David they were so inconsequential that First Chronicles {27:16-22}

lists the officers over every tribe *except* Asher, which is not even mentioned.

In 722 BC, Asher and nine other tribes were decimated by the Assyrians. Most Asherites were slaughtered or deported to what is now Iran.

{Doug Ward} A few survivors discerned that their defeat and exile were the consequences of their sin. They repented, and God used their suffering to transform their hearts and minds. Centuries later, some Asherites migrated back to Israel. Their descendants are among the most faithful Jews, and Anna is one of them.

☼ Anna is old. The Greek can be translated either, {NIV} "**was a widow until she was eighty-four**" or {TNIV} "**was a widow for eighty-four years.**" Either way, she has outlived most of her contemporaries.

☼ Anna is a widow. No woman in Anna's time and place chooses singleness; yet she has never remarried, though she was still young when her husband died. The most plausible explanation is that Anna was poor and childless when her husband died. Poverty and perceived barrenness are nearly insurmountable obstacles to a first century woman. Anna has been relegated to the bottom of the socio-economic heap for most of her life.

☼ And Anna is extraordinarily devoted ~ she "**never** [leaves] **the temple**," she worships "**day and night**," and she continually "[fasts] **and** [prays]." Her entire existence is centered on God.

Luke does not record any of the specific details of Anna's witness, but he thoroughly documents her identity. This is no accident. The greatest substance and beauty of

Anna's testimony is transmitted, not through what she says, but through who she is!

☼ She is poor, old, female, widowed, and childless, a nearly dead remnant of a nearly forgotten tribe. The choice of Anna as an early witness to Christ's coming is a compelling sign of God's profound love.

It is easy to skip over Luke 2:22-38, as if it was a throw away narrative.

Yet, Mary and Joseph's meager sacrifice points to Christ's poverty. This is a sign of God's profound love.

Simeon is nearly invisible. This is the most attention I have given to him in a long time, if not my entire life.

Yet his words point so clearly to Christ's service, suffering, and death. This is a sign of God's profound love.

No one has an Anna figurine in their nativity scene, though she met Jesus before the wise men did. Who remembers Anna?

Yet her witness points so clearly to Christ's compassion for the lowest and the least. This, too, is a sign of God's profound love.

Christ Jesus is the King of Love. Let us receive him again this Christmas, more deeply than ever before!