

December 31, 2023  
Luke 2:22-40

Christmas 1  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## “Bucket List”

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word ...”

*The Bucket List* is a 2007 movie that centers on the lives of two terminally ill men, Edward and Carter, who embark on a road trip with a wish list of things they want to do before they “kick the bucket.” Starring Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman and directed by Rob Reiner, the “bucket list” for these two friends includes skydiving, driving vintage cars around a California speedway, flying over the North Pole, visiting the Taj Mahal, riding motorcycles on the Great Wall of China, and visiting Mount Everest. When they return home from their adventures, they decide that a far more important item to place on their “bucket lists” is to be reconciled with their estranged families. When Edward is reconciled with his daughter and is introduced to the granddaughter he never knew he had, he is able to cross “kissing the most beautiful girl in the world” off his bucket list. When Carter dies, Edward delivers an eulogy at his funeral during which he explains that the last three months of Carter’s life were, thanks to Carter, the best three months of his own. In the end, the experiences they shared became the most important item on their “bucket list.”

Thanks to this movie, the term “bucket list” has entered the vernacular, with many people creating list of places they would like to visit or experiences they would like to share before they “kick the bucket.” It may be travel to exotic places, or daring to undertake an adventure that was once unthinkable, or to try something that they had avoided in the past. For others, “bucket list” items are far more personal; like the characters in the movie, they may include being reconciled to persons from whom one has been estranged, or daring to reach out to someone who we have avoided, or getting involved in activities in the community that we never had the time in which to engage. A “bucket list” does not necessary mean traveling to exotic locations or putting oneself in a dangerous situation; it may be something as simple as experiencing a blessing in one’s life or reestablishing a relationship that had been broken but now is a great source of blessing. As another character in the movie said, “*stop dreaming about your bucket list and start living it.*”

While you will not find the phrase “bucket list” in the Bible, it may be said that two of the main characters in today’s Gospel will find that their greatest desire is brought to fruition and they can now go forth satisfied that the main item on each of their

“bucket lists” has happened. Today’s Gospel lesson is the conclusion of the Infancy Narrative in Luke, following his account of the birth of Jesus in the Bethlehem manger and his circumcision and naming eight days after his birth, in accordance with the commandment of the Torah (*“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.”* – 2:21). Forty days after his birth, Jesus’ parents bring their child to Jerusalem to fulfill two further acts required of devout Jewish parents: the redemption of the firstborn and the purification of the mother:

- “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 (as it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord’), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, ‘a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.’” – Luke 2:22-24.

As a reminder of the Exodus, the firstborn child is to be consecrated to the Lord (*“Consecrate to me all the firstborn; whatever is the first to open the womb among the Israelites, of human beings and of animals, is mine.”* – Exodus 13:2). The firstborn is to be “redeemed” – bought back – at a price of five shekels of silver (*“Their redemption price, reckoned from one month of age, you shall fix at five shekels of silver”* – Numbers 18:16). After the birth of a male child, the mother was considered ceremonially unclean for seven days and then underwent purification for thirty-three days. During this time, she was not permitted to enter the Temple or touch any holy object. After forty days, he would offer *“a pair of turtledoves or two small pigeons”* (2:24; Leviticus 12:8).

- “Mary does not need to be purified from the birth of Jesus, his birth ushers in the purification of the world. But she obeys the law, and in this way, she serves as the fulfillment of the promises.” – Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI).

The scene in our Gospel lesson shifts to Luke’s description of *“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.”* (2:25). Like Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon is characterized as “righteous” (*“Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.”* – 1:6); he is also described as “devout,” a term Luke will use frequently in the Acts of the Apostles to describe those who would become the first followers of Jesus (*“A certain Ananias, who was a devout man according to the law and well spoken of by all the Jews living there, came to me ...”* – Acts 22:12). Simeon

exemplifies a devout response to God's promise and God's response to human devotion; he was "*looking forward to the consolation of Israel,*" the restoration of God's people and the fulfillment of God's redemptive work ("*Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.*" – Isaiah 52:9). This suggestion that "*Simeon was waiting for the consolation of the nation reveals that he lived not so much for himself but for others in the nation.*" (Raj Nadella). Luke also reports that "*the Holy Spirit rested upon him*"; as the Spirit came upon Zechariah, Mary, and Elizabeth, Simeon is identified as one on whom the Spirit rests. He is promised that "*he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah*" (2:26).

- "Simeon is 'devout' – his whole person is oriented toward God. He is inwardly close to the Temple; he lives the encounter with God and awaits the 'consolation of Israel. He lives for the Redeemer, for the one who is to come ... Simeon is a man of hope and expectation, and in this sense, he already has the Holy Spirit upon him." – Ratzinger.

It may be said that Simeon has one item on his "bucket list," and this item is placed there by the Holy Spirit who promises him that he will not die before he sees the Messiah of the Lord. He is guided by the Spirit to the Temple, where he waits every day in confident hope that God is faithful and that he will not die before this one promise is fulfilled. We are not told how long Simeon's period of watching and waiting lasts; but we do know that "*when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law*" (2:27), Simeon knew that his time of waiting was over the item the Holy Spirit had placed in his "bucket list" could now be crossed off. This devout and righteous man now knows that God is faithful and has fulfilled what God had promised him; so, he takes the child in his arms and sings out in praise of God who has now accomplished that which will allow Simeon to go forth from life in peace:

- "Master, you are now dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." – 2:29-32.

This hymn of praise (known by its Latin title *Nunc dimittis*) declares the praise of God for faithfulness at the redemption of the people. Simeon can go in peace because he has seen the fulfillment of God's promises, as God had promised Abraham that "*as for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age*" (Genesis 15:15). As a faithful watchman, Simeon has been

dismissed from his post by his master. Simeon's blessing relates the birth of Jesus to the fulfillment of the promise of salvation found in the Scriptures of Israel and looks ahead to the inclusion of Gentiles as well as Jews in the experience of God's blessing.

- "Simeon's peace come not from thinking that everything will be peaceful in light of Jesus' arrival – it will not be – but from deep awareness that Jesus will challenge the Roman Empire that offered its own version of peace and reserved it for a select few. Simeon's peace comes from the assurance that everyone will benefit from that challenge to the empire, and from redemption." – Nadella.

The reaction of the parents of Jesus is understandable: "*And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him*" (2:33). While both had known before his birth that their child was born to be the fulfillment of God's promises to God's people, amazement is a reaction that often follows an oracle in Luke's Gospel ("*... and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them*" – 2:18). Simeon then assumes the role of a prophet as he blesses the parents of Jesus and shares a word of what will happen in the course of his life as well as that of his mother: "*This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too*" (2:34-35). The one who will bring salvation will also bring judgment; the cornerstone upon which our Lord will build his church will be the stone of stumbling to others. Mary is warned that she will share in the pain of the rejection of Jesus and the division of Israel; "*Simeon offers Mary a realistic warning about what awaits her, now that her life is intrinsically connected to Jesus' mission of challenging the powerful*" (Nadella).

Luke now introduces us to a second person who is waiting for the fulfillment of the item on her "bucket list" that had also been placed there by the Holy Spirit. Anna is described by the Evangelist as "*a prophet ... the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher*" (2:36). Anna continues the tradition of female prophets in the Old Testament and anticipates the role of female prophets in the early church:

- "Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing." – Exodus 15:20.
- "At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel." – Judges 4:4.

- “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.” – Acts 2:17.

While Anna’s actual words are not recorded, when she looks upon the holy child, she *“began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the consolation of Jerusalem”* (2:38). Anna’s prophecy *“consists in her proclamation – in passing on to other the hope by which she lives”* (Ratzinger).

- “These two ancient saints are Israel in miniature, and Israel at its best: devout, obedient, constant in prayer, led by the Holy Spirit, at home in the temple, longing and hoping for the fulfillment of God’s promises ... God is doing something new, but it is not really new, because hope is always joined to memory, and the new is God keeping an old promise.” – Fred Craddock.

Luke tells us nothing more about what happened to Simeon and Anna; like many persons in the Bible, they simply fade from the narrative. Instead, the Evangelist concludes his presentation of the birth narrative of Jesus by reporting that *“when [Jesus’ parents] had finished everything required by the law of Moses, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.”* It was there, in the town from which Jesus would begin his ministry, that *“the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.”* (2:40). “Wisdom” (*Sophia*) and “favour” (*charis*, which can also be translated “grace”) are significant in Luke. Wisdom is used to describe the gift that Jesus bestows on his disciples so that they can withstand the same persecution that Jesus will suffer (*“So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.”* – 21:14-15). When Jesus returns to his hometown synagogue after his baptism and temptation, he reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and declares that *“today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,”* the response being that *“all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.”* (4:21-22). The grace of God and the favour of the people would characterize the early church in Acts (*“With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”* – Acts 4:33). This conclusion assures us that even though we do not know the ultimate fate of Simeon or Anna – or countless other Biblical figures who suddenly fade from the narrative – we do know that the item that was placed on their “bucket list” did come to fruition: they both lived to see the coming of the Messiah, the one who would serve as a *“light to the Gentiles and the glory of thy people Israel.”* Even if they had not laid eyes on the Holy Child in the Temple on that fortieth day after his birth, they still could have died knowing

that because God is always faithful, because God always accomplishes what God promises, that they could “go in peace” because one day the Holy One of God would come, and the “*dawn from on high*” will break upon all of God’s people. The author of the letter to the Hebrews identifies such exemplars of faith as Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Sarah as persons who all “*died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them.*” (Hebrews 11:13). Like builders who do not live to see their efforts brought to a conclusion, each of these role models of faith know that God will accomplish all that has been promised to us; for as “*long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son*” (Hebrews 1:1). Neither Simeon or Anna probably lived to see Jesus fulfill God’s will through his death and resurrection, but they could “go in peace” knowing that because they had seen the Messiah in the baby Jesus, what God had begun God would accomplish so that all might rejoice in knowing that the promises, hopes, and dreams on each of their “bucket lists” was being fulfilled because the child born of Mary is Emmanuel – God with us.

- “It all depends on this, that we with dear old Simeon open our eyes and see the babe, take him into our arms, and kiss him, which means that he is our hope, joy, comfort, and life. Where this faith is firm and sure in our hearts – that this child is God’s Saviour – there, indeed, it must follow that the heart is content and is not afraid of sin or death, for it has a Saviour who delivers us from it.” – Martin Luther, 1544.

Whether or not any of us have put together an actual “bucket list,” we can join with Anna and Simeon in knowing that all for which we have hoped and dreamed has been accomplished, because in the child of Mary and Joseph God has fulfilled God’s promise of one who will be our Redeemer, of the one who suffers, dies, and rises again so that the greatest hope on each of our lists – eternal life in the presence of our Lord – has been accomplished. For those of us who have been baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection, we live in the blessed assurance that when the day comes for us to “kick the bucket,” the hope that is on our lists will become our reality in the one who is a light to all people, whose grace and love endure forever. The promise on our lists has been accomplished because of the good news of this Christmas season: *Christ the Saviour is born!*

Amen.