

Longing for God
 Luke 2: 25-35
 By Evan Lature

Augustine once said longing is the heart's treasury. For some longing is unbearable. It takes endurance and perseverance. It might also mean a failure for overachievers since it indicates a delayed fulfillment. In our world today, longing is unpopular when instant gratifications are the air that we breathe.

Simeon from the story of the nativity invites us to see longing from a different perspective and ushers us into the deeper meaning of a longing. Simeon is not much mentioned among nativity characters. I happened to realize that actually I have come across him a long time ago and even got a chance to enter his world. It was when I joined a choir during college years and sang a song called *Nunc Dimittis* that got its inspiration from Simeon's praise. I suspect due to the unfamiliar mood the music created (it's totally different from *Joy To The World* vibes), *Nunc Dimittis* easily slipped my memory. Recently, as I prepared this sermon, I revisited the song and marveled at the sacredness and the majestic of a fulfillment longing conveyed in it.

The journey of a Longing

As a nation, Israel had been desperately longing for Messiah (the anointed one). Messianic hope existed among the covenant people upon Isaiah's prophecy, "*For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon His kingdom, to order it, and to establish it judgement and with justice from henceforth even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.*" (Isaiah 9: 6-7)

The carol "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" translated in 1861 from Latin *Veni, Veni Emmanuel* captures Israel's longing for the fulfillment of the promise.

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
 And ransom captive Israel
 That mourns in lonely exile here
 Until the Son of God appear

O come, O bright and morning star,
 And bring us comfort from afar!
 Dispel the shadows of the night
 And turn our darkness into light.

Rejoice, rejoice!
 Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel"

Luke didn't tell us much about Simeon's age, job, nor his marital status. Nevertheless, Simeon is described as a righteous, devout, filled with the Holy Spirit man who has been waiting for the consolation of Israel. According to Christian tradition, Simeon is believed to be an old man parallel with Anna, the old lady who comes in in the next scene. Some hints from the text can be inferred that Simeon is a senior citizen. Notice verse 26, that he would not see death before he sees the Lord's Messiah and verse 29, "*you may now dismiss your servant in peace.*" From the words "death" and "dismiss", we can infer that he was an older man who had been waiting for a long time. Simeon was predicted to be in his 80's just like Anna.

If he was in his 80's, he must have been around in his late teenage or early 20's when General Pompey from Rome came and conquered Jerusalem in 63 BC. Pompey destroyed the city and slaughtered 12,000 people. Simeon was one of the survivors. We don't know exactly how old Simeon was when he received a revelation by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before seeing the Lord's Messiah. Either way, the horrible Romans' siege unavoidably played a major part in Simeon's understanding of the fulfillment of the promise. **Now when you are in limbo, you know exactly what it means to be longing for something. And to be longing for something, to use Augustine's words, is a treasure.**

Jesus says, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Mat 6:21). Longing is a heart's treasury that this materialistic world simply doesn't get. But at the same time, longing is a commodity that is easily deceived in this fallen and broken world. Take a look around. Our world is over-saturated with the obsession of money, fame, sex, status, self-happiness, and self-glorification. To long correctly is a lonely road. To long seems slow and unattractive. Many people fall short when things don't move in a direction and pace they want. Sara gave her slave Hagar to her husband Abram out of her anxiety, despite God's promise to make Abram a great nation (Gen 16); Saul acted on his own initiatives and ignored God's command when he felt being threatened by the enemies (1Sam 13), and Israel threatened by Assyria set out to go down to Egypt without asking God's counsel (Isaiah 30:2).

Though to long right is lonely, slow, and unattractive, it is a treasure for those who are faithful. For them, the longing turns them to be righteous, devout, and filled with the Holy Spirit. Simeon, our man today, is a great example of the beauty of longing. The Bible describes him righteous, devout, and filled with the Holy Spirit.

God is pleased with a heart that is longing for Him. David who's called a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22) once wrote,

*"You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you;
I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you,
In a dry and parched land where there is no water.
I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory.
Because your love is better than life,
My lips will glorify you.
I will praise you as long as I live,
And in your name, I will lift up my hands.
I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods;
With singing lips my mouth will praise you.
On my bed I remember you;
I think of you through the watches of the night.
Because you are my help,
I sing in the shadow of your wing.
I cling to you,
Your right hand upholds me" (Psalm 63:1-8)*

In a longing heart, we understand that God's love is better than life. In a longing heart, we actively devote ourselves to seeking and worshipping Him. In a longing heart, the loneliest and daunting nights are times to remember His embracing love. In our deeper longing we have to go through loneliness, shattered dreams, rejections, and disappointments in a long waiting. Nevertheless, the heavenly longing compels us to move

forward with hope and strength (endurance and perseverance) and see the present in a perspective that brings out comfort, joy, and peace.

A Longing God

God himself is a longing God. When Jesus teaches about God's Kingdom, he shares the story of a broken-hearted father left by his youngest son (Luke 15:11-31). Driven by his ambition and a longing for a hedonistic life, the youngest son makes his way to his father and asks for what he thinks he deserves. He doesn't know that his father's heart is broken the moment he asks for inheritance, something that is culturally shared upon someone's death. "Does he think that I'm death to him?", ponders the father. The father can't stop his son as he looks so determined and ready to sail off. He is right. Not long after he got what he wants, the youngest son set off for a distant country to squander his wealth in wild living. The father can only stand by the door as he sees his youngest son's back disappear from his sight. His heart was shattered into pieces. Minutes turn hours, hours turn days, days turn weeks, weeks turn months, as by the door the father is faithfully waiting for his son's return. Every day he would check if he would see a silhouette of someone dear to him walking in from a distant. He whispers a little prayer, "When will I see you, son? I miss you." Every time he says that little prayer, he knows he loves him so much though his heart had been broken by the one he loves so dearly. "I love you. I will always love you," he says in his deepest longing.

One day, as he stands by the door, from afar he sees a silhouette approaching. It's the one he's been waiting for. Filled with compassion and unbearable longing, he runs toward the silhouette. Toward his son. He finds his son looking miserable. He throws his arms around him, holds him to his chest and kisses him. With tears in his eyes he says, "Son, do you know I still love you? I've been longing to see you again."

God's heart is a longing heart. He knows exactly what it means to be longing. He knows exactly what a broken heart means, the shattered dreams, the rejections, and the disappointments in what seems like an endless waiting. Because of that, He is God who's not holding back his extravagant love to his beloved. He fulfills his promises and meets the longing of his people.

The Fulfillment of Longing

Verse 27, "*Moved by the Spirit, Simeon went into temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God.*" While we are waiting, God is working. All the waiting and acts of devotion Simeon faithfully has been doing are about to pay off. It takes a long chain of events all the way back to the moments Simeon never had a single idea at all. And the glorious thing about it is that God put together a band of righteous men and women to deliver the fulfillment of His promises.

It starts with a righteous man named Zechariah who was serving as priest before God and in a divine provision, chosen by lot. The angel Gabriel appeared before him and said to him that his old wife will bear a son who will prepare people for the Messiah who's about to come. In the sixth month of Zechariah's wife's pregnancy, the angel Gabriel appeared to a righteous young woman named Mary from Nazareth and told her that she would conceive and give birth to a son that who'll be called Jesus, the Son of the Most-High (Luke 1). Joseph, Mary's fiancé, was encountering an angel of the Lord too. In his dream, he was told by the angel not to be afraid to take Mary to be his wife because what was conceived in her was from the Holy Spirit (Mat 1:20-21). The baby was forty days old when Joseph and Mary brought him to the temple in Jerusalem, to be consecrated to the Lord. In a divine provision, Simeon was moved by the

Holy Spirit to the temple courts the same time Joseph and Mary brought the baby to temple. Filled with the Holy Spirit Simeon knew at the moment that it was the baby that God has promised to him about. He held the baby and his heart was full of praise to God, ***“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel”*** (Luke 2:29-32)

When we are waiting, God is working. In our journey as Christ followers in this world, though it seems longing is like a lone ranger business, in eternity longing for God never can be a secluded business. God links and orchestrates all His people together for a beautiful and majestic symphony. With His unmistakable timing and pace, He makes things beautiful in His time. Our broken humanity tends to rush God’s timing and pace. We become impatient, anxious, and disobedient. Keep in mind that He is a faithful God. He keeps his promises. Though it seems slow and lonely, remember that His time is not ours. *With the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day* (2 Peter 3:8). Our portion is to be faithful to what God is trusting with us in the moment.

Think about this, between the promise and the fulfilment is a ground to cultivate our longing for God. In His Kingdom’s business waiting deepens our longing. Nevertheless, it’s not an idle waiting. With the longing in our hearts, we wait with hopeful expectation and creative participation. We pray, we commune, we work, we create, and are sensitive to the flow of the works of the Holy Spirit.

Life between resurrection and restoration

Luke didn’t inform us what happens next to Simeon after he saw the Messiah, if he died right away or not. Whatever it is, I think the underlining point from Simeon’s praises is the joy of the fulfillment of God’s promises in one’s life and the beauty that ensues upon seeing the face of salvation. I’m sure Simeon’s life was not the same after that.

As Christians, we live between the resurrection and the restoration. The salvation that we encountered should empower us to live out a missional living, be it as a student, a father, a mother, a child, a minister, a translator, a musician, an environmental worker, etc. Just like Simeon, who cultivates his longing for God, we are called to cultivate the longing for the great restoration when Jesus returns for the second time. While we’re longing for the second coming of Christ, we experience the Kingdom’s nature of already but not yet. It happens in the beauty of redemptive relationships that involve men and women of God, the beauty of friendships, the beauty of intergenerational relationships, the beauty of cross-cultural relationships, the beauty of nature, music, and arts.

Longing is the heart’s treasury. Nevertheless, in this fallen and broken world, longing is easily warped. Faithfulness and discipline of grace day by day are our portion to exercise in the world where God has placed us right now. In the meantime, while being faithful, let’s keep our hearts and minds captivated by the vision of restoration that the Bible provides for us and be longing for that.

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.”(Revelation 22:5)

The song that came to me this morning which describes our deepest heart longings for God is Forever and Ever by Randy Travis.

Forever and Ever

Evan Lature

Inspired by Psalm 63, Randy Travis "*Forever and Ever, Amen*", and Music Travel Love "*Forever and Ever, Amen*"

You are my God, oh I seek You
I thirst for You
My whole being longs for You
I've seen Your face and Your glory
In a dry and parched land where there is no water

Your love, dear God
Is better than life

I'm gonna love You forever
Forever and ever amen
My lips glorify You
As long as I live
To see your face
Is what I'm longing

I'm gonna love You forever
Forever and ever amen
My lips glorify You
As long as I live
Forever and ever amen

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