

Homily - Feast of the Holy Family 2023

This weekend, we come to the close of another year, and we look ahead to the start of a new one.

For many of us, this is one of those milestones that makes us stop for a moment, or perhaps longer, to think back on the previous months.

Were they seasons of joy or sorrow?

How different are we from the people that we were last year at this time?

Have we progressed or fallen back?

Are we nearer to the Lord's heart, or farther away?

The secular world's conversation about these sorts of questions usually comes in the form of New Year's resolutions.

These are, as you know, a moment of decision to try to improve in some area where we realize we've fallen short of our potential and need to get back on track.

Often, we know, our resolutions to change don't get very far. Lots of books and articles are written about why these kinds of decisions might struggle to get traction, or why our habits resist attempts at redirection.

One principle is certain, however, for any dimension of our life:

To achieve real progress toward a goal, you need to have that objective clear in your mind.

Or, as Yogi Berra put it, "if you don't know where you're going, you'll end up someplace else."

In this case, our changing of the calendar year is marked as well by today's celebration of the Feast of the Holy Family, accompanied by the Gospel of our Lord's Presentation.

Through the Holy Family's eyes, we encounter two fascinating individuals, the aged Simeon and Anna the Prophetess, who embody what this kind of hopeful vision of the future looks like for someone who is truly seeking the Lord.

Simeon, the Gospel tells us, "was righteous and devout, awaiting the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him."

What exactly was he looking for?

Simeon and others who shared this faith believed that this "consolation," what was traditionally called the *Naham* of Israel, would be experienced in the new freedom that the Messiah, the Lord's anointed one, would bring to his chosen people.

Simeon shared this longing for a freedom that generations before him had heard of through the words of the prophets.

But in that second part of this line of the Gospel, we learn that he hasn't been waiting alone.

The Holy Spirit was upon him, and with the light of faith that came from the movement of the Lord himself, alive in his heart, he was able to recognize the presence of the Incarnate Son of God from whom that same Spirit proceeded.

The same Spirit moved in Anna the Prophetess, who not only shared Simeon's hope for a savior, but immediately went out to find all those who, as the Gospel says, "were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem."

Today, the Church invites us as individuals, and especially as families seeking to model ourselves on the life of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, to contemplate these events, to ponder them as Our Lady did, and seek to live out their virtues.

I would argue that you can actually find most of the key ingredients of a mature and healthy prayer life just in this one Gospel passage - exactly what pretty much all of us need as we enter into the new year.

If you don't believe me, just wait.

Let's start with Simeon. Why was he awaiting the consolation of Israel?

Because he had encountered the Word of God and treasured it in his heart. He had been raised with the Hebrew Scriptures, and knew what the Lord had promised through the prophets.

He had not just heard those words, he had allowed *the* Word to form and direct his mind, will, and heart, and held on tightly to his hope in what God had promised his people.

As one Catholic author put it, we can't believe what we don't know and can't remember.

The Church reminds us in the dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum*, on divine revelation, that we receive God's Word from two founts - in Sacred Scripture, and in the Sacred Tradition of the Church.

As it says, "This sacred tradition, therefore, and Sacred Scripture of both the Old and New Testaments are like a mirror in which the pilgrim Church on earth looks at God, from whom she has received everything, until she is brought finally to see Him as He is, face to face."

We have even more reason for hope than Simeon, because we have the fullness of this revelation right at our fingertips.

So why don't we learn it? Why don't we keep it first and foremost in our minds?

You don't need to be a theologian to encounter the Word of God, and if we find our minds are filled with everything *but* God, well... that's a sign we need to clear some stuff out of our lives and our brains and start filling them with something better.

But that wasn't the only source of Simeon's faith. As the Gospel said, the Holy Spirit was with him, the same living and moving Spirit that dwells within each of us through the grace of our baptism.

Unfortunately, so many of us stifle the Spirit's action, whether through sins that we refuse out of fear or pride to bring to the purifying graces of Confession, or simply by our neglect of our prayer, and our lives being filled with so much noise that the Lord's still, silent voice can't break through.

We need to examine our consciences on this question: can we name how the Holy Spirit has acted in our life just in these past days? In the past year?

On this feast in particular, if you are a parent of children old enough to have received their sacraments, it's worth asking: do my children pray? Have I taught them to pray, or modeled personal prayer at home?

This is a serious question, far more serious than the many obligations and extracurriculars that have filled so many weeks and evenings.

Our souls depend on that guiding light of faith, and the directing voice of the indwelling Spirit of God.

We should never fear that encounter, because it truly is a joyful one, just as joyful as the exultant prayer of Simeon who found the realization of his lifelong dream of a Messiah brought to fulfillment in the tiny child he held in his arms.

Nothing can ever be more joyful for us than to receive the love of our savior, our divine Bridegroom.

And when we *have* received that joy, the final step remains - to go out, like Anna, who had waited until the final years of her life within the temple, to rush to share that experience with those who are still searching for their life's purpose.

Saint Bede the Venerable, the great scholar and Doctor of the Church, reflected that in this way Anna is like a beautiful symbolic image of the entire Catholic Church, who receives the Lord and immediately goes out to proclaim him to every corner of the world.

That is our mission.

In the days to come, each of you will talk to friends, family, strangers who are all looking ahead to this new year and struggling to find the reason to continue forward, or the purpose behind all their work and suffering.

Give them what the prophets gave to the people of Israel.

Give them what the Holy Family has given to us.

Give them Jesus Christ, and nothing less.

Resolve to proclaim the Word of the Lord like a prophet.

Resolve to treasure Christ's Real Presence like Our Lady and Saint Joseph.

Resolve to live, and to love, like a Christian.

Do that, and like Simeon, Anna, and the holy Saints and Angels of God, you too will know the consolation of a Savior.