



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Wisdom and Strength

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The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him (Luke 2:40).

Two elderly strangers, a man and a woman, see Mary and Joseph in the temple, and each of them has a prophecy about who their little child will turn out to be.

Simeon is a righteous man; he strives to know and do what is right before God. The Holy Spirit rests upon him, because the Spirit comes to those who want to do God's will. The Spirit told Simeon that he would not see death until he had first seen the Messiah. Now, finally, after long years of faithful waiting, the Holy Spirit prompts Simeon to come to the Temple on the very day when Mary and Joseph bring their boy to dedicate him to God.

Simeon gathers the child up in his arms and praises God. "Now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation" All Simeon literally sees with his eyes is an infant, but with his soul he sees the Savior of world. "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed." John's gospel says this Jesus is the word of God made flesh, and the way people react to God's word does indeed reveal their inner thoughts. It clarifies who we are and what we really want.

Then there is the prophet Anna. She's 84 years old, and spends all her days in the temple. What tunes her heart to God is not just time in the temple, but deep devotion, praying and fasting until she learns to recognize when God is on the move. Now she tells anyone who will listen that God is about to do great things.

Prophets and others who devote themselves to God can see what God is doing because the closer they get to God the wiser they become. Wisdom is not the same thing as knowledge, if by knowledge we mean just gathering information. People have lots of information these days, more than ever before, but they don't always know how to use it wisely. Some seem to have trouble distinguishing fact from fiction, or focusing on what really matters.

Wisdom is not the same thing as knowledge, and neither is it the same as intelligence. People can be very smart and not be wise at all. Einstein worried that human beings might be smart enough to make terrible weapons but not wise enough to refrain from using them. Smart people can use their intelligence to manipulate and tear down, where the wise would teach and build up instead.

Even Jesus, this little child about whom Simeon and Anna foretold so much, still had to grow up. He had to grow into the person he was meant to become. Luke says he grew in three ways: he matured and became strong physically, he grew in wisdom, and he grew spiritually as “the favor of God was upon him.”

“A three-fold cord is not easily broken,” Ecclesiastes says. Strength needs wisdom and spiritual insight to guide it, and anyone who is strong and wise and led by God may be able to do great things too. But strength by itself, without wisdom, can also do great harm.

I have a tendency to bump into things. I've knocked enough stuff over in my day to earn the proverbial description of a bull in a china shop. Bulls may be strong, but strength lumbering around carelessly has a way of breaking things. Sometimes the things that get broken are very

precious; and once they're broken they may be difficult or impossible to put back together, and even if you can glue them together again, they may never be the same. That's true for china, and it's true for relationships among human beings as well.

Strength needs wisdom to guide it, because strength by itself is just power that can be used for evil as well as for good. That's why the letter to the Ephesians says, "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power." To be strong in the Lord is to become that three-fold cord of strength and wisdom and true spirituality.

"Put on the whole armor of God," the letter says, "so that you can stand against the wiles of the devil." The Bible tells us that our struggles in this world are not only against the obvious obstacles and people who would do us harm, but also, and more fundamentally, against the things that threaten our soul, the essence of who we really are.

It's striking that the first item mentioned in the armor of God is the belt of truth. Jesus says that the devil is "a liar and the father of lies," which is to say that nothing threatens our relationship with God and other people more than the twisting of the truth. Lies leave us blind to the way things really are, so that we can't see what's right and what needs to be done. Dissembling and evasions and falsehoods undermine trust, and neither a personal relationship nor a republic can long survive in the absence of truth.

Put on righteousness, the Bible says. Be committed to knowing and doing what is right in God's eyes. Proclaim the gospel of peace, God's word of reconciliation to the world. Hold up the shield of faith that will protect you from the

arrows of evil. Trust God, and take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God itself.

The wise old prophets Simeon and Anna saw that God was moving through this child who would become the Savior of the world. Even Jesus had to grow in wisdom and strength in order to fulfill God's purpose for him. God has a purpose for each of us too, and in order to be faithful to our calling in this world we need to rely upon the wisdom and strength that only God can give.



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