You and I are continuing our celebration of Christmas by taking a close look at an event in Jesus’ life which occurred when he was only forty days old. We see Jesus’ parents being scrupulous about living under the dictates of Jewish law. Mary had gone through the purification rituals that all Jewish women were expected to abide by after giving birth. This wasn’t for health or sanitation. It was a religious observance. Then Joseph and Mary went to the temple to present the child and to dedicate him. They were following the rituals of their people, the Jews. (And that serves as a reminder to us that Jesus was a good Jew.)

So at a certain time in the child’s life they went to a certain place. They performed traditional actions and said traditional words. We need to hear this because there is so little ritual left in our society. We just don’t have many rituals unless you count doing all your laundry every week on Friday, or putting in a day of shopping on Black Friday.

With ritual we take time out of the rest of our more practical and mundane activities to affirm that God is present in all of life’s activities. You go with certain people to a certain place and engage in certain prescribed duties. I think you and I should strive to add some rituals to our lives which are true rituals and not normal day-to-day life. The ritual Joseph and Mary participated in allowed them in a set manner, used for many years by many couples, to affirm that Jesus, like any other baby, was a gift from God.

So Mary and Joseph go into the temple and present a small sacrifice – two turtle doves or two pigeons, things which tell us that they were quite poor. And that day in the temple they have an encounter with an elderly man named Simeon. This is the only place where scripture mentions Simeon, so this is his fifteen minutes of fame. But his fame is not temporary. He continues to teach important lessons to believers all these years later. My main goal in this sermon is to help us learn from Simeon.

Luke the gospel writer describes Simeon as a righteous and devout man. So he is the kind of person we love to have in our congregation. Going further, Luke
tells us that Simeon is “looking forward to the consolation of Israel.” He anticipates that God, through this forty-day-old child, is going to be a Savior to the people. They need a savior. They need a Lord. And Simeon looks forward to that divine aid.

Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit arranged this encounter in the temple. They old man meets the Holy Family because God wants to bless Simeon with this encounter. It’s a joyful meeting for old Simeon, but it wouldn’t have happened if the Holy Spirit had not also given him the proper spiritual insight to apprehend who this baby is. This is not just a newborn. This is not just a couple with their first child. Simeon can see that the child will be source of salvation for all of humanity. He is the long-awaited Messiah.

Simeon joyfully exclaims “…my eyes have seen your salvation….” Where does someone learn to see, to perceive such hidden things? I submit to you that is only through years of pious devotion that Simeon can have his wonderful insights about this baby. The baby is the messiah!

I think that you and I should aspire to pious devotion like that of Simeon. We should want to have the spiritual insight of the old man. You know, you and I say in many different ways that God is at work in the world. We believe that. But how do we spy it out? How can we spot God at work? How can we witness God at work and then announce it to the world? Not often enough! So you and I should seek to have spiritual eyes.

Let’s keep learning from Simeon…. Now let’s take note that Simeon is old. He has been around the block a time or two. That means he has seen some tough times. We can be certain that he has been down and out, and we’re not just talking arthritis here. Let’s also recognize the disappointments he has experienced, the illnesses he has endured and the difficult journeys he has taken. Simeon has a lot of experience on the roller coaster of life.

And I think that those difficulties have helped to make him the righteous man that he is. The Christian mystic Simone Weil has said: “Pain is the root of all knowledge.” I don’t have any doubt that pain is where Simeon discovered some of what he knows.

Let’s remember Helen Keller. She was born unable to see or to hear. Helen Keller once said “Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through
experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambition aspired, and success achieved.

So let’s you and I affirm the difficulties we have experienced, even the ones we brought on ourselves. I’ll confess that I need to reframe many of my difficulties in this way. I need to look at times when other people have hurt me and when I have brought difficulty down on myself that pain is a darn good teacher. “Pain is the root of knowledge,” as I just quoted Simone Weil. It’s the beginning point for learning and character development if, if, if we will let it be that.

You may know the name of Madeleine L’Engle. She wrote Christian books such as *A Wrinkle in Time*. Madeleine L’Engle lived in New York City most of her life, and she wrote these words soon after the attacks of 9/11: “There has been a lot of pain this year. It has not been a good year in the world, and it has not been a good year for many people who are dear to me. But our souls do not grow if we insulate ourselves from pain.”¹

So again, I need to learn to affirm my struggles, and many of you might have the same need. They are the road to maturity and spiritual insight. We have to incorporate these events into our lives and not push them aside as if they have nothing to offer to us.

I’m going to read a short poem now, It speaks of life as a loom on which things are woven. And the “dark threads” that are part of our lives are those difficulties – the pain.

Not till the loom is silent  
And the shuttles cease to fly,  
Shall God unroll the canvas  
And explain the reasons why.  
The dark threads are as needful  
In the weaver’s skillful hand,  
As the threads of gold and silver  
In the patter he has planned.

¹ *Penguins and Golden Calves: Icons and Idols in Antarctica and Other Spiritual Places*
So embracing pain and suffering is one key to spiritual maturity. Let’s continue now to let old Simeon teach us about that important subject. We learn from Luke that Simeon was devout. I think that most of us know what being devout means. It means that we pray and worship. Prayer and worship are regular parts of our lives.

Devotion is both private and public and that’s what I want to emphasize here. Our devotional life needs to be balanced between times of solitude with God and times of prayer and worship with others.

Here’s one side of the equation – solitude. As I commented not too long ago when I preached on prayer, it isn’t easy, but we need time alone. Here’s how Ralph Waldo Emerson put it: “God enters by a private door in every individual.” We need to take time or make time to encounter God on our own. But we also need public worship. Both are necessary. Someone has written that we “need society and we need solitude also, as we need summer and winter, day and night, exercise and rest.”

Have you noticed the joy of Simeon? He is exuberant when he spots the Christ Child. We can learn from Simeon about joy. Simeon’s joy cannot be contained, so he speaks that beautiful poem. The Latin name for the poem is *Nunc Dimittis*. It’s been treasured by Christians for many centuries and set to different musical tunes. They key thing to notice about it, in my opinion, is the joy. We really can be joyful people! You and I, created by a loving God, saved by a wonderful Savior and sustained by the Holy Spirit, have a lot to say grace over.

Let’s don’t let anyone try to talk us into a somber, serious faith. We need to laugh. We need songs which help us sing our praises and gratitude to God – with joy. John Wesley, founder of Methodism, said “Sour godliness is the devil’s religion.” We can be joyous people no matter how our bodies ache and no matter the losses we have experienced. I like what Mark Twain said: “Grief can take care of itself; but to get the full value of joy you must have somebody to divide it with.”

Well we who follow Christ have plenty of people to divide our joy with. We are blessed to have one another. Yes, I know we get in each other’s way lots of times. But we have the Church, the Body of Christ, where we worship together, laugh together, pray together, work together. You and I are blessed with the togetherness of church life. And that should lead to joy and can lead to joy.

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2 Philip Gilbert Hamerton, *The Intellectual Life*. 
Here is one more thing about Simeon from which we can learn. He was a person of anticipation. I helped us to reflect on anticipation as we started Advent. I said we were all anticipating certain blessings at Christmas. I said that our faith leads us to anticipate God continuing to work in the world and to bring in the kingdom, to bring God’s kingdom to full fruition….full consummation. Biblical people anticipated the arrival of the messiah. You and I anticipated our birthday celebration of the messiah’s birth. Now we long for the full consummation of history.

But we don’t like to wait. It’s an issue in our fast-moving, materialistic culture. We don’t like to wait. One of my spiritual mentors was a Catholic priest named Henri Nouwen. He taught at Yale when I was there. Now Henri was from Holland. That allowed him to notice things about America that you and I might have trouble noticing. He said that we have a lot of difficulty waiting. Does that seem true to you? I sometimes fall into the trap of thinking that any time spent waiting is wasted time. Henri commented that Americans considered waiting to be an “awful desert between where they were and where they want to be.”

Let’s enjoy waiting, and let’s relish the time we spend waiting. Stuck in traffic? Look for something spiritual to reflect upon. Ask God for an insight. Or just relax for a change! Waiting is not all bad. Remember when you were a kid, and Christmas was coming. Day after day you looked under the tree and saw nicely wrapped gifts from your folks and your aunts and uncles. Did we open them before Christmas morning? No, of course not. First, Mom and Dad would have punished us in some fashion. And then we would have spoiled the wait! I relished the wait for Christmas when I was a kid. I’ll bet you did, too! We can relish the time we spend waiting.

Let me tell you one of the great things I anticipate these days. I anticipate, I look forward to, watching what will happen in the life of this church in the year ahead. The past year has been surprising. Who of us could have anticipated all of the successes and happiness we have shared since last Christmas? So who knows what God can do with us and through us in the year which begins on Thursday? It’s going to be interesting. I have a keen sense that God has some new ways to work through us in 2015.

So that is part of what I am anticipating. How about you? Simeon – old, wise, insightful, mature, pious and joyful – was full of anticipation. He was blessed to see some of it come to pass in the latter stages of his life. He finally met the messiah! What about you. What do you anticipate in the year ahead?
And I do hope that you are anticipating the year ahead. Let’s not spend too much time and energy looking back at 2014 or the years that preceded it. Let’s look forward. Let’s anticipate what God will do. Amen? Yes, Amen!

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Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon;[a] this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.[b] 27 Guided by the Spirit, Simeon[c] came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, 28 Simeon[d] took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

29 “Master, now you are dismissing your servant[e] in peace, according to your word;
30 for my eyes have seen your salvation,
31 which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”

33 And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. 34 Then Simeon[f] blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed 35 so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”