

A Tale of Two Children  
Luke 2:22–40  
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*The names have been changed to protect the guilty.*

Back in the day, I lived in Pittsburgh for eight years, and for seven of those years, while I went to Seminary and prepared for ordination, I worked for a social service agency called Zoar Home. If you look up the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19, you'll find that Zoar is the place to which Lot and his family escaped when God rained down sulfur and fire upon that those cities. The "official" story at the agency before I arrived was that the word meant "saved from the fire," or "a place of refuge," and indeed that was true for Lot and his family as well as for the women who came to Zoar Home, not to mention a wonderful marketing and fundraising tool. It was to great consternation then, that management was presented with the fact that I had discovered while taking Hebrew, namely, that the literal meaning of the word was the somewhat less dramatic, "a little place." They did not, however, let fact stand in the way of truth, and to this day, the explanation of the word remains on the more figurative side of the truth.

Zoar Home was, for many, many years the proverbial "home for unwed mothers," a place where women who were pregnant and unmarried, or abandoned, or indigent could go to get out of the microscope of their communities and save

their families a lot of explaining. By the time I worked there, the agency was on to different kinds of programming for women and children but we still got many requests for information about children who were born to mothers at Zoar. Usually these letters were asking for medical records of birth parents or information so that an adopted child could trace the roots and branches of their family tree. Most of the requests were rather mundane, but occasionally we would receive one with a little more pathos. None, however, could top the letter we received just after Christmas one year, a letter by which I was so moved that I have kept a copy of it to this day. What struck me then, and still does today, apart from the heartbreaking story it tells, is the amazing parallel between this letter and Simeon's Nunc Dimittis, the name which the church has for centuries used for the first canticle in the passage we just read from Luke. Let me read this letter; the names have been changed to protect the guilty and the innocent alike.

I, Jane Doe, bore a boy child in your facilities in the year 1930. It was delivered in Montefiore Hospital. I have been abused by a devil–possessed man for 66 years. I'm 85 now. He claims that I gave the child out for adoption (never). I was sent home to Pitcairn. A nun came to my house asking for money to defray the cost of burial; the baby died. It was buried in Sharpsburg. Please end out my life proving I did not give the child away. I need a death certificate. Please at any cost advise me what to do. Do I need an attorney? I don't recall the first name of the baby. Last name was either

Doe or Deer. Thank you very much and if you can help me, send a bill or where to send a gift. P.S. Would it be advisable to contact my Senator?

According to the records we had, here is the rest of the story. Jane Doe was engaged to be married to a man with whom she had become pregnant in February of 1929. In April, her beloved died. By October, perhaps fearing the stigma of unwed motherhood, strong at the time, she had married another man, a man who knew that the baby was not his. She came to Zoar in December, gave birth and left the baby at Zoar intending to keep it, but leaving it behind because she and her husband were unable at the time to care adequately for the baby. In fact, the people at Zoar would not release the baby until the little family could be settled securely. Unfortunately, in the meantime, the infant died and was buried but it seems that a death certificate was never presented to the mother and her husband, and for 66 years this man had accused Jane of giving away the baby, a scenario he somehow preferred to believing that the baby died. The control and influence he must have exerted for all these years, playing on Jane's guilt and shame, must have seemed to her like shepherding by the devil, a life of virtual emotional servitude. Now, near the end of her life, perhaps fearing that her life will never end, its torture continuing in perpetuity, she longs for a piece of paper that will offer her salvation, a way to peace in her final painful days. "Please end out my days, at any cost," she says, "proving I did not give the child away."

Now, listen again to the words of Simeon as he praises God. Now you are

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.” According to Luke’s records, Simeon gives thanks that he is “dismissed” by the Lord, now that he has seen the salvation of all peoples. As he holds the child in his arms, he recognizes the consolation of Israel, the fulfillment of the prophecies of old. Church tradition holds that Simeon was an old man, perhaps blind, perhaps in poor health, and that he could now die in peace knowing that Israel had met its savior, and that even the Gentiles had found favor in the eyes of the Lord. More likely, as the great New Testament scholar Raymond Brown has pointed out, what Simeon celebrates is not his dismissal unto death, nor that God is through with him, but more accurately his release, an idea that Luke uses on a lot of levels, both literal and theological: Simeon’s own release from waiting, the release of salvation unto the Gentiles, the release of Israel from Roman occupation, the release of the Holy Spirit into the world. You see, the word used here for dismissal is better translated as “release” and it is related to a watchman being released from duty by the arrival of the one for whom he has watched, joyful to be released to greet the awaited guest. Luke is trying to tell us something about who and what has been released into and from the world with the coming of Jesus Christ.

The stories of Simeon and Jane Doe are separated by centuries, languages, and culture, but there is a remarkable similarity in the longing expressed in their

words. Their stories are different, the emotional angles are different, but they speak to the same need – the need for release: release from waiting, release from captivity, release from torture, release unto salvation. Simeon, who represents Israel and its centuries of prophetic longing and waiting, recognizes salvation for all peoples when he sees it before him in the temple courts. Jane Doe, representing herself and so many other voiceless and tortured people in our society, watched and waited for release for 66 devil–possessed years and sees her salvation in a death certificate. Simeon’s salvation is the living child, Jesus. Jane’s salvation is the dead child with a name she has long forgotten. Simeon was waiting for confirmation of the birth of a child, Jane Doe for confirmation of the death of a child. As sad as that may sound, there is something valuable for us today from tonight’s Gospel and Jane Doe’s letter. Simeon, the final prophet of old Israel, is the one who tells us what release is like. Jane Doe, the prototypical sufferer of our time, gives us glimpse into the need for release today.

There is a lot more that could be said about Simeon and Anna, the prophets who recognized Jesus, but what I want you to think about this week is the witness of Mary and Joseph and the role they played in the temple that day. In our story, the holy family travels to Jerusalem to do what was required under the law, to be purified and presented before the Lord. As matter of fact and routine as Luke makes it sound, the truth is that it was in Mary and Joseph faithfully doing what God had commanded that Simeon met the child Jesus and recognized release. In

both a literal and figurative sense, Mary and Joseph brought Jesus out into the open and dedicated him to the service of the Lord. The thought I want you to take with you tonight is this: How might you as an individual and how might our church be like Mary and Joseph and bring Jesus out of the comfort of our own homes and hearts and into the world where people with hurts and hopes can experience him? How is God calling you to do that? You see, who knows who might find release in the encounters we have in his name? Who knows whose hurts might be helped and whose hopes might be realized by coming into contact with Resurrection people who have brought themselves out in the open and dedicated themselves to the service of God. Our job, our Christian calling, is to help people see their salvation, to see Jesus Christ.

It doesn't make you a cynic to think that even if Jane Doe was able to give her husband the death certificate he would need to believe, he would find a way to continue to hold her hostage. The truth is that the release she needed was needed decades earlier, and in a far different form than a piece of paper from the government. And it is too simple, at least for me, to say that if she just "got religion," or "found Jesus," she would find the release she needed. Rather, it seems to me to reflect the reality of our existence today that she needed supportive friends, a good psychiatrist, intervention from county services, a community of the faithful for her to find her release. It is not to judge her to say she was looking in the wrong place. But it is possibly to judge us, meaning the whole Church, for

leaving her feeling that the search for proof of a dead child is the only possibility for her release if we did not seek her out or if we turned the other way, or if we gave her up for hopeless.

If we are to believe our creeds which assert that Christ was fully divine and fully and if we believe our scriptures that Jesus sent out the disciples in his name to drive out demons and perform healings, then we must begin to think about the role we mere humans play in bringing about the salvation of people that God promises in Jesus Christ. At the risk of sounding as if we, rather than God, offer salvation, I would suggest that our role in God's salvation begins when we offer the Jane and John Does of the world an experience of Jesus Christ that reflects our faithfulness to God, just as Mary and Joseph did.

I never met Jane Doe or knew whether she prayed everyday, or visited church on a regular basis. I don't know if she was writing from the confines of a mind closed in by its own defense mechanisms. I don't know if she was trying to prove to herself that she didn't give away that baby and trying to convince herself and us that it is really her husband who wants to know. But I do know that she was crying out for release, a release unto salvation, salvation for living the fullness of life revealed by the incarnation. The incarnation of Christ is nothing if not an invitation to life, a demonstration that life is worth living rather than enduring. Simeon's life and indeed Israel's, was endured until he saw the salvation prepared in the presence of all peoples. Jane Doe's life was endured, rather than lived, in the

shadow of hopelessness that the truth would never come out that she may be released in peace and joy. How many lives need releasing from enduring to living? How many Jane Does can live if released from their waiting? As followers of Christ, inheritors of his power and faithfulness, spiritual descendants of the apostles whom Jesus commissioned to bring healing and salvation to the world, we are in a position to bring release unto salvation by the works and love we do in his name. Let us hope and work that all people might celebrate, as Simeon did, the wonder of release unto peace and salvation. Amen.