

Awaiting, Discerning and Proclaiming Jesus' Love Christmas 1 December 27, 2020
St. Columba's Church David Griswold Luke 2: 22-40

Simeon took (Jesus) in his arms and praised God, saying...my eyes have seen your salvation.... Anna began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem (Luke 2: 26, 30, 38). Let us pray: Gracious God, help us, like Simeon, to recognize Jesus in our midst and, like Anna, to proclaim him to all who seek your love. Amen.

Like most children raised in a Christian family, the story of Jesus' birth led me toward an understanding of God's relationship to the world. I helped to enact the story every year in a Christmas pageant that featured the holy family, angels, shepherds and animals in the stable. A week or two later we observed Epiphany with a procession of magi, bearing gifts.

Celebrating these events that take place in and around the creche in Bethlehem, I grew to understand that God enters our lives in the humblest of circumstances, and the image of the creche reminds me to look for signs of God today in unexpected, inauspicious places.

For the people we meet there, the reality of Jesus has come into their lives seemingly from out of nowhere – they have learned of his birth with a measure of surprise and fear followed by great reverence as they try to comprehend this child's identity with the help of angelic interpreters. But today in the Jerusalem temple we meet two other essential witnesses who seem overjoyed instead of dumbfounded; excited instead of fearful. To Simeon and Anna, Jesus arrives not as an unexpected burst of news from the heavens but as the momentous, long awaited answer to a lifetime of expectant prayer.

Since they are not in Bethlehem, Anna and Simeon do not appear in our pageants and processions to commemorate Jesus' birth. We don't sing about them in Christmas carols. Their appearance is often skipped over as the church moves from Jesus' nativity into the story of his adult ministry. Yet Luke records this part of the story to remind us that while the world comes to Jesus when he is born, not long after Jesus comes to the faith community in fulfillment of centuries of longing for a sign that God's restoring presence is at hand. That sign enters the temple today, carried by Mary and Joseph.

We all know what it means to wait – for a life challenge to be resolved; for a troubled relationship to flourish again; for healing and growth after a setback. In this troubling year 2020 we've been waiting as a people – for freedom from the hardships, losses, disruptions and sadness of pandemic life; for change that will bring us a more just society and a healthier planet.

We may be more familiar with what it means to wait – whether in anxiousness, impatience or resignation – than with how it feels when the waiting is rewarded. Today Mary and Joseph encounter elders in the temple who have devoted themselves, like their ancestors, to decades of prayerful expectation based on centuries of prophetic testimony to a waiting nation. In an instant Anna and Simeon recognize in Jesus the answer they've been expecting.

How gratifying and yet bewildering and even frightening this must seem to Jesus' young parents. They have been drawn to this sacred space for some of the same reasons that you and I might visit our church – to participate in the rituals and traditions that remind us we belong to the household of God. Now, forty days after giving birth, Mary will observe a rite of purification for new mothers, and Jesus, as the family's firstborn son, will be presented as holy to God. Instead of giving a lamb for an offering, Jesus' parents present a pair of birds, as is customary for the poor. Watching this scene tells us two important things about Jesus: he is being raised in a devout Jewish family whose life is grounded in faith and he will know what it means to be poor.

But Simeon and Anna see more than that. These holy

people wait in the expectation that a Messiah will restore God's rule to occupied Israel. Anna is a prophet who, at age 84, worships in the temple with fasting and prayer night and day. Simeon is touched and guided by the Holy Spirit with the assurance that he will not see death before seeing the Lord's Messiah. Today Simeon not only sees the Messiah but does what the gospels report no one else outside the Holy Family doing: he holds the infant in his arms and praises God for fulfilling, in Jesus, the divine promise of blessing, not only for Israel but for "all peoples" (2: 31).

The significance of Baby Jesus would be powerfully clear whether Simeon lifts him into his arms or not. But by holding the infant, Simeon can feel and touch God's decisive response to his lifelong prayers. I expect most of us who have ever held babies can relate to what Simeon feels. I didn't get to be a dad and I've held an infant in my arms only a few times. But even these momentary encounters have taught me that holding a baby changes us—it shifts our way of knowing from the mind to the heart and calls forth from us a God-given language expressing dependence, tenderness, reassurance and delight—a language that conveys the most important things we and the baby-- and we and God-- need to know about one another.

In this intimate moment Simeon is flooded with insight about the full measure of Jesus' identity and of his own place in God's plan. He praises God as the long vigil ends, declaring "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace" (2: 29). Simeon speaks of peace not only as well-being for himself but as a wider vision of shalom—a way of living in right relationship to God that reflects community harmony and love among neighbors.

Mixed with Simeon's joy is awareness that a new age now begins in which Jesus' challenge to the old order will not be accomplished smoothly. His ministry to establish God's shalom on earth will meet with misunderstanding and resistance even as it advances the purposes of God.

In the same moment that Simeon speaks to God and to Jesus' family, Anna starts to share the message more widely, spreading the news about Jesus to all who are "looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (2: 38). Her life, devoted to worship in the temple, suddenly has a broader mission: to proclaim the arrival of the One who will rescue Israel from oppression and restore its covenant relationship with God.

God's realm on earth may not be established with the swiftness that those who hear Anna may expect and that we still desire, but hers is the voice of hope that the liberating work of God is now begun in Jesus and there is no turning back. Widowhood made Anna among the least secure and consequential people in society. But in her unhesitating readiness to share the news of Jesus with all, Anna begins the work of discipleship a generation before the adult Jesus will call others to follow him.

After the momentous events of the creche and the temple, Jesus' family returns "to their own town of Nazareth" (2: 39). And we, after observing Christmas 2020 in ways perhaps more subdued than celebratory, will return to our pandemic life routines, including attending our own virtual version of the temple, where we're gathered now. Like many of you, I wait to feel again the connecting energy of our shared space-- the greetings, grins, handshakes and hugs that express what it means to feel blessed in the love of God and one another.

Yet God is showing us that this awareness of blessing still binds us in our online and limited in-person activities. The only essential ingredient is our readiness to approach God together—to watch and listen like Simeon and Anna for signs that our life stories are part of the unfolding purposes of God.

We might wish for the kind of tangible proof of God's nearness that Simeon finds when he holds the baby. But when our approach to God in prayer and among one another begins from the

heart, we recognize the face of Jesus. Like Simeon we study, pray and search together to discern the ways in which the blessing of God is revealed in our midst. Like Anna we stand ready to proclaim Jesus as a liberating presence who will bring healing and reconciliation to all who long for the love and justice of God.

And like all the people who meet in the temple in today's story, we never know how crossing the church threshold, whether virtual or physical, may lead us to precious discoveries.

Amen.