

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, December 29, 2019

Hymns: 133 – Go, tell it on the mountain; 173 – We Three Kings; 662 – Those who wait on the Lord; 808 – Come in, come in New Year

Scripture: Luke 2:22-33; :36-38

Sermon Title: The Wait is Over

Luke 2:22-33; :36-38

When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord'), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: 'a pair of doves or two young pigeons'.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

'Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.'
The child's father and mother marvelled at what was said about him.

There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Simeon doesn't make it into many Christmas pageants or carol services. He comes in a bit late, after everyone has returned home to celebrate with their families, after Christmas is come and gone; his story starts when Jesus is forty days old – well into February for us - long past when everyone has had quite enough of Christmas.

Poor Simeon, relegated to this no man's land of the church season, like the guest who is always late, like the relative who forgets your birthday, and sends you a "sorry I missed your big day" card every year. Which is too bad, because although Simeon is not part of the Christmas entourage, he really is part of the story. He is part of our story.

You see, Simeon is waiting. He is waiting in Jerusalem, by the Temple; not in Bethlehem, by the Manger. He had no idea that anything out of the ordinary was happening in Bethlehem, other than the herding of sheep and the baking of bread and the drawing of water that were the daily highlights of life in that small, sleepy Judean village.

No, Simeon is waiting, but it is in the Temple, in Jerusalem, that he's doing it; and he is waiting there that particular day, forty days after angels sang in Bethlehem, because somehow he got the idea that God had something special in store for him; that before he would leave this old world behind, God would answer his questions, would honour his search, would touch him with his grace.

He didn't know exactly what he was waiting for, looking for, hoping for, searching for – Luke says he was “waiting for the consolation of Israel,” whatever that means - but he knew somehow that when it came, he would know it. And he knew, too, somehow, that it would change him, and the world around him.

What came was what he perhaps least expected. What came was an infant, carried into the Temple Court by a young woman and her husband, an infant like the countless other infants and mothers and fathers who had paraded past for the ritual of dedication, this particular family, like so many, anonymous in their poverty, able to afford only the most humble of sacrifices.

Yet something had brought Simeon to the Temple Court that day, and the same thing that brought him there – the Holy Spirit, we're told - the same thing that brought him there opened his eyes to see, that this was no ordinary family, no ordinary child. That which had brought hope to the heart of Simeon as he waited all those years – again, the Holy Spirit, we're told - now assured him that unlikely though it may seem, this child was that very hope, made flesh; that this child – all six pounds, two ounces of him - was the hope of all the world.

He approached the startled parents, and took the child in his arms, as he had held his children, his grandchildren, his great-grandchildren. But this time was different. This child was different. And as he beheld the child, he knew. He knew that he would never be the same again, that the world would be forever changed. And in his knowing, he prayed this prayer, he sang this song:

‘Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.’

Forty days late, but Simeon gets his chance to add his voice to the angel choir. Forty days late, and not even in Bethlehem, but it turns out he didn't miss Christmas at all. And neither did a woman named Anna.

Perhaps it is Simeon's song which draws her over; perhaps, like Simeon, it is the Holy Spirit speaking to her heart. But whatever it is that brought her to that very spot, at that very moment, Anna knew she was where she needed to be. Right there. In the presence of the Child.

She's a prophet, Luke says, meaning, we suppose, that God had given her great insight; she was perhaps known for her wise words, for her sound counsel, for pointing people to God. She had been doing so for many years; a widow for the greater part of her life, she had reached the age of eighty-four. *"Very old,"* Luke says, in the NIV; *"of great age,"* says the King James. *"She had gone forth in many days,"* is how old Wycliffe delicately phrases it. If you are of a similar age to Anna, and someone asks how old you are, you can reply, "I have gone forth in many days."

"She never left the Temple, but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying." We all know women like this; women who seem to be in church all the time, in front of the scenes, behind the scenes, the first ones to help, the last ones to leave, the very backbone of the church. Anna is the prototype. She is the Patron Saint of Church Ladies, without whom most if not all of our churches would long ago have closed their doors. Your tradition of service, Dear Ladies of the Order of Anna, goes back thousands of years. And your efforts are seen by the Lord.

And they are rewarded. For due to her diligence, Anna did not miss the moment – the moment when to her fading eyes, the Messiah was revealed. It was just a baby – and most forty-day-old-babies all look much the same, with the exception of my beautiful granddaughter, who outshines them all – it was just a baby, but Anna was a Prophet, and to her eyes and in her heart and shining brightly within her spirit was the knowledge that this was The One. The Messiah. The Saviour. The Lord.

"Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem." Think for a moment, of the privilege this was – to approach Joseph, and Mary, and the 40-day-old Jesus, to approach them in the very Temple of the Lord, and to know who they are. To stand before them. To look upon the child. To place your hand on Joseph's shoulder. To look into Mary's eyes. And to kiss the Son of God. Such is the reward granted to the faithful women of God.

We, like Simeon, like Anna, have come to this place, looking, searching, for something which will touch us, move us, change our heart. And what we get, December 29, not forty day late but four days late, what we get is the story, the old story, the Christmas story, the story of the child born so long ago, so far away. It is so long ago, so far away; how can it change us? How can the Christ child cause us to realize, as Simeon realized, that nothing would be the same again? For us, for our world? Christmas is, after all, over; it is, by December 29, now just about the cleanup and the leftovers and the bills. If there was a big change of heart that was supposed to happen a few days ago, if there was a light burning within us that was to be kindled on Christmas Eve, well, for many of us, we missed it again, it seems. If there is something different to see, we missed it. Again. Or have we?

Perhaps it is only, as with Simeon; perhaps it is only, as the story reminds us, by the Spirit that we might hope to see. It is not with the same eyes with which we look upon our world, but with the eyes of faith, that we glimpse the hope in the child. It is the Spirit which brings the hope, the joy, the Good News, that this child is no ordinary child, but is *the* Child, the Child of God, come to save us from ourselves. The gift is there, has been there, awaits us still; we need only the Holy Spirit to help us to see, to understand, how this story changed it all, for us, for everyone.

Perhaps it is only, as with Anna; perhaps it is only as we continue to come, to serve, week upon week, that the insight comes, not as a flash of light, but as a growing awareness, as a deep-rooted certainty, not in a single day but through a span of faithful years; when one day, it culminates into the knowledge of just who it is we serve, and worship, and why; for he is the Son of God, and we are his faithful servants. And that surety of heart comes not only as a gift, but as a reward. For as Anna's story demonstrates, faithfulness has its reward.

It isn't too late. We haven't missed our chance. We aren't too old, or too tired, or too cynical, or too "used to the story." It isn't too late for us to see the truth, to take the promise into our hearts, to live lives shining with the gifts of hope, of peace, of joy, of love. It is not too late for us to sing with Simeon his special Christmas song, of, finally, peace in our heart; of salvation for our soul; of a light which will shine for all people, and forever more. It is not too late for God to find us faithful, as he found Anna; and like Anna, we too, with the testimony of our words and our service, it is not too late for us to speak to all people of the one who has come to deliver us all; the Saviour who brings us home. Thanks to be God. Amen.