

## Holy Waiting

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 Luke 2:21-38  
 Epiphany 1

Rev. Kara Markell  
 Lake Washington Christian Church

*When eight days had passed, Jesus' parents circumcised him and gave him the name Jesus. This was the name given to him by the angel before he was conceived. When the time came for their ritual cleansing, in accordance with the Law from Moses, they brought Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. (It's written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male will be dedicated to the Lord.") They offered a sacrifice in keeping with what's stated in the Law of the Lord, A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.*

*A man named Simeon was in Jerusalem. He was righteous and devout. He eagerly anticipated the restoration of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. The Holy Spirit revealed to him that he wouldn't die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Led by the Spirit, he went into the temple area. Meanwhile, Jesus' parents brought the child to the temple so that they could do what was customary under the Law. Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God. He said,*

*"Now, master, let your servant go in peace according to your word,  
 because my eyes have seen your salvation.  
 You prepared this salvation in the presence of all peoples.  
 It's a light for revelation to the Gentiles  
 and a glory for your people Israel."*

*His father and mother were amazed by what was said about him. Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "This boy is assigned to be the cause of the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that generates opposition so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your innermost being too."*

*There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, who belonged to the tribe of Asher. She was very old. After she married, she lived with her husband for seven years. She was now an 84-year-old widow. She never left the temple area but worshipped God with fasting and prayer night and day. She approached at that very moment and began to praise God and to speak about Jesus to everyone who was looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.*

*When Mary and Joseph had completed everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to their hometown, Nazareth in Galilee. The child grew up and became strong. He was filled with wisdom, and God's favor was on him.*

Let us Pray: Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your holy spirit, that as the scriptures are read and your word proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

It's particularly appropriate that the choir sang about the shepherd's running to Bethlehem. Immediately after their visit to the manger, Luke goes on to tell the next bit of the story in these three short scenes. The story of the shepherds' visit and consequent

proclamation about who Jesus is recounts God's revelation to the outcasts. Mary keeps everything to herself. In this passage the religious establishment makes its own claims. The recipients of God's revelation this time are priests and prophets.

First, we learn that, according to Jewish tradition, Jesus was circumcised 8 days after his birth. Then about 30 days later, his parents brought him to the temple, not to dedicate him, but to participate in another Jewish ceremony, a ritual of cleansing for Mary. This ritual would return her to full participation in the life of the synagogue. For this, they have to travel again, this time from Bethlehem to Jerusalem.

While the family is there, they run into the priest, Simeon. Is it kismet or serendipity? Perhaps it is something deeper. Perhaps the spirit, who it is said rested on him, whispered in his ear, so to speak. Or is he simply doing what he does every day? going to temple and waiting for God to keep God's promise. Simeon has been waiting a long time. But his waiting has not been passive. He has been in the temple, devoutly practicing his faith, reading the scriptures, fulfilling his duties as priest.

So when God shows up, Simeon is ready. He sees the baby, and takes him in his arms. What deep joy must have attended that moment! So much joy that he breaks into a song of praise.

I grew up singing this song every week after receiving communion. Even before I was allowed to take communion, this song formed me in the presence of the assembly. "Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou has prepared before the face of all people. A light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of thy people Israel." [Glory be to Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.]

Now, most believe that Simeon is singing about his own death; that now having seen God's chosen one, he can now die in peace. Sort of an odd Christmas Carol. But, perhaps it also means he can leave his post as sentinel for God's future. Jesus' birth, is the beginning of a new story. He has seen God's promise revealed in flesh and bone. But as a song that I sang in the context of weekly worship the departure we sang of was our own departure from that place of God's physical presence around the table, to do and to be God's love in the world.

After Simeon's song, the camera turns back to an astonished Mary and Joseph. Their little baby, 40 days old, the fulfillment of God's promise for a Messiah and a light to Gentiles? Mary might already know this...she did sing her own song about in chapter one of Luke. But, Joseph? According to Luke's gospel, this is the first he's hearing about it. Writer Fred Buechner reimagines this scene:

*The parents were pleased as punch, and so he blessed them too for good measure. Then something about the mother stopped him, and his expression changed. What he saw in her face was a long way off, but it was there so plainly he couldn't pretend. "A sword will pierce through your soul," he said (Luke 2:35).*

Perhaps Mary was again pondering all these amazing things in her heart. But we get the first indication here that the fulfillment of God's promise won't be an altogether happy thing.

And then enters Anna, prophetess and widow. Anna is the only women named as a prophet in Luke's Gospel. She prays and fasts night and day. She has been connected with the temple for probably 60 years waiting, hoping. I imagine she breaks into a song of praise, too, but Luke doesn't record one. She, however, proclaims the good news to the crowds – especially those who she knows were expecting Israel's liberation through God's anointed one.

In contrast to the shepherds – and later the magi - Simeon and Anna represent the religious establishment, attuned to the promises of God, fiercely hoping that they will be fulfilled in their life time. Not just open to God's presence, but actively seeking it, even in a tiny baby born to poor parents. We need Simeon and Anna – perhaps we should add them to our nativity sets. We need their vibrant expectancy. We need their devout faithfulness and their vision. We need their wisdom and their longing. We need them to show us what to do when our waiting and longing is fulfilled.

Spiritual writers speak of this kind of holy waiting or longing. The poet, David Whyte, describes longing as “divine discontent...[that] makes us into pilgrim souls” or seekers. It's as if, he continues, the horizon we seek “were both a lifetime's journey away, and living deep inside.” Augustine, the great church father, wrote that “our hearts are restless until they find their rest in [God].” Ron Rohlheiser suggests that “Spirituality is what we do with our longing.”

This story is about longing, and waiting and noticing. Simeon and Anna spent decades in holy waiting for the anointed one. They were busy training their eyes and their hearts to recognize God's presence – going to the temple, fasting, praying, watching. They see what everyone else misses – God's word in the flesh, Emmanuel. Their holy waiting gives them deeper vision. This is the fruition of our Advent practices – making room for Christ to enter and then noticing when he does. It's like the grandmother in our children's books said “Yes, God is here...You just need to know where to look.” We need now, as much as ever, the courage of Anna and Simeon to trust in God who is present and powerful when the world would suggest otherwise. May we be as attuned to God's presence and as willing to share the good news!