

December 27, 2020
Luke 2:22-40

First Sunday of Christmas
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Hopeful Waiting”

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word ...”

Waiting has become a fact of life during the COVID-19 pandemic. It may be waiting outside of the grocery store because of capacity limits or waiting at the barber shop to get a haircut before the lockdown came into effect or waiting for packages ordered online to arrive. As this difficult year comes to an end, we will be waiting in the new year for news of when the vaccine will be available, or when the border will reopen so that we can visit with family and friends in the USA, or when we will be able to move around more freely and resume life as we knew it before phrases like “social distancing” and “lockdown” became so familiar. We have gained a new appreciation for Tom Petty’s words that *“the waiting is the hardest part.”*

Today’s Gospel lesson centers on the story of two faithful persons who have been waiting for the fulfillment of God’s promises. Simeon and Anna, as devout persons, are important because they recognize and prophetically articulate what Jesus’ role will be; “[their] primary purpose is to declare who Jesus is and foreshadow what he will do.” (Alan Culpepper). This scene in Luke’s infancy narrative takes place forty days after Jesus’ birth, when in accordance with the Torah Mary and Joseph travel to the Temple in Jerusalem “for their purification according to the law of Moses” (2:22). As a reminder of the exodus, the firstborn child was consecrated to the Lord (“*The LORD said to Moses, ‘Consecrate to me all the firstborn; whatever is the first to open the womb among the Israelites, of human beings and animals, is mine.*” – Exodus 13:1-2) and was to be redeemed at a price of five shekels of silver (Numbers 18:15-16). The purification of the mother also occurred forty days after giving birth and involved offering a lamb and a pigeon or turtledove (Leviticus 12:6-8). All of this serves as a reminder that Mary and Joseph were faithful Jews who observed all that the Torah had taught concerning the birth of a child; this includes Luke’s previous report that “*after eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was named Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.*” (2:21).

As Mary and Joseph bring their infant son to the Temple, Luke introduces us to Simeon, a man who “*was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested upon him.*” (2:25). Simeon was probably a

fixture on the Temple grounds, a man who would be seen there every day patiently watching and waiting; for “*it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah*” (2:26). Simeon did not know how long he would have to wait, but he trusted in God’s faithfulness in fulfilling what God had promised in God’s good time. His indeterminate period of watching and waiting is rewarded when “*guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God*” (2:27-28). The meeting at the Temple was no accident; Simeon was guided there by the Holy Spirit so that he could experience the fulfillment of God’s promises and serve as a herald for praising God and sharing God’s Will for the child he now holds in his arms. Raising his voice in praise in the tradition of Mary and Zechariah (1:46-55, 68-79), Simeon sings out the praise of God for faithfulness and redemption of the people, a hymn known to generations of Christians as the *Nunc Dimitiss*:

- “Master, you are now 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.” – 2:29-32.

Simeon had been watching and waiting for the coming of the Lord’s anointed, and now as a faithful watchman he is dismissed from his post by his master. Simeon’s blessing relates the birth of Jesus to the fulfillment of the promise of salvation found in the Scriptures of Israel and looks ahead to the inclusion of Gentiles as well as Jews in the experience of God’s blessing.

- “But now we hear of a salvation made ready ‘in the sight of all peoples’ – a salvation that is ‘to the Gentiles’ as well as ‘for your people Israel.’ Simeon can depart in peace because the consolation of Israel which he awaited has come, and this consolation of Israel has proved to be a revelation to the Gentiles as well.” – Raymond Brown.

The “peace” (*Eirene*) in which Simeon can depart is both the goal and the result of God’s redemptive work in Jesus, the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy when God would establish peace on earth (“*For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*” – Isaiah 9:6). Simeon rejoices that his waiting was not in vain, that once again God has been faithful to God’s servant, and now he can depart from his post in the “*peace of God, which surpasses*

all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7), a peace that Martin Luther teaches that we can share as we behold the fulfillment of God’s promises in the coming of Christ.

- “It all depends on this, that we with the dear old Simeon open our eyes and see the babe, take him into our arms, and kiss him, which means that he is our hope, joy, comfort, and life. When this faith is firm and sure in our hearts – that this child is God’s Saviour – there, indeed, it must follow that the heart is content and is not afraid of sin or death, for it has a Saviour who delivers it from it.” – Sermon from the year 1544.

Amazement often follows an oracle in Luke (“... *all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them*” – 2:18) and so it is not surprising that “*the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him*” (2:33). But before he departs, Simeon shares a second oracle that blesses both parents and then turns to foreshadow the rejection of Jesus: “*This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, to be a sign that will be opposed, so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too*” (2:34-35). It is an ominous sign of what is to come, but a reminder that the good news that we celebrate at the birth of Jesus was not received as good news by all, for it is the message that the “*kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ*” (Revelation 11:15), that all who have opposed God and oppressed God’s people will soon discover that their reign of terror is coming to an end.

- “Not all will receive the salvation that has been prepared, see the light of revelation, or recognize the glory of God in the coming of Jesus. The one who would bring salvation will also bring judgment. Mary will share in the pain of the rejection of Jesus and the division of Israel.” – Culpepper.

Luke is fond of pairing male and female figures in his narrative (Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph) and how he introduces us to “*Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher*” (2:36). Anna’s character and piety are emphasized, even though her words are not recorded in the narrative. As a prophet, Anna continues in the tradition of female prophets in the Old Testament such as Miriam, Deborah, and Hildah, and anticipates the role of female prophets in the early church (“*In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and you sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and you old men shall dream dreams.*” – Acts 2:17). Anna is a descendant of a family from the northern kingdom and a devout widow like the pious widows

mentioned in First Timothy, a widow who “*has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day*” (1 Timothy 5:5).

Anna’s blessing, though not recorded, is characterized as praising God, and speaking about the child: “*At that moment she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem*” (2:38).

- “These two ancient saints are Israel in miniature, and Israel at its best: devout, obedient, constant in prayer, led by the Holy Spirit, at home in the temple, longing and hoping for the fulfillment of God’s promises … God is doing something new, but it is not really new, because hope is always joined to memory, and the new is God’s keeping the old promise.” – Fred Craddock.

Simeon and Anna exemplify all faithful men and women who throughout the ages have waited patiently and hopefully for the Lord’s redemption, for the fulfillment of all that God has promised. They are those who have exemplified the definition of faith as “*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*” (Hebrews 11:1). Even though many of God’s faithful have died without experienced the fulfillment of God’s promises in their own lives, they trusted that “*God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them*” (11:16). Simeon and Anna serve as role models for all men and women who in our uncertain times give us examples of how we might wait with hope during this time when our waiting is often filled with doubt and anxiety, when we do not know how long we might have to wait through this second lockdown, wait for the arrival of vaccines, wait for the day when all we will be open and we can gather together as people of faith in the presence of the Lord.

- “When we end our worship with the words of Simeon, we acknowledge that we, too, have seen the Lord. We have been given a vision of the peace Simeon knew after such a long wait in the temple. We have heard the word of the Lord, confessed our sin, and received forgiveness. Whether or not we are able to be present to each other in person in the late months of 2020 because of the pandemic – whether or not we are given the bread of life in person – we receive through God’s Word the promise of God’s steadfast love and faithfulness. This is enough for us to sing thanksgiving for this vision of the Lord’s real presence in our lives. We sing Simeon’s own experience when we sing his words.” – Melinda Quivik.

As we have entered another lockdown due to the pandemic, our present experience of waiting continues; like Simeon and Anna, we do not know how long we will have to wait. But even though we may be disappointed that we cannot gather for worship or gather together with family and friends, we can wait in trust and hope that while waiting is hard, it is not forever nor will it be for naught, for we live in the hope that comes to us in the birth of the Christ Child, the good news that our eyes have seen God's salvation and we can therefore live in the peace of the Lord, for we do not wait alone but in the presence of the child born of Mary who is Emmanuel – God who is always with us.

Amen.