

Offer Christmas Praise
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Luke 2:22-40

22 When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), 24 and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.” 25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. 27 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, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

29 “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
30 for my eyes have seen your salvation,
31 which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”

33 And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed 35 so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

36 There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. 38 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.

39 When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. 40 The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

This is a beautiful story about two grandparent-types who hoped for a very long time, and waited for a very long time, and got to experience the fulfillment of that hope.

Can we really imagine waiting our entire lives for something? Jokes about our impatience as a culture have become cliché, of course. My favorite meme of the season read: “Stop tracking that package. It is in the Lord’s hands now.”

At the first church I served, a colleague celebrated that God had answered her prayers that her husband would get a new job. She had been praying that for TEN years. When she said that, my mouth just fell open.

Every time we see a video of kids being reunited with a parent who has been deployed, we tear up.

Every time I hear about families that have been separated for decades because a parent had to leave spouse and kids to find work in another part of the world, I am in awe. I really have no idea what it means to truly have to wait for something, to long for it, and to develop that deep, quiet, persistent patience that comes with such waiting.

Such waiting is powerful training for the soul. At Thomas Merton once wrote: "Souls are like athletes that need opponents worthy of them if they are to be tried and extended and pushed to the full use of their powers."

2020 has been just such an opponent. We have all been tried, and extended, and pushed beyond what we could have thought possible. So it seems to me that perhaps this year of all years, we impatient people can relate to Simeon and Anna in a way that we might not have been able to before. Even as we celebrate Christmas and celebrate vaccines that make it certain that there will be an end to this pandemic and all its effects, we also accept that there is still a long way to go, and still a lot of waiting and enduring to face.

Anna and Simeon's story reminds us that **Hope in God is never misplaced**. What God promises, God will accomplish. They also embody how such times can truly be soul-strengthening. They can teach us a lot about how to wait, how to see, and how to respond.

How to Wait

Simeon "was waiting for consolation of Israel." In a world full of people who are just trying to get by or get back to normal, Simeon was cultivating a taste for deep change. He waiting was not passive. He wasn't just "killing time." Instead he had a yearning, a restlessness that we tend to cover over with busyness.

Simeon longed for the consolation of Israel. We long for the consolation of an entire world confronted by environmental, political, and economic turmoil. It is so easy to spend this time distracting ourselves or simply trying to be as comfortable as possible. That longing is a good thing. *We can praise God for a year that stirs that longing in us. Let's continue to cultivate it.*

How to See

I would love to hold a child and see as Simeon sees – to see child's promise, the significant contribution they will make to the world in the years to come. How much did Mary and Joseph need to hear this, in the midst of their tumultuous engagement and persistent poverty!

In a crowded Temple court, undoubtedly full of people and more than a few families bringing their sons to be dedicated on the seventh day. Contrary to how they are depicted in fine art, the Holy Family didn't show up with halos! They looked like everyone else. Yet Simeon and Anna see something what no one else sees. They had cultivated the ability to see with their hearts, to perceive God's presence and activity where others saw nothing special at all.

We need grow in our ability to observe the common, the poor, the insignificant and yet see the holy, the blessed, and the important. You know that your soul-sight is improving when you can gaze at another person and NOT notice their physical appearance but catch a glimpse of their true being – The precious image-of-God impressed into them that Jesus came to restore, heal, and liberate.

2020 could be called many things, but I hope we will remember it as “The Year of the Essential Worker.” *We can praise God that we will never look at the people who grow our food, serve our tables, deliver our goodies, or keep us healthy and safe the same way again.*

How to Respond

I wonder if anyone else noticed the fuss Simeon and Anna were making. The story says that Anna “began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.” But the story doesn't say that everyone stopped what they were doing, gathered round, and started worshipping like we see depicted in our nativity scenes. I'm sure they just kept doing whatever they were doing.

But when we are able to *wait well*, and to *see well*, then we are called to *respond well* too. Anna and Simeon respond with devotion to Christ and compassion to all. When God's promised Messiah is before him, Simeon takes the baby into his arms and speaks prophetic blessing over him. Fear and self-consciousness vanish. There is only the reality of God's promise being fulfilled, and that reality is fully celebrated! Yet even in this celebration, there is foreshadowing of the challenges that lay ahead. I hear Simeon's words to Mary being said with the utmost compassion and care: “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and 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.” When we respond to God's action, we praise God for it AND we embrace the full reality of it. We take hold of it with both hands, even when we know it has painful implications.

2020 has been a year of peeling-away. We have had the opportunity to peel away the layers of misconceptions we have in order to rediscover the truth about Christ's presence among us and the truth about our presence in the world. *We can praise God that inner thoughts have been revealed, our souls have been pierced, and that we will never be the same again.*

The end of 2020 seems to me to be a good time for “honest praise.” How will you praise God honestly? For myself, I praise God for the severe mercies of a pandemic – how this year has held up a mirror to us; how it has forced us all to experience solitude, stillness, and silence; how

it made us aware of all that we take for granted... and on it goes. Perhaps most of all, it has revealed that our only real hope is in God, and that is a hope we all need to experience. May we all be Simeons and Annas in 2021 – people who know how to Wait on God, and See where God is at work, and Respond to God with joy before a watching world. Amen!