

Providence Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. David Pettit

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Luke 2: 22-40 “Celebrating the Foretastes of a Fulfilled Kingdom”

What warms your heart these days? What causes the worries to dissipate for the time? Amid concerning news, stressful circumstances, grief, and uncertainty, what are the moments that make you breathe deeply, smile, or your chin quiver with joy or emotion? In a world you can't control, try though you may, what is it that makes the future feel hopeful, or what gives you a moment of joy and peace?

Our scripture includes in the story, no doubt, because they attest to the special identity and calling of Jesus. Like the shepherds and angels, they add yet another set of independent and corroborating voices indicating that this child is from God. But I am struck by their own stories, by what sighting the Christ child might have meant for them, these figures of steadfast hope and longing.

During this advent, we talked a good deal about advent as a time of preparing for and anticipating the fullness of God's kingdom. We spoke of what it means to anticipate and participate in God's kingdom. But we live in a time when so much is out of order in our hearts still, as well as our physical bodies, communities, political systems, institutions, world, even climate and nature. So much of humanity is still awry.

Simeon and Anna would likely say similar things of their time. They lived their days in the temple courts, maintaining the worship in the holy city under Rome's control. The priests and Sadducees are no longer voices for change, for they had accepted lucrative deals and therefore live in the uppity part of town and go down to the Jericho springs for respite. Those who worship at the temple seem to have lost the vision of God's people being a source of blessing for the whole world. They have accepted some accommodated version. Instead, random figures scattered about the Jordan valley held the ideals and hopes of renewal and God's fulfilled promises, and these would occasionally raise the zealous voices. And in addition to the prophetic voices out on the periphery were these quiet figures like Simeon.

Both Simeon and Anna worship. Amid the difficulty and the uncertainty spanning their many years, they spend their time as close to God's presence as they can.

We are told Simeon was righteous, meaning he lived in right relationships with others, fulfilled the requirements of festivals and sacrifices. He lived according to

the law. He was devout, his heart set on the things of God. He seemed to attend to things in his control, like his own heart, relationship, and worship. But he did not lose sight of the redemption of Israel, of the righting of the larger picture, the redeeming of systems and structures. He was looking forward to the consolation of Israel – he knew a better day was possible for God’s people. The Holy Spirit rested upon him.

He was led to get up and go to the temple. His heart warms at the sight of this child. He comes up to Mary and Joseph, and this old man who was up in his years, and bearing all the signs of it, he asks to hold the child.

We can only imagine what it was like for Simeon to hold this child. Only imagine what he thought, or what he felt, what went through him. But in a world with all its challenging relationships and corrupted institutions, he sees something of a fulfillment. Maybe only a foretaste, but clear enough that hope, peace, and satisfaction take over his body long racked with longing.

“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.”

What warms your heart these days? Where do you see signs of hope? What are the foretastes of the kingdom?

My Hebrew professor would talk about the Hebrew verb system. What we call the tense system. In Hebrew, there is not really past, present, and future. There are two basic conjugations that everything else is built off of: the perfect and the imperfect. And these do not always align with our sense of past and future. There are completed actions and incompleting actions. So that one can speak or conceive of an action as complete, even if it hasn’t happened yet. For Simeon, even though the restoration and salvation were yet to come time-wise, there seems some sense of completeness. It is. He sees enough to know, and the completion, though yet to happen, washes over him.

He looks into this child’s eyes and knows that his longing and hoping have not been in vain. I can rest now, he says essentially, for what I have waited for, has begun to take place. It had begun, and he says to Joseph and Mary, “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.” God’s work has entered a new chapter, a chapter of fallings and risings, and inner thoughts being revealed; hearts being re-made, old paradigms changing, and the one who brings it about is before us.

The second person who Luke draws our attention to at the temple that day was Anna. She is described as a prophetess who “never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day.” Why does one fast? – to be undistracted from the work of prayer and beseeching God; to contemplate; to remind yourself that there is something more to life than merely filling your daily needs. She has given her life to fasting and prayer, longing for something more, petitioning God, and watching and waiting for God to console and satisfy God’s people.

She spent her days in God’s presence, though always at bay; women could only come as far as the women’s court. But nonetheless, she was there every day and had been there every day for over sixty years. She lost her husband young, probably around age twenty or so. She is now eighty-four. In a culture where family and child-bearing were marks of personhood, Anna was stripped of these at a young age. So what is it like, I wonder, for Anna to watch mothers bringing their babies to be dedicated every day. To see families coming to celebrate events in the lives of their relatives with a sacrifice. She knew her own personal disorder and longings. Anna knew the waiting and weary world, and she had dedicated herself to the hope for a better day, not just for herself, but for all of God’s people.

On this particular day in the temple, she comes up to Mary and Joseph, and though she had seen thousands of children dedicated, it was this child that strikes her with hope; this child holds promise for all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. Anna appears to know the regulars in the temple and knows who shared her longing and hope. She calls them together, and they begin to praise God.

Perhaps that is what we are doing this morning. Like Anna, we gather as those who are still waiting and longing, and we celebrate the hope of God’s purposes as represented and embodied in the Christ child. We gather and praise God even while the disconcerting realities of the world persist around us. In doing so, I wonder if our hearts can rest a little or be renewed a little, even while the world around is still awry?

I think of our poem, of the author being asked to write about the destruction of the natural world. He conveys the great heart and effort exercised to draw to light realities that warrant change and action, and after all that exertion of heart and

words, the world seems to go on as it was. And coming out of advent and into Christmas and soon back into ordinary time, we too might wonder if all this anticipating and hoping did anything.

But what I love about this poem is that even while he has not changed external circumstances through his reflection and writing, something has shifted in him. Something inside him has seen again, been dumbstruck and captivated,

I now stare
dumbstruck at the magnificence of a single
ocean wave, and cannot take my eyes
off clouds and full moons or Giant Egrets,
taking one tiny sacred step at a time.

The change he wanted and expected is supplanted by the changes in him. The possibility for change seems to move smaller and more inwardly. That desire for change is transformed into a search and rescue party for his own soul, a renewing of his own spirit. And then in those last words, the transformation within him renews the hope for change again in others as a result.

After all, isn't every poem ever just a search
and rescue party for our heart and soul—
nothing protected, nothing saved, nothing
sustained, except maybe, just maybe, me,
and you, and every other blessed thing.

And so, I wonder what all this anticipating and hoping in God's fulfilled kingdom has done in you, even while the world rambles on. Perhaps the transformation moves smaller and more inwardly for the time. Perhaps the hope of long-term change in the world begins again with the transformation of our own hearts and perspective, to fall back into a sense of wonder and hope and confidence and desire for God's best.

For Simeon and Anna, there is a renewal of hope, there is a satisfaction in knowing that God has set things in motion. And they worship, and they praise even, tuning out the din of the world for the time.

And so, perhaps rather than raging against the same old world, perhaps we, like Simeon and Anna and the poet, turn inward to the renewal and change in us. What renewal and change might happen in us, that in turn might contribute to the renewal and change of me, and you, and every other blessed thing?

Luke 2: 22-38

Jesus Is Presented in the Temple

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;^d 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.^e ²⁷ Guided by the Spirit, Simeon^f 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^g took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹ “Master, now you are dismissing your servant^h 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 Simeonⁱ 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^j 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^k to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

^d Gk *Symeon*

^e Or *the Lord’s Christ*

^f Gk *In the Spirit, he*

^g Gk *he*

^h Gk *slave*

ⁱ Gk *Symeon*

^j Gk *Hanna*

^k Gk *him*

The Return to Nazareth

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.