

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Pettit
December 31, 2023
Luke 2: 22-40 “The Residue of Encounter”

We undecorated last night. The earliest we have done so in a while. But it is busy week coming up, and it seemed prudent to get that out of the way. The holidays come and go. We accumulate experiences and memories along the way. It was a different year for us with Abby now a college student. She bought presents for everyone all on her own, to our surprise and enjoyment. We were unsure what to get Hudson right down to the wire. Fischer was in the middle of all the Christmas day activity, and I'm pretty sure he had no idea what was going on, though he liked it. This is probably the last year we will have a reel tree. They have gotten expensive, and our tree this year was the driest I've ever seen, dropping needles like crazy the day we put it up, and is at this point a legitimate fire hazard.

Holidays come and go, stay the same in some ways and change in others. Holidays come and go, the extraordinary seasons succumbing to ordinary rhythms. We gain memories and experiences, renew our pleasant and quaint traditions, and yet time rolls on. In terms of our church and spiritual lives, we seek to retell and relive the story of God coming into the world through Christ. Not just so we won't forget it, not just to pass down the tradition to others. No, we seek to relive it and retell it so that we might experience and get in touch with that wonder and hope and encounter. But as you follow suit in the coming days by taking down your decorations, what lingers of that encounter? Have we managed some true encounter with the Christ, with our God who so greatly loved us?

Divine residue. That is a better sermon title this morning. The residue of encounter, like Moses having come off the mountain in the Exodus narrative, having encountered the Lord and he comes down glowing. They pack up and start walking through the desert, back to the ordinary but all the while Moses is glowing. A divine residue lingering from the encounter, that makes us a bit less ordinary even as life goes back to the ordinary.

That is why I am always fond of our gospel story, of Simeon and Anna. They come off a bit eccentric, they have lived these very principled and focused lives. And as the world turns, their joy and their center comes from a different place than all their peers. They live out of sync with their peers, out of sync with others' routines and expectations. When *they* see the Christ-child, there comes some deep satisfaction, fulfillment, hope. It is not just another day, it is a day that lingers for them.

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

Simeon has his own Moses-like encounter. 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 yearning.

“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.”

“My eyes have seen your salvation.” Others see only another baby being dedicated in the temple, no major deal, it happens every day. But not for Simeon. His whole demeanor and outlook on the future has changed, and will not change back easily. The residue of encounter.

He then speaks a word of blessing to the parents, a blessing that takes a prophetic tone, affirming the uniqueness of this child, and echoing the significance of what Simeon sees in the child: “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.”

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. According to the numbers here, 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.

An encounter with God's presence, a momentary glimpse of God's great purposes, and a residue that lingers from the encounter. That is what we see in Simeon and Anna, that is what we can hope for and seek in our Christmas celebrations. So that as the world goes back to its rhythms, it is not all the same for us. We carry something of that encounter with its hope, with its possibility.

I think of our poem, another personal favorite of mine. The title gives a context, one of great purpose and significance - to write a poem against the destruction of the natural world. No small task. It speaks of having some important purpose or cause. Have you ever been passionate about a cause and then be discouraged by how oblivious and care-free others are about it, not sharing or catching your vigor? Like Simeon waiting for God's fulfillment, like Ana giving her life to fasting and prayer.

The poet conveys the great heart and effort he takes to draw to light realities that warrant change and action, and after all that exertion of heart and language, 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, if reliving the story has made any difference in the world.

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. Encounter and the residue that lingers. 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, but the change that is possible seems to start with the change in him.

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 prayer.

Now you may be sitting here this morning and be like, darn it! I missed it. All that Christmas decorating and celebrating and I don't feel the residue of divine encounter. I guess I'll have to wait and try again next year.

Or maybe it begins even with the realization that encounter is possible, to desire such divine residue as we return to our normalcies. And maybe it goes back to that question of spiritual practices, the practices that cultivate openness and questions, and the desire to see how God is present and at work in us and around us. Maybe it starts with the desire to be changed ourselves, rather than worrying about

everybody else, at least for the moment. The willingness to pause and acknowledge God has come to you, is with you, has not given up.

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?

And all God's children said... Amen.

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.

The Return to Nazareth

^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*

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

Psalm 148 *Praise for God's Universal Glory*

- 1 Praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD from the heavens;
praise him in the heights!
- 2 Praise him, all his angels;
praise him, all his host!
- 3 Praise him, sun and moon;
praise him, all you shining stars!
- 4 Praise him, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens!
- 5 Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for he commanded and they were created.
- 6 He established them forever and ever;
he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.
- 7 Praise the LORD from the earth,
you sea monsters and all deeps,
- 8 fire and hail, snow and frost,
stormy wind fulfilling his command!
- 9 Mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars!
- 10 Wild animals and all cattle,
creeping things and flying birds!
- 11 Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!
- 12 Young men and women alike,
old and young together!
- 13 Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven.
- 14 He has raised up a horn for his people,
praise for all his faithful,
for the people of Israel who are close to him.
Praise the LORD!