

“When the Wait is Over”
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 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, WV
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Isaiah 61:10–62:3

¹⁰ I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

¹¹ For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations. ^{62:1} For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. ² The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give. ³ You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

Luke 2: 22 - 40

²²When 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”), ²⁴and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

²⁵Now 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. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. ²⁷Guided 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, ²⁸Simeon 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.”

³³And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴Then 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 ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed — and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

³⁶There 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, ³⁷then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸At 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.

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.

I don't know what it is exactly, but one of the traditions the Straight family, my family, has embraced is that we like to wait as long as possible to put up our Christmas tree. Maybe it's a desire to be traditional. I suspect many of you remember when the Christmas Tree arrived on Christmas Eve, or maybe on Christmas morning as a gift from Santa. If you don't remember, maybe you've seen them decorating the tree on Christmas Eve in "It's a Wonderful Life." Or "A Christmas Story," (known by many as the "BB Gun Movie").

Christmas began on December 25 and continued through to January 6,

If I were truly a traditional Presbyterian I wouldn't celebrate Christmas at all. In the Presbyterian Church, as in most reformed denominations one hundred years or so ago, the celebration of Christmas with feasts and presents given to one another was considered idolatry and distracting from the true point of faith, Jesus. And so, while the birth of Jesus was celebrated it was done so with worship, and worship alone. The day of Christmas was to continue like any other, bringing Glory to God through work and worship, word and deed.

But I'm not that traditional. I'm only partway traditional, and so we have a tree. We exchange gifts. We eat a special meal.

But, back to where I started. We like to wait as long as possible to put up our Christmas Tree. But inevitably, around the middle of December, I start to get antsy. It's hard to wait. I find myself gazing extra-long at the facebook photos of those who, thankfully, don't wait so long.

But I wait, because waiting is good. Waiting is important. Advent is, after all, about waiting.

Luke tells us, just after telling us that eight days after his birth Jesus was circumcised and formally named, Luke tells us that forty days after his birth, Mary properly went to the temple to complete her purification and dedicate her son.

These were not randomly chosen days, they were traditional days, days set forth in the laws of the Torah.

Forty days before a woman could return to the temple to be purified after the birth of a son. Eighty days if it was a daughter. Offering a lamb as sacrifice, or birds if the parents were not financially able to provide a lamb, as was the case for Mary and Joseph. All of this spelled out in Leviticus, Exodus, and Numbers.

Why are these details important? Because they were important to Mary and Joseph, they were a part of their faith. Luke wants us to know that for Mary and Joseph, for Jesus, for

all of the radical things to come, these were not people who dismissed what God had done up to that point. Jesus was raised in accordance with the law. Not as an accident, but as a way to learn and grow, as the text says, with wisdom and the favor of God.

And they are important, too, because the temple is where they meet Simeon and Anna.

Anna and Simeon had been waiting.

But not for a few days to put up a tree, they had been waiting their entire lives. Their entire lives to see God's promise fulfilled.

It gives new meaning to the understanding of patience.

Simeon, a man of faith who has been told by the Holy Spirit that he will not die before he has seen the Messiah. He trusted the Holy Spirit. And he waited.

Then Jesus, the baby, appeared with his parents.

Simeon knew, the moment they arrived. He sings a song of joy, a song sung by many choirs set to many different tunes across the years, the *Nunc Dimittis*, meaning "Now You Dismiss."

For now, Simeon proclaims, he can be dismissed. His work, his life is complete.

And there is Anna. Anna who, for decades, has been the model of a righteous widow. Praying, fasting, worshipping, serving was not a pastime, it was her sustenance. She, too, recognizes Jesus when she sees him, and speaks of the wonders that are to come for Jerusalem. She doesn't just speak, she proclaims.

Dr. Bonnie Thurston, New Testament Scholar and West Virginia Native, in writing about Anna describes her as one of the first evangelists and says, "Clearly, Anna is more than an old woman who has nothing better to do than loiter around the Temple. She personifies the long history of an expectant people, those who have looked for the fulfillment of God's promises.... Anna has recognized Jesus as the Christ and proclaimed that fact. To paraphrase the Roman letter, she has believed with her heart and confessed with her mouth (Rom 10:10).¹

How did they know? How did they know this baby was the baby, the one God had promised, the one for whom they had been waiting?

¹ Thurston, Bonnie Bowman. 2001. "Who was Anna?: Luke 2:36-38." *Perspectives In Religious Studies* 28, no. 1: 47-55. ATLASerials, Religion Collection, EBSCOhost (accessed December 30, 2017).

What did they see?

My friend and colleague, the Rev. Meg Peery-McLaughlin asks it in this way,

This text revolves around what these old wrinkled, clouded eyes see. The text says Simeon was *looking* forward to the consolation of Israel, Simeon was told that he would not see death before he had *seen* the Lord's Messiah, Simeon says *my eyes have seen your salvation*. He and Anna then proclaim and praise what they've seen. Anna particularly proclaims it to all who were *looking for the redemption of Jerusalem*.

Pastor John Stendahl writes:

"Picture the old man with the baby in his arms He stands chuckling with giddy joy, or perhaps he gazes with streaming tears on his cheeks, or is lost in transfixed wonder; in whatever way, he is so very happy. Then he says that this is enough now, he is ready to die. He has seen salvation and he can depart in peace.

But what has he seen, really? It's just a little child in his arms, a powerless, speechless newcomer to the world. Whatever salvation this baby might work is still only a promise and a hope; whatever teaching he might offer will remain hidden for many years. Nothing has happened yet. Herod still sits on his throne and Caesar governs from afar. The world looks as it did before."²

How did Simeon and Anna know what to look for? How did their old eyes recognize the fulfillment of God's promises, even in the midst of largely unchanged world?

When I was little, around 4 years old, my parents realized I wasn't seeing like I was supposed to see. And so, they took me to the eye doctor. Two eye doctors. The first said that my eyes weren't very good. My left eye was worse. And that I would likely be that way for the rest of my life.

My mother was not satisfied with this answer and took me to another Dr.. Dr. Fogle. Dr. Fogle looked at my eyes, the same eyes the other Dr. had seen, and said that my eyes weren't great. My left eye was worse. But that, if he put a patch on my good eye and we got to work there was a fair chance my eyes would improve. We stuck with Dr. Fogle.

What did Dr. Fogle see that the other Dr. hadn't? I don't know. But the patch went onto my good eye, forcing me to start seeing with my not good eye.

I thought the patch was cool. But I hated what it made me do. It was hard. My left eye was my lazy eye. It wasn't used to having to work so hard. There were times when simply couldn't focus well enough to see.

But my eyes did improve. And over the next twenty years they continued to improve until I no longer needed, and still don't need, glasses.

² John K. Stendahl, "Holding Promises" *The Christian Century*, December 4-17, 2002, p. 17.

But my left eye is still weaker. And if I'm tired and have lots of reading to do, I find myself covering my left eye, just to make the reading a bit easier. I'll always, naturally, lean on my right eye more.

Is that the way it is with faithful seeing, too?

What keeps us from seeing what Simeon and Anna saw? It's not that they had rose-colored glasses on. They knew that this Messiah didn't bring all joy and that there would be sorrow in his life, sorrow in his family's life. They were realistic, and yet saw Jesus.

Meg Peery McLaughlin again,

"Maybe it's easier for our eyes to see all that isn't saved yet. Maybe it's easier for us to focus on how we can't quite make out how the story is going to unfold. Maybe it's easier to look at all in the world that seems damnable. There's plenty to go around: gun violence and greed, hunger and hopelessness.

I think what Simeon asks is that we train our eyes to see salvation.
 Peek through those old eyes to see Jesus.
 Force our weak eyes to search, to really look,
 to peer out into the world to see signs of God's promises,
 vulnerable and small though they may be."

As we stand at the beginning of a new year, what will our eyes see?

Where, in your own life, do you see the world as it is, a world of Herods and Ceasars and where can you begin to train your eyes and hearts to see salvation? Seeing God's promises unfolding?

How might that make all the difference?

How might that be the hope for which we are waiting?

One thing we know for sure. God is waiting for us to see. God is waiting to be seen, just as God sees you. And me. And us. With eyes of hope and eyes of love. Eyes of courage and eyes of justice.

Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God.