

Luke 2:22-40: Simeon & Anna

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 (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons."

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. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. 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, saying,

Master, now you are 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.

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

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 for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. 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.

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

The Word of God, for the people of God...

The shepherds, the angels and the heavenly hosts are all gone now, and Joseph and Mary have a baby to raise. As devout Jews, they took him first for circumcision and naming and now, after the appropriate time has passed, they've come to the temple in Jerusalem for Mary's purification and Jesus' presentation as a firstborn male to be consecrated to God. This is truly a sacramental moment.

Jerusalem and the temple are significant throughout Luke's Gospel, and it's important to Luke that Jesus is seen as one who was raised in faithful observance of Jewish law. He makes that point in today's reading; in fact, while Luke uses the word "law" nine times in his Gospel, five of them are found in this passage. Jesus was raised in full obedience to the Law of Moses, within a religious tradition, (says Alan Culpepper), that praises and honors God in all of life, when you rise up and when you lie down, in your going out and your coming in, in the way you dress and what you eat. And Fred Craddock has observed, "Later in life Jesus would be in tension with some interpreters of his tradition, but his position would not be that of an outsider."

Culpepper has observed that this ceremony of presentation expresses Mary and Joseph's "deepest awarenesses and commitments." They "saw God at work in events they had experienced. They lived within a covenant community and they sought to fulfill vows they had made as well as to introduce their son into that covenant community."

This Holy Family, then, is devout and observant. And they are poor, so their offering is simple, just two turtledoves instead of a lamb. But they also offer, or present, their child, Jesus, who would later be called a "lamb." In the temple, at least in the outer court where women were allowed, they encounter two old

saints who represent, in Fred Craddock's words, "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." They embody what have been called "the wonders of waiting," an art lost to us today, patience. It is to this covenant community that Mary and Joseph introduce Jesus.

Perhaps Mary's first amazement was that Simeon addressed her at all, since it was unusual for men to talk with women they didn't know, especially in public. (Won't this be exactly the sort of thing that will get Jesus into trouble one day?) Luke tells us that Simeon has been assured by the Holy Spirit that he won't die until he sees the Messiah, so he clearly has some power backing him up. Sure enough, when the big moment arrives, Simeon has the insight, the gift of recognizing what he has been waiting for all along. What he holds may be "just" a baby, but he sees the salvation of God, glory for the people of Israel and light for the gentiles, not just long ago but today, not just for himself and his people, but for all people, all the children of God.

James C. Howell writes of this scene: "How lovely, how tender, the way aged Simeon, the frailties of his years draped over him, cradles the infant Jesus in his arms. Imagine holding in your arms this most wanted child, the hope of the ages, the yearning of your entire life." Ironically, God didn't come down as a powerful emperor or a rich man: "God came down," Howell writes, "not to thrash evildoers or crush the Romans, but as an infant, to elicit love, to nurture tenderness." Like Mary and Zechariah before him, Simeon breaks into a beautiful song, praising God and asking to be released now from his duty as watchman ("like Habakkuk before him," William Herzog writes, "standing at his post, keeping watch and waiting for the Lord"); he asks to be released from his waiting for the "consolation of Israel," for he has beheld it before his very eyes. He can now die in peace, a peace we'd call *shalom*.

As it turns out, Luke often uses "sight" in his Gospel as a metaphor for perceiving the Word of God, for "getting it" when it comes to faith. So this Simeon is a good example for us of someone who sees with his heart and soul and mind; it's as if he stood there and felt the presence of God's promise about to

be fulfilled. He was open, as we should be, to what is yet to come. Of course, Simeon also "sees" beyond the beautiful baby to a shadow side, to the opposition that Jesus will experience, a division that will cut like a sword through the heart of Mary. Fred Craddock says this beautifully: "Jesus will bring truth to light and in so doing throw all who come in contact with him into a crisis of decision (a beautiful truth!). In that decision, rising and falling, life and death, result.

Anna, too, has the gift of seeing, of recognizing God's hand at work doing not so much a new thing but keeping an old promise in a new day. We may not get to hear her words directly but we hear that she went around praising God and telling everyone all about the great thing God was doing in their midst, the great thing she had waited for so faithfully. (It's interesting that Simeon addresses the couple, but Anna goes out and spreads the good news, even at her age.) Even as she's "ready to move offstage," Fred Craddock says, she knows that the new thing God is doing "is not really new, because hope is always joined to memory, and the new is God keeping an old promise." This sounds a bit like my message yesterday as we honored Al. However, like Simeon, Anna understands what a blessing is, and it has been the central hope of her life, the focus of her heart: "God's blessing,"

What do you think about this vision thing, this thing of seeing within and beyond, of seeing with our hearts and souls and minds? Think for a moment about our hope for God's reign to be experienced right here, in our midst, all around us, about our deepest longing when we are poor, or oppressed and marginalized, excluded and pushed around, when we're sick and suffering, when we're depressed and downcast, when our hearts are grieving or weary and we think we can't go on, not one more mile, maybe not one more step, and then, in a moment, we are lifted up, strengthened, healed, loved, accepted, chosen. This can happen in the most amazing ways.

I remember a story on TV several Christmases ago about a young boy who had been diagnosed with cancer and was given a grant by the Make-a-Wish Foundation to make his wish come true. He decided instead to see a different vision of what he could do with his time and energy and this monetary gift, and decided to create a foundation himself to give toys to other children who had

cancer. When other people heard about it, they sent lots of donations. And there he was, on the TV screen, taking the toys and carrying good news and comfort and healing, to young, hurting people whose pain he understood and whose needs he saw with a vision far greater than most.

Like Simeon and Anna, like this young boy, we can speak out the good news, not just for ourselves, but for every one of God's children. Like Simeon and Anna, we can see beyond what's right before our eyes to the future unfolding of God's plan, to the promises of God being fulfilled here and now, and in the days ahead. They looked at a baby, and saw grace and hope. While we've been inspired and blessed by the songs of Zechariah, Mary, and Simeon, they're about more than what happens in church, during our religious observances. Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan devote a chapter of their book, The First Christmas, to these songs about the fulfillment of our hope: "These hymns proclaim and remind us that the God of the Bible is concerned about the whole of life....this language is about how the world should be." For Crossan and Borg, these hymns from the Bible "combine what we often separate, namely, religion and politics, spirituality and a passion for this world," and they recognize that Jesus "decisively reveals and incarnates the passion of God as disclosed in the Law and the Prophets--the promise and hope for a very different kind of world from the world of Pharaoh and Caesar, the world of domination and empire." Whether we are Simeon and Anna long ago, or the people of God today, we recognize with our hearts "the one who reveals God's dream for this world."

What would it mean for the United Methodist Church to recognize the newborn baby as "the one who reveals God's dream for this world"? Perhaps we see only the baby right now, and we need to be able to dream of what is yet to come. Think about our children's children, or their children's children, the ones who will someday come through the doors of our churches, long after we have gone to rest in the arms of God. We are their ancestors, and they are our heirs. Those heirs of ours will look back and hear the story of how we, in these days long ago, dreamed of them and built up this great church to be a place of warmth and open welcome, a place of justice and love, a place where we all move over and make room for every single person, a place that can be a home where we sincerely tell each new person, "We've been waiting for you, and now you're at home with us!"

These are uncertain, even scary times, here on the brink of a new year. Alas, extravagant hospitality offends the religious sensibilities of many people, but sometimes, the church finds that it must be faithful in new directions even if those directions are painful and terrifying. Yes, maybe there are those who are sometimes scratching their heads at us, and questioning what we are doing and where we are going. But these are hopeful times, too, because we have glimpsed the promises of God unfolding before our eyes, and we're looking beyond the uncertainties and the fears and the criticisms; we're setting off on this journey with our eyes and our souls and our hearts and our minds fixed on Jesus and on the very example he set for us in his own life, when he welcomed all of God's children, and healed them, and fed them, and called them to follow him.

Perhaps a baby resembles that unfolding of God's promises because we have no idea what will happen in the future, what and who a baby will grow up to be.

Like Simeon and Anna long ago, we acknowledge the reality beyond our eyes even as we behold the beauty and the mystery of a new child, a new person, a bearer of God's peace and hope for the world. If they sang God's praises so long ago, how can we do otherwise on each bright and hope-filled morning?

Sources:
Al Ravenhall's Memorial Service
Kate Huey, freely adapted