

Pastor's Message – 12/31/23
Luke 2:22-40

More and more I'm seeing, as you probably are too, many more older people in television commercials. Business and marketing have long caught on to the idea that more and more baby boomers are retiring and they have money to spend. Older people have become valuable in a way they have never been before.

Not that older people have never been valuable, for we hear in our Bible reading today just how valuable two senior citizens were in the life of Jesus and in the ongoing Christmas story. Simeon, as we heard today, upon seeing Jesus as He is presented for His purification in the Temple, takes the child in his arms and proclaims, "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 the revelation of the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:29-32, NRSV).

Simeon offers a blessing to the Holy Family as he prophesies about the destiny of Jesus, saying that it is connected to the rising and the falling of many in Israel. In other words, Simeon connects the redemption of Israel to the person of Jesus the Christ. He sees in this child the hope of Israel and the salvation of all people, including the Gentiles. His birth initiates a turning of the whole world toward God's kingdom.

Also present in the Temple is a woman named Anna. Women are far less represented in the Bible than men, especially women with names. So, whenever a woman with a name is part of the story, it is important to pay attention.

There is a sense in which Anna's interaction with Jesus parallels that of Simeon. She, like Simeon, is a devout follower of Judaism. Luke names her as a prophet, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She is old and is a widow and, as such, has now committed her life to constant worship, fasting, and prayer in the Temple. And so, like Simeon, she is present when Mary and Joseph bring Jesus for his purification.

It's hard to know what it was that Simeon and Anna saw, or felt, or experienced, when they came into direct contact with Jesus on that day in the Temple. Whatever it was, it was life changing. It caused Simeon to say he would now be able to die in peace. And it propelled Anna to speak about the hope for redemption she now knew as a result of meeting this child.

I suspect both Anna and Simeon have seen a lot of babies come and go in the temple. Year after year, one baby after another has come by as their families come to make a sacrifice. Sometimes the baby comes back as an older child when the family brings another baby or a cousin. Large family groups come to give praise to God, and small families move quietly by.

Like the pictures our friends send us of new babies all wrapped in the same striped hospital blanket, all with the same cap on their small heads, babies look alike. How did Anna and Simeon know that this was the baby they had waited for? In fact, how did they even know that salvation would come as a baby and not as a fiery prophet or charismatic priest?

The two elderly people represent Israel's longing. Simeon greets the baby Jesus as the completion of his hope. Anna speaks of him to others who were also waiting for the Messiah. But right after this story, Jesus disappears for about twelve years.

Just when we find ourselves finally focused on a child, the tradition of the church seems remarkably uninterested. Out of four gospels, only Luke and Matthew give us any information about Jesus' actual birth; only Luke gives a few scanty details about incidents in Jesus' childhood. The official gospels say very little about Jesus' childhood or his early adulthood.

This is all we know: Jesus was circumcised, ritually dedicated at the temple in Jerusalem, and then taken back to Nazareth to grow up. About Jesus' first twelve years, his "hidden years" as scholars call them, we know only that Jesus "grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him" (Lk 2.40). That's it. Luke gives one more story of Jesus' childhood -- his visit to the temple and his precocious performance before the teachers there (vv.41-47).

We see very little about Jesus from His birth until His baptism by John in the Jordan River. Today, Simeon held the Child in his arms and saw the salvation of Israel.

Whom do we see? Who is Jesus to you?

Stephen Prothero, an American scholar of religion, authored a book a while ago in which he reflected back and traced how Americans have seen Jesus in the past. Over the years of America's history, Prothero says, "Jesus . . . has been interpreted and reinterpreted, construed and misconstrued, in the messy midrash of American culture." Prothero identifies four different "Jesuses" that have shown up in American Christianity.

Those Jesuses within Christianity itself include first, the "Enlightened Sage." This was the Jesus Thomas Jefferson envisioned. When he was president, Jefferson spent a few evenings with an exacto knife cutting out of the gospels all the references to miracles and Jesus' divinity, ending up with a slim volume he called *The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth*. Jefferson's Jesus prayed to God and believed in an afterlife, but he did not die for anyone's sins. In fact, that Jesus did not come to save, but to teach us the way to live.

Another Jesus is what Prothero calls the "Sweet Savior" who was a product of the evangelist fervor of the 19th and early 20th centuries. During that era, the style of preaching changed from teaching sermons to storytelling, and the life of Jesus, often embellished by the preacher, became a central subject. The call of evangelism was to an intimate walk with Jesus — so intimate, in fact, that preachers felt compelled to talk more about Jesus as a buddy whom we could come to know and hang out with, rather than either an historical figure or an object of faith.

To make this work, this Jesus had to be described as approachable and friendly, meek and mild rather than harsh and demanding. That, coupled with the fact that a lot of religious training took place in the home under the teaching of women, led to a viewing of Jesus as one embodying the more feminine qualities — warmth, caring, humility, piety and so forth. The religion of this Jesus was not so much to be *thought* about as one to be *felt*. Hymns like "In the Garden" or "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" are typical of this era. Jesus is someone with whom you might have a meeting in a place where the "dew is still on the roses."

A third American version of Jesus, says Prothero, is the "Manly Redeemer," a muscular reaction to the girly-man Sweet Savior. Beginning in the late 19th century and elbowing his way into the 20th century, Jesus as a testosterone-powered hero came to the fore. Hymns like "Onward, Christian Soldiers" exemplify this image. This Manly Redeemer was no more linked to the historic creeds of the church than was the Sweet Savior, but at least he was more vigorous — a Savior with sex appeal. This Jesus brought with him strenuous demands, and he was the one who was ready to lead Christians to war against the social ills of the culture.

The fourth and most recent incarnation of the American Jesus that Prothero highlights is the “Superstar.” In the 1960s, a Jesus movement began among the youth counterculture, and some started to see Jesus as a revolutionary, a leader of an underground Christian liberation movement. When that movement fizzled in the ‘70s, that image of Jesus survived, and became the subject of the rock musicals *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell*. He was thereafter adopted by rock groups and rap singers and heavy metal bands as an upbeat guy who offers an experiential high that is better than drugs. Eventually this Jesus morphed into the figure on whom is built Jesus T-shirts, bumper stickers, posters, and other collectables, much of the Christian music industry, as well as some seeker-sensitive mega-churches.

Simeon looked at Jesus and saw the salvation of Israel! As with Simeon, Anna seems to have an immediate, visceral response to the child. She senses something in him, something that connects with her very soul. She responds by praising God. But she doesn’t just praise God. Luke says she also speaks about her experience to others, although he does not tell us what she said. He only describes her words as being offered to those who were looking for the redemption of Israel.

Note, however, that Simeon did not rely on his own hunch about this baby being the promised Messiah. Rather there were two critical things. First, when the gospel writer Luke tells us that Simeon was “looking forward to the consolation of Israel,” Luke is saying that Simeon was steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures. The term “the consolation of Israel” derives from references in the book of Isaiah to God comforting the people by redeeming them (Isaiah 40:1-2; 52:9). So first, Simeon was basing his pronouncement about Jesus on Scripture.

And second, Luke tells us that Simeon was being guided by the Holy Spirit.

Those two sources of understanding — the outward one of Scripture and the inward one of God’s direct inspiration — still stand today as means of deciding who Jesus is. So obviously, if you are going to take a razor to the gospels as Jefferson did, you’re not going to get the whole picture. The first place to look to decide who Jesus is is in the Bible itself.

In that regard, the question of who Jesus is isn’t that difficult. The gospels, if we look at them in total, give us some basic answers:

- Jesus is the one, who, after he was baptized, lived up to his baptism every day by the way he honored and obeyed the heavenly Father.
- Jesus is the one who proclaimed the good news of God, preaching repentance and announcing that the kingdom of God had begun.
- Jesus is the one who was so filled with compassion that though it sometimes seemed to get in the way of his proclamation ministry, he still took time and energy to heal the sick.
- Jesus was the one who embodied the very authority of God, and whose life embroidered the deeds of God on the fabric of human experience. This was so evident that people who heard him commented on it.
- Jesus was the one who did not shun bad company, but who called them also to repentance and a place in the kingdom.
- Jesus is the one who repeatedly withdrew to pray.
- Jesus is the one in whom his contemporaries recognized a special connection with God — a recognition that led Peter to call him “the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16).
- Jesus is the one who went to the cross, understanding that in doing so, he was being obedient to the will of God and was doing something profound for humankind.

- Jesus is the one who arose victorious over death on Easter and is thus living today.

Those are the things the Bible tells us directly. We may not understand the implications of all that we can say about Jesus from Scripture, but those things are enough to help us frame an answer to the question, “Who do you say Jesus is?”, an answer that includes the words “example,” “teacher,” “guide” and “Savior.”

Have we, like Simeon and Anna, seen in Jesus the hope of Israel and the salvation of all people, including the Gentiles? What does that look like? What does it feel like? How has it changed our lives?

It may be hard to know how to describe what it was that you saw, or felt, or experienced the first time you came face-to-face with our Savior. Hopefully, it changed your life. Hopefully, it helped you to be at peace. And hopefully, it has propelled you to speak about the hope for redemption you now know as a result of meeting Jesus.

Simeon and Anna did not wait because “there was nothing else to do,” but because they had hope. Therefore, their waiting was not a vacuum, devoid of activity. They worked and worshiped, performed acts of justice and prayer. While they waited, they defied the darkness by serving God, because it was for the light of *God* that they waited. They did what they could, and they waited.

Many (most?) have now returned to their homes after Christmas. We have moved back into the regular patterns and rhythms of our lives. But have we been changed by our encounter with Jesus over the past month and through Advent? Are we the same people that we were on December 3? Hopefully, we, too, like Jesus have grown in wisdom and strength.

You never know when, or for how long, like Simeon and Anna, we will have to wait to see the Messiah. You never know just when Christmas will come. It might happen on the 25th of December, and again it might not. For some Christmas will come early; for others it may be later, even into next year. And for those who don’t prepare, who aren’t watching and waiting, Christmas may not come at all. We’re referring to God coming into our lives in a meaningful, unexpected way not just the human celebration we schedule for an exact day and time. The message of scripture is to be ready, be watchful for God’s coming into your life. You just never know when it will happen.

Anna and Simeon experienced the presence of God coming to them late in their lives. Those experiences may happen to us every day, but how often do we recognize them. Perhaps not very often. And how to live in between them.

The older people in our Congregation, like Simeon and Anna, have a unique and valuable ministry to us. In the story of Simeon and Anna, there is great hope that God can come in surprising ways at all stages of our lives. That is why it is so valuable to be watching and waiting, actively waiting, and preparing ourselves, for Christmas to come every day. It can happen to all of us. It is happening in our lives: the coming of the Messiah if we are waiting and watching.

Simeon and Anna are remembered in part because they were able to recognize the true identity of the promised One when many in Israel never came close. Simeon and Anna had the ability to hang on. Their perseverance paid off. This passage speaks to the importance of ritual and tradition. Sometimes life consists of just doing the same thing over and over again. Christmas is probably the best example of ritual and tradition. It’s something we do and go through year after year. Most years, nothing much changes. Most people certainly experience little change, except for a few days of temporary respite from the other routines of life. And yet, we continue to have hope. Who knows, this may be the year that Christmas really comes for us.