

“Waiting with Simeon”

Introduction: We find ourselves just beginning, in the church year, the season called “epiphany,” a season which runs up to Ash Wednesday (Feb. 22 this year) and the season called Lent. One writer suggests that a good synonym for epiphany might be the phrase “ah-ha.” For, epiphany is a season in which we seek to come to a deeper understanding and awareness of the person of Jesus and the universal scope of his mission. This morning we’re going to let a man named Simeon help us reflect on that birth. Before we meet him, let’s hear how Luke introduces him to us, picking up the story shortly after the shepherds had left the manger, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen. [READ]

I. Waiting

A. From what I’ve heard and seen, I’m assuming that you are a people who don’t like to wait. From Instagram and instant messaging, from fast food to fast passes, from instant coffee to instant credit, you’ve structured your life to be able to move on to the next thing as quickly as possible. Now, don’t get me wrong. I don’t find waiting all that pleasant either. My name is Simeon, and as Luke puts me into the story of Jesus, he says that I have been waiting . . . for what? For the consolation of Israel.

This fancy word recognizes that all was not right with the world in my day. Roman troops patrolled the streets, a crazed ruler named Herod was wreaking havoc throughout the region, the hungry and homeless were in need of aid. Pagan practices were everywhere; people were even worshipping the emperor as savior and lord! Equally important was the reminder of the prophet Isaiah not to point our fingers at others but to recognize that each of us was like a sheep who had gone astray from God’s way, that the lifeboat God had sent in the people of Abraham and his descendants had gotten into trouble and was itself in need of rescue, that all of our kings had come to nothing and that we needed a true king, a good shepherd, and a right sacrifice to bring us back into a right relationship with the God of the universe and those around us.

B. And so I was waiting for God to come, in the person of his long-anticipated Messiah, his anointed one, to make things right for his people, to make things right for the world. Do you know what I mean? Given what I read in your newsfeeds, I’m sure you do! But waiting, you know, is not all bad. I’ve learned that it can be helpful in unearthing what lies deep in our hearts. Waiting can get us to face the roots of our motivations, fears, and idols as we come to learn that God is not a genie who is simply there to make our life better, somehow. Waiting means that the past is behind you, the future is uncertain, and so the present can feel very much out of control. You wonder if God is out there, or ...? It’s maybe why one of your writers calls waiting the “crucible of transformation,” as it becomes one of those spaces where we are simply called to trust that God is with us, and in control, even if we cannot see how. Or, as one of your divines has put it, “trust in the slow work of God” (Teilhard de Chardin).

C. I was joined in my waiting by a woman named Anna who also came regularly to the Temple. She, too, was waiting for God to make things right. She had seen much heartache in her life, not the least of which was the death of her young husband after only seven years of marriage. Many would have been bitter and angry at God, but she continued to trust that God was with her, drawing near to him through worship, prayer, and fasting.

II. Singing

A. And then one day we saw him. God had promised me I would, before I died, but if I were honest, I wasn't always so sure. Living by faith isn't always easy! But that day something, someone—it had to have been the Spirit—moved me into the courts of the temple. This, by the way, was not a quiet place but one in which there was a lot of activity: prayers were being offered, psalms were being sung, sacrifices were being purchased, and people were coming and going. In the midst of all that, I saw a young couple with the sacrifices in hand needed to purify a mother 40 days after giving birth, and to present their son to the Lord. Prior to this, as Luke confirms, on the eighth day of his life they had him circumcised, the act – like your baptism – that brought him into the covenant community of God's people. Now, his parents were living out the spiritual practices of that people.

B. So let me just say at this point that while we're talking about a unique child—Jesus, the Lord's Messiah—don't miss that he was nurtured by faithful parents, parents who sought to hear God's voice, who sought to follow God's word, who sought to raise their child within the community of God's people, who sought to grow their child on a diet of God's wisdom and grace. If that was important for the parents of Jesus, how much more important it is for parents today. As I heard while eavesdropping on your baptismal liturgy, at this point in the lives of these little children, it's actually less about them and more about the promises you as parents, and you as a community of faith, have made to raise and nurture these children in the faith, that they might have a spiritual scaffolding on which to construct their lives as they grow and face the challenges the world will throw at them. Like for Mary and Joseph, it is a privileged, and extremely important role, that you all play.

C. Back to Jesus. When I saw the child, I couldn't help but take him in my arms, and then I couldn't help but break out into song! This was the one, I knew without a doubt, who would be the savior of the world, the true king, the good shepherd, and the right sacrifice. He would fulfill the promises God made through Israel, and would include the Gentiles in his people. He would reveal that God, wonderfully, does not desire to be hidden but to be known and enjoyed by all. Talk about an epiphany! And as if to confirm what I was experiencing, at just that moment, Anna arrived at our side and began praising God and talking to anyone who would listen about all he had done and would do in and through this child. I knew at that moment that I could die in peace, whenever my time came.

D. Now, although my time of waiting had come to a joyful end, the Spirit also led me to see that not all would welcome the arrival of this new king. You cannot be neutral to the light. One either welcomes the savior, or not. Many either love darkness too much or are unwilling to admit their need to be rescued by someone outside of themselves. It would all lead to a sword—the image I was given—that would pierce his mother's soul as she would watch him suffer and die. But she would also come to know, as would many others, that he was pierced for our transgressions, as Isaiah explains, so that we would not have to be. We can now joyfully come into the presence of a holy and righteous God without the need of lambs or doves or pigeons; the Lamb of God, Jesus, is all we need. And we can be sent out by him in the power of his Spirit to love and serve the world with the same kind of sacrificial love that he showered on us.

So as you find yourself waiting, in whatever the situation, may you rest confidently in what God, through Jesus, has done for you in the past. May you be secure in what he promises to do in the future. And may you be alert, in the present, to the nudges and whispers of the Spirit as you grow in wisdom and grace.