

It's a Start

by

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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; ³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³²a 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.

It's that time of year again, you know. It's the Sunday after Christmas Day. Given that I'm preaching to an entirely empty building, the pews are just a tad bit barer today than they would be if folks were still allowed in the sanctuary. But even if we all of a sudden could have people in the building, I wouldn't blame you for not being here.

Recognizing the peculiarities of this year, it's fair to say everyone is exhausted. Nothing about this Christmas is normal. Nothing about 2020 has been normal. If you are tuning in, and you still have a sinking feeling in your stomach and are simply doing what it takes to survive one day at a time; take a deep breath, and let me remind you that you are not alone.

Because when I say this morning that everyone is exhausted I also mean the characters of our text. Mary and Joseph are bone-tired. They have experienced a whirlwind of physical and emotional fatigue these last several months.

It started with a divine promise that what God was up to in the birth of their child would be unlike anything God had done before. Which sounded good at first, until they began thinking about the limitless possibility of those implications.

The couple has made the journey from Nazareth to Jerusalem, to Bethlehem, and now back to Jerusalem all within the span of forty odd days. They are sore. Their sole donkey is so worn out he's about to go on strike. And now they have to get all gussied up to bring their baby into the temple to be presented.

You know how it is, tired and in a hurry on a big day. Mary forgot her good scarf at home, Joseph needs to shave, and their solitary prayer is for Jesus not to throw up on his one good gown, or have an accident in the only clean cloth diaper they have left. Their parents and in-laws couldn't make the journey, so they'll be watching on Facebook Live,

and Mary can already hear her mother-in-law offering helping advice on how things could have gone better.

It's one of those days. It's one of those years.

What could we possibly hear as good news in this text this morning? This story of two elders speaking words of blessing on the baby Jesus, what does it have to do with us?

Honestly, it's all a bit much to hear. Which I suspect is how Mary and Joseph felt when the devout old man took up the infant child in his arms. Simeon told God that God could take him home now, because Simeon's eyes have finally seen in the life of this child, the salvation that is for *all* people, Jew and Gentile alike.

Former BMPC pastor Bill Arnold, writes of Simeon that he “is an old man carrying a vast hope.” He goes on, “while this aging saint rejoices in this particular moment, he represents a wider reality. At the birth of every child, there is a wider company of persons who have hopes and fears for the future. Some will remain silent and watch from afar. Others, like Simeon, will step forward and be devoted enough and courageous enough to tell parents what lies deep in their hearts.”¹

So Simeon turns toward Mary—that tired teenage mother—and with a poignant look on his face, he prophesies, saying, “this child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel.” And then adds with a sadness that sticks to the back of his throat, “and you too shall be pierced to the heart.” What Mary pondered in that moment is anyone's guess.

Likewise the prophet Anna, a constant presence at the Temple, declared the boy's redeeming power to basically anyone who was within

¹ Arnold, William V. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011) 168.

earshot. With the spiritual wisdom of age, her words are offered for all who seek the redemption of Jerusalem.

That's a lot of expectation to heap on a child. That's a big promise to announce over a baby born in a fairly insignificant town in the backwaters of a Roman province. Reminds me of a couple I knew back in my hometown who were seemingly so convinced that their only son was destined to play in the NFL that they held him back a year in middle school so he wouldn't have to compete with another rising local for the top spot on the team.

Last I heard, the one held back works for an oil company somewhere in the south, and the other rising talent still lives in our hometown, painting houses.

A lot of pressure to put on a kid.

The promises spoken over the baby Jesus were no small hopes. He is called *the consolation of Israel*. The one for whom the people have waited, the one for whom all of history has waited, whether history knew it or not. The stakes are high.

One biblical scholar notes that in Simeon's word to Mary, "Israel's consolation and the salvation of Gentiles will not be without great cost. Jesus will bring truth to light, and in so doing, throw all who come in contact with him into a crisis of decision."²

From this choice it seems, falling and rising, living and dying will result. It will be in this child, that the greatest capacity for life will be measured. How does the life of Jesus help us gauge the living of our own? Do we live in a way that moves us closer to God's call or farther? This crisis of decision is made known for the first time right here.

² Craddock, Fred B. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Luke*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990) 39.

V. 33 tells us that Mary and Joseph were amazed at what they were hearing, because perhaps for the first time, the things they heard from angelic messengers, the thoughts they had cradled in their hearts and minds, were now being proclaimed aloud by flesh and blood people. The verb here in this verse in Greek also suggests confusion. If Mary and Joseph were confused by what they were hearing, who could blame them?

Frederick Buechner says the promise of the Bible is something like this, “Here is the world: beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don’t be afraid.” And we have plenty of reasons to be afraid, especially in this last year dominated by fear.

As much as I find what Simeon and Anna proclaim to be beautiful, haunting, and truthful, I want to look away. I don’t want to put so much pressure on Jesus, or his parents for that matter. It’s hard enough getting my kids dressed with both socks in the mornings for school, let alone assuming messianic expectations for them.

But it is their confidence which breaks into the fearful sounds of this year that rattles me the most. The God who exists outside of time and space has entered it.

Fred Craddock writes of this passage, “God is doing something new. But it is not really new, because hope is always joined to memory, and the new is God’s keeping an old promise.”³ God had promised to make a way; to deliver, to save and redeem. This is it.

Now is as good a time as ever to think about the new thing God continues to do in Jesus. It will soon be 2021, and of course we can’t get there fast enough. But a new year brings new challenges, and the daily groanings of creation did not stop just because the pandemic happened.

³ Craddock, 40.

In fact, in some cases the groanings only grew. More hungry bellies. More shattered savings. More debt because of payday loans and other insidious lending practices. More violence suffered by black and brown bodies. More homelessness. More poverty. More family and small businesses destroyed. More dying without proper healthcare.

Not to mention the fear. My Lord, we've been taught to fear just about everything this year. It's exhausting. And if you want my opinion, which no one's here to protest anyway, it's fear that's the real enemy of faith, not doubt.

It's fear that causes us to stop trusting, to close ourselves off, to circle the wagons, to become jaded and petty and small-minded. Fear can do horrible things to people. But fear doesn't get the last word. Especially not today.

That wonderful Presbyterian poet Ann Weems wrote once,
The night is still dark and a procession of Herods still terrorize the earth, killing the children to stay in power.
The world still knows its Herods,
but it also knows men and women who pack their dreams safely in their hearts and set off towards Bethlehem, faithful against all odds, undeterred by fatigue or rejection, to kneel to a child.⁴

Weems reminds us that it is Simeon and Anna who proclaim a word against all the Herods past and present, all that which threatens to destroy us, or make us afraid. Whatever God is up to in Jesus will make a mockery of fear.

⁴ Ann Weems, *Kneeling in Bethlehem: Poetry for Advent and Christmas* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010) 55.

But this new thing presents us with a decision. How then shall *we* live? Will we work to bring God's kingdom closer, or will our fears rule the day?

It's a lot of pressure to put on a child. It's a lot of pressure to put on us. But we need not worry about how long it takes us to lean into God's eternal *Yes*. It seems to have taken Jesus his whole life. V.40 says, "the child grew and became strong; filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him." It takes time.

If all you can manage to do today is press play on your screen, and hear this Good News, it's a start. Do not be afraid. For I bring you good news of great joy which shall be for all people. Amen.