

Journey to Bethlehem 2: *Through Inner Peace*

by
The Reverend Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
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Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. ²The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. ³His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; ⁴but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. ⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. ⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. ⁷The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. ⁹They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. ¹⁰On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Luke 2:21-38

²¹After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. 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.

It may seem like we're getting ahead of ourselves on this second Sunday of Advent jumping past the birth of Jesus to his eight-day-old presentation in the Temple. But under the banner of this Advent sermon series, *Journey to Bethlehem*, the story of Anna and Simeon is a worthy place to pause as we consider their unique itinerary. Last Sunday we considered the centuries long journey of ancient Israel who came through the dark decades of the Babylonian exile. Today we journey with two individuals whose deep faith and inner peace helps them recognize in the face of baby Jesus the hope they had been waiting for.

Given the space Simeon and Anna take up in Luke 2 we have to admit, that by comparison to the stories around them, we generally ignore their awe-inspiring moment. They won't be in the Christmas Pageant, they don't have a place in our manger scenes; even in the readings appointed for the Sundays of the church year, they show up only once every three years on the Sunday after Christmas, when many of us don't show up. Neglected among the other Christmas characters who intrigue us with their halos and crowns, Anna and Simeon – nonetheless - have an important role to play and really good news to proclaim. They remind us that even though the focus of our Christmas festivities is a child, Christmas is not just for children. Luke is clear that these senior adults are part of the birth narrative, and with the wisdom that comes with age they see something in Jesus most of us cannot yet see.

Anna and Simeon enter the story like aging grandparents, in the whispers and hushed tones of people who know how to find hope for the future in the face of a baby. They slow us down and give us a glimpse of how the true light that falls upon this child emanates from the dawn of Easter morning. As pastor Dana Myers once observed, "When Jesus says to his disciples, *I am preparing a place for you*, the journey of life

itself becomes the journey to that place, the striving to know as closely as we can in this life the Christ we will know for all eternity.”¹

Simeon and Anna help us see Easter in the birth narrative of Jesus, his destiny to create a new kind of human family, a family of resurrection hope. Here are these two elderly people, a man and a woman, related only by their shared trust that the promises God had made would come true. We don't know how old Simeon was, but Anna, we are told, was eighty-four, a widow likely for more than fifty years. Simeon was righteous and devout; Anna was a prophet, the only woman in the whole New Testament given that title.

Like other first century Jews, they knew their history, how God had sent great Prophets, Priests and Kings to lead their people, and vanquish their oppressors. They remembered Moses was sent to free them from slavery; and when they needed a King, a handsome, athletic and talented warrior was found in David. But perhaps they remembered more of the story, too. How baby Moses was pushed into Pharaoh's stronghold and saved for greatness from a dripping basket in the reeds. How King David was the unexpected, youngest son who almost escaped notice because he was out shepherding sheep when Samuel came looking for new leadership. Simeon and Anna knew that hope for a brighter tomorrow does not begin with might or political power – but with a baby.

So they readied themselves, they nurtured an inner peace through confident trust that God would again do some unexpected thing. They committed themselves to praise and prayer, to daily worship and constant hope, to stoking the things of spiritual growth. Through their faith and inner peace, they were ready to recognize their Savior when they came face to face with Jesus; unexpected, vulnerable, the beginning of a new kind of human family. They could see in this baby the

¹ A quote of Dana Ferguson Myers, beloved associate pastor, on a Memorial remembering her at Fourth Presbyterian Chicago, April 2008.

redemption promised by the Prophecy of Isaiah where righteousness will rest upon the poor; equity will judge the meek of the earth. They could see in this baby a new kind of human family coming together where a little child would lead the wild beasts of the world into harmonious peace where no one would hurt or destroy. They saw a future others could not yet see, a resurrected human family of justice, equity and peace.

There is a recent children's book that tells a remarkable story of a new kind of family, as if from a vision forged from the words of Isaiah about poverty, meekness and amazing peace. The book is called *Our Subway Baby: The True Story of How One Baby Found His Home*. Twenty-two years ago, the author Pete got a phone call from his then-boyfriend, Danny, who is now his husband. They were supposed to meet for dinner, but Danny called to tell Pete he was going to be late. He had found an abandoned baby in the New York City subway and had called 911 from a payphone. Danny is a social worker, and had missed the express train, so he took the local instead, exiting onto a lower platform. In the eerily empty subway station, Danny noticed something against a back wall. He thought it was a doll left behind by a child, wrapped in a sweatshirt... but then he saw a tiny leg move. It was a baby, the umbilical cord still attached. The baby boy was alive, just hours old.

Pete ran to the station where all of this was unfolding. Danny was there with two officers. "One of them was carrying the baby in his arms," Pete said. "...a chill raced up my spine...it was an unbelievable thing." The officers took the baby to a nearby hospital. Overcome with emotion at what had just happened, Pete turned to Danny and said, "You're going to be -we're going to be - connected to this baby in some way or another for the rest of your life. Maybe not tomorrow or next week or five years from now, but eventually he's going to learn about this night, and he might want to find you. What was about to happen next was, well, nearly impossible. The baby was placed in the state's care while a citywide search was underway for the boy's parents.

Three months later, Danny was asked to testify at a hearing about the day the baby was found. So Danny showed up in court on a December morning, twenty-two years ago. Unexpectedly, the judge turned to Danny and asked, “Would you be interested in adopting?” Danny said yes, but he knew that adoption would not be easy. The judge replied simply, “Well, it can be.” Danny and Pete became foster parents to the boy found in the subway, and they named him Kevin. They were young, had student debt, lived modestly, but they made it work because Danny and Pete saw a future in the face of that baby. They saw a new kind of human family. Two Decembers later, they adopted him, and early on they made a decisively faithful decision.

They have compassion for Kevin’s birth parents, still unknown. And they wanted Kevin to feel positive about their family origin story, so one of his Dads, Peter wrote the children’s book about it. He said in an interview, “We have always told Kevin from a very early age that he was left out of love, so that he could be found and cared for. We never used the word *abandonment* or *abandoned*. We said, you were left where you could be found by us.” Kevin is now 22. He runs half marathons and plays Ultimate Frisbee, studied mathematics and computer science, and last Spring he graduated from Swarthmore College.² Written to show children how families come together in a whole variety of beautiful ways, this wise father put this on the back cover of the book: “Where there is love, anything is possible.”³

Baby Jesus, born of God’s love, was put down in an unexpected place where he could be found, and become part of our family, and we part of his. As an old poet said it once, in the birth of Jesus God *was self-abandoned on the doorstep of time*. Because they loved God, and expected the unexpected, Simeon and Anna were the first to recognize this. That’s why they take up so much space in Luke’s birth narrative.

² Marianne Garvey, “A man found an abandoned baby in a subway. It led to an unexpected family and a beautiful children’s story,” CNN, 12/11/21.

³ Peter Mercurio, *Our Subway Baby*.

If we would only pay more attention to them, we might follow in their way of inner peace to Bethlehem. They did not depend on excursions to the shopping mall, or elaborate festivities or over-the-top decorations to make their spirits soar. They stayed fine-tuned and Spirit-filled. They kept Sabbath through long years, praying every day. They showed up and served the Temple, and nurtured their hope among the community of faith. It was the day in and day out faithfulness that prepared them for the glory they beheld in the birth of Christ – vulnerable and poor.

They were open and ready to welcome the unforeseen in-breaking of the presence of God -not in some frantic, unfocused search, but through an inner peace they had nurtured through their length of years. Anna preached the first Christmas sermon ever, when she began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for redemption. And we still sing Simeon's Christmas hymn: "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace ... for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

They saw resurrection wrapped in glory in the face of a baby. God still enters our world by surprise, still stretches our imaginations not just with grand expectations and joyful Christmas celebrations, but in the whispers and hushed tones of everyday life attuned by a long-nurtured inner peace.

AMEN.