

Blessing and Praise

A Sermon Preached by Anne Keener
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
December 27, 2020
First Sunday of Christmas (Year B)

Luke 2:22-40



Picture someone you know and love holding a special newborn child. I am picturing my grandfather holding Julie, his great-granddaughter, in those first days after she was born. His eyes conveyed such deep love. Eyes that already knew both the deep sorrow from the death of 2 children at childbirth and the immense joy of adopting my mother. These same eyes that had greeted me as an infant were now greeting my daughter.

I trust you have seen this look in another's eyes. The look of love that you feel in your bones. Love conveyed from one to another without words. Now picture Simeon using his age spotted hands to take this baby into his arms. Imagine the depth of love that must have been conveyed as his eyes met the eyes of Christ.

We don't know many details about Simeon, but we do know the most important ones. We know that he was a righteous and devout man and that the Holy Spirit rested on Simeon.

We don't know exactly how, but we know it was revealed to Simeon through the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. We are not told how long Simeon lived with this knowledge, but I imagine there was plenty of waiting.

Waiting... I think we can identify with the feeling of waiting these days having just journeyed through Advent, a time of waiting, which arrived as we had already been in such a long season of waiting. Simeon was faithful in his waiting as he offered blessings and praise to God day after day.

After all that waiting, Simeon was guided by the Holy Spirit to the temple the same day that Mary and Joseph would arrive at the temple to present Jesus as was customary under the law of Moses. How many times before had the Holy Spirit guided him to the temple? Did he expect to meet the Messiah that day or was he faithfully putting himself in the place where he expected to one day meet the Messiah face to face? Did he wonder how he would be able to recognize the Messiah?

Simeon wasn't the only one with eyes to recognize the Christ child. Anna, a prophet who spent her life in the temple worshipping God, also began praising God and speaking about this child as the redemption of Jerusalem.

Luke doesn't share Anna's exact words, so we are invited to give her a voice. Do you hear it as a quiet voice that forces you to lean in and really listen or a boisterous voice shouting praise to God for all to hear? Either way, I wonder how she was able to recognize this child as the Messiah.

This story as with all stories has a backstory which places people at the right place at just the right time. As I pondered this week how each of these individuals found themselves in the temple on this same day, the words of Julie Peeples guided my reflections. "The habit of worship and prayer, of belonging to a community, sets the stage for this blessing to occur."¹

Joseph and Mary were living out their faith by fulfilling their Jewish rituals; Simeon was living out his faith guided by the Holy Spirit waiting to meet the Messiah; and Anna was living out her faith each day through prayer and fasting in the temple.

Their habits and faithful living brought them all together where past, present, and future seemed to exist simultaneously as Kairos broke through. Simeon and Anna represent the longing of their people in the past, they meet the holy family at the temple in the present moment, and then Simeon and Anna each recognize Jesus as the Messiah, the hope for the future of Israel.

Again, Julie Peeples offers insights as she writes, "Anna and Simeon show us how to live expectantly. Beyond just hoping that God would someday redeem Israel, they took it as given that God would fulfill God's promises. This was not wishful thinking, but profound trust, deepened over time into lifelong habit. They expected God to act, and they were not disappointed."²

We are created to see with our eyes, but God also gives us the ability to see with our heart. This type of seeing takes the kind of training that Chris spoke about on the Second Sunday of Advent. We must be faithful to the practices that draw us closer to God. Anna and Simeon each lived out their faith in deeply consistent ways. Their spiritual practices helped prepare them for this moment.

¹ Peeples, Julie, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, p. 131, Louisville, WJK, 2020

² Peeples, Julie, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, p. 132, Louisville, WJK, 2020

Simeon and Anna didn't recognize the Christ child by simply seeing with their eyes. They recognized Jesus by seeing with their heart and feeling the love of the Messiah in their presence. They expected God to act and were not disappointed.

After praising God and declaring he has seen the salvation for all peoples, Simeon offers a blessing, what some might say is an odd blessing. While still holding the holy child, he turns his attention to the parents, and the blessing he offers holds the paradox of our faith. It includes both the joy of Christ's presence and the heartache to come.

Simeon declares, "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many." In these few words, Simeon is laying the pattern for all who will follow this child. It is the same message we often hear from the baptismal font during the Assurance of Forgiveness, "Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation, the old life is gone, and a new life has begun."

Our faith holds the paradox of death and new life. Deep faith at times invites us to hold sorrow and joy simultaneously. Simeon's mature faith allowed him to give language to this paradox even as he held the Christ child in his arms. Seeing with his heart gave space and language to the fullness of the moment and allowed Kairos to break through for those with the gift to see.

Seeing with our heart doesn't mean life is only filled with happiness, but it does allow us to experience joy and truth. Truth is filled with good things and with hardship. Truth is filled with the good news that God can use all things for good, even those that cause pain. Truth is knowing God send Christ to us through a vulnerable child who grew up to endure immense pain for the sake of our world.

The truth is that God is the Creator. God revealed Christ to Anna and Simeon. God allowed them to see with their heart, and God allows us to see with our heart. God initiates, and we respond. We train by practicing spiritual disciplines day after day and living out our faith in community which helps us form habits.

Then these habits prepare us for the divine moments where past, present, and future collide, and we experience Kairos. Moments where we recognize God at work. Moments where we see the divine in the other not only through the loving eyes of a great-grandfather or a wise elder holding an infant but with our heart as revealed to us only by the grace of God.

We have journeyed together through Advent with anticipation of Christ's birth, and now we celebrate this holy gift. May we pause today in the middle of this season of Christmas to be fully present- to reflect on the story of God working through Simeon and Anna, to receive the blessing of joy and truth, and to join our voices to theirs in praising God for the birth of Emmanuel, God with us. May it be so today, tomorrow, and always. Amen.