

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
December 29 & 30, 2012
Deb Kielsmeier
The Voices of Christmas: ANNA & SIMEON
Luke 2:21-40

I'm Deb Kielsmeier, the membership pastor here. You know, for most of history, people were not literate. They did not necessarily read, and Scripture was told to them like a story. Rather than read it, they heard it with their ears. I would like to tell you the story from Luke, chapter 2, verses 22 through 40. Listen for the Word of God.

When the time came for the rite of purification as required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took the child to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord. As it is written in the Law, every first-born son shall be consecrated to God. They offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the Law, two or a pair of doves or young pigeons.

Now in Jerusalem there was a man named Simeon who was both righteous and devout. He was longing for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. The Spirit had told him that he would not die until he saw the Lord's Messiah. Well, prompted by the Spirit, Simeon went into the courts of the temple. When Joseph and Mary walked into the temple, Simeon took the child in his arms and praised God. He said, "Sovereign God, as You have promised, You may now dismiss Your servant in peace for my eyes have seen Your salvation that has been prepared before all the peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of Your people, Israel.

The parents wondered and were amazed at what Simeon was saying about the child. Then Simeon blessed them as well and said to Mary, Jesus' mother, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will spoken against, that the thoughts of the hearts of many will be revealed. And, Mary, a sword will pierce your soul as well."

There was a prophet named Anna, daughter of Phanuel of the tribe of Asher. She was very old. She had lived with her husband for seven years after their marriage and then had been a widow for 84 years. She never left the temple but worshipped there night and day, fasting and praying. At that very moment, Anna came up to them and thanked God. She spoke about the child to all who were waiting for the redemption in Jerusalem. After the parents had done what was required by the Law, they took the child and went back up to Galilee to their home town of Nazareth. There the child grew and became strong. He was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon Him.

This is the Gospel of the Lord according to Dr. Luke in chapter 2.

After the birth of a young male, for the rite of purification that is talked about, a woman would wait 40 days. Jesus was probably about 7 weeks old when Mary and Joseph gathered Him up and walked from Bethlehem up to Jerusalem. They probably would have walked because, to have a donkey, you would need to be fairly wealthy. Ever since the exodus, God required the first-born male of any family was to be consecrated to Him, to be given to Him, and then in a sense, the parents would redeem that child back by offering a sacrifice. If you were poor, two birds like the doves or young pigeons, or if you were more wealthy, a lamb. Obviously Mary and Joseph were people of poverty as they offered two young pigeons.

When they got to Jerusalem, they met these two elderly saints. Eccentric? My goodness! Anna was ancient. She was a woman. She was a prophet, and she never left the temple, night or day. And Simeon believed that the Holy Spirit had told him he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. You just have to wonder, out of all of Israel, why God chose these two people to recognize His Messiah and to speak of Him to the world. Why them? I mean, honestly! If I were there in the temple that day, I know exactly what I would have done. Just like the baby who was baptized today, I would have gathered that child in my arms, and I would have said, "My gosh, look at those beautiful brown eyes. What a cutie!" Then to the mother, Mary, I would have said, "Are you sleeping at night? How's it going?" I definitely wouldn't have come up with what Simeon said and, by all counts, 99.9 percent of the people had the same reaction. Either they ignored the baby because children were of little import, especially a peasant child, or they just cuddled Him. There was nothing noteworthy, no halo, even though I know many paintings have things like that.

What caused Anna and Simeon to recognize this one as God's Messiah? They were both looking! We see that in the Scripture. They were both yearning for the Messiah, for the Consolation of Israel, for the Redemption of Jerusalem, but then, honestly, everyone was looking for the Messiah. All of Israel was yearning for this one who would finally set them free, as they had been for absolute centuries. These were dark and desperate times. This was an occupied country, and they were oppressed by their enemies. Before the Roman occupation, there were the Greeks, and before the Greeks, there were the Persians. Before the Persians, there were the Babylonians, and before the Babylonians, there were the Assyrians. The people were war torn and weary. The Northern Kingdom had been conquered, and ten of the tribes had largely been carried off and were lost. Judah, the southern tribe, had been carried into exile and only some of them had returned to Jerusalem. Not only that, when Jesus came, God had been silent for over 350 years. They were yearning for God's Messiah, yearning to be set free, and yet so few recognized Him when He came.

I wonder if it was their expectations that kind of tripped them up. I mean, Isaiah had talked about the Messiah coming. You know the words. He was to be Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Now if I was expecting that Messiah, I would assume He would be born in a palace, certainly with some trumpeting and fanfare. Maybe rather than being placed on straw in a feeding trough, He would have been on a velvet pillow; but instead, you know the story, how the royal announcement came. It came through angels to a largely empty field full of sheep. And who were the recipients of this royal announcement? The shepherds! In Jesus' day, shepherds were on the same rung as tax collectors and dung sweepers. They were the lowest rung of society. And the Magi, the Wise Men. They discerned His coming, but they were from a pagan kingdom to the East. They were astrologers. They didn't even have the same God as Israel. They were complete outsiders. So who recognized this one? Shepherd

riffraff and pagan astrologers. What in the world was God doing here? This is not the way the Messiah was expected to arrive, and yet Anna and Simeon recognized Him.

Now you might think, well, they were waiting a long time and they positioned themselves very well. They were at the temple in Jerusalem, the very heart of Judaism. They were at the very center of everything that happened in this nation and their faith; so, naturally, if the Messiah were to come, they were there to see Him. You might even conjure up in your mind something like a huge cathedral in Europe where it feels sacred when you walk in. Maybe there are candles lit. Maybe you are smelling a little incense and hearing the soft chanting of the priests who would surely recognize the Christ Child. But the fact was, the temple was not anything like that. Not at all.

The temple was vast. Here is the picture of a model of it. (*Slide shown.*) And this doesn't even show the whole temple. What happened was, when the Israelites came back from captivity, King Herod decided to curry their favor by rebuilding the temple. He made the temple huge. He lopped off the top of a mountain to build it. And he built courtyards, 85 acres of courtyards. He made the temple so big that he built retaining walls around the courtyards to hold it up, one of which is now the Western Wall or the Wailing Wall. (*Slide shown.*) Are you familiar with this? This is where Jews today pray and worship God. So the temple was gigantic. Imagine walking into the Mall of America. Huge. He also built it of marble and covered it with gold. There were thousands of priests, Roman soldiers, temple soldiers, to keep order, and attendants and minions that just caused the mechanisms of daily life in the temple to continue.

When you approached the temple, you walked up the hill in Jerusalem. First you would come across shops and vendors, where people were selling sacrificial animals. They would gladly change your money for a price so that you could pay your temple tax or make your offerings. And there were baths. When you entered the outer court, the court of the Gentiles, there were rabbis and people who were maybe a bit *off*, who thought *they* were the Messiah, standing up on soapboxes preaching. It was a busy place.

As you walked in closer to the more sacred center, you would begin to hear the bellows and squawks of terrified animals who were being sacrificed. There would be sluices of blood and the stench of a slaughterhouse, and pillars, pyres, of smoke and fire. Every day thousands of worshippers came to the temple. There were scores of couples who brought their firstborn baby to be presented to God and hundreds of women coming for the rite of purification. How easy it would be to miss the Messiah! How ordinary for a peasant couple to bring their baby to be presented before God, and yet here amidst the chaos, the distraction, amidst radically different expectations for whom the Messiah would be, Anna and Simeon discerned their salvation. What are we to learn from their voices?

Friends, we also live in a very distracting time. We may not have bellowing animals being sacrificed all around us or sluices of blood, but we live in rivers of traffic. We have a non-stop assault of images and noise. Messages from the media and the pressures of modern life are like none centuries have known. It is easy to miss the presence of God.

I have a friend who is now just finishing up her Master of Divinity at Princeton Seminary. She was raised Jewish. She was quite Jewish and lived in a *kibbutz* in Israel after college. She ended up marrying a young man who became a Christian in their first year of marriage. This rocked her world. She wasn't sure she could remain married to this man, so different was their

world view. She intentionally took a year to seek God, to seek whether or not it was true that Jesus was the Messiah. When I say intentional, I mean she made plans. She went out West and talked to famous rabbis. She talked to people who had come to accept Jesus as their Messiah, and she went to Israel and talked to people who knew that He wasn't. By the end of that year, she was distraught. Their marriage was about to end, and she was at really a low point. One night she just lay in her bed in the dark and said, "God, this is it. I cannot figure this out, and my marriage is about to end. Jesus, if You really are the Messiah, will You just show Yourself to me?" She said at that point, it was one of those holy moments. She couldn't see anything, but her room was filled and she had an incredible sense of the presence of God. She knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that this Jesus was real, that He was the Messiah, and that He still showed up to ordinary people today.

That is really an amazing story. I know something like this probably hasn't happened to most of us here, but wouldn't it be neat if it did? The truth of the matter is, Jesus *is* here. He has promised us that He will be with us even to the end of the age. He promises us just like He promised Simeon and Anna, "Your eyes will see your salvation." He promises to come into our lives to bind up broken hearts and heal us, but we can so easily miss Him in our modern world. What will you do this year, this new year, so that you will not miss God's Messiah? Will you watch? Will you wait? Think of all the years that Anna and Simeon waited to see the Messiah. Will you ask for eyes of faith to see this one and to anticipate Him breaking into your new year maybe in ways you don't expect?

You know, as modern Christians, I think we have sort of tamed Jesus. We like to kind of keep Him in a little cradle, a baby that we can just sort of burp when we want to. Annie Dillard in *Teaching a Stone to Talk* has this wonderful quote about us coming to church. She says it's ridiculous that women come to church in straw and velvet hats. She says they should come to church with crash helmets on and ushers should be issuing life vests and signal flares because the God of the universe just may show up.

We know God does show up but it is true that sometimes we expect Him to stay in this one little box, in this one little piece of our lives, where we may or we may not decide to invoke Him. Will you watch, will you ask for eyes of faith to see? There are some things I think you can intentionally do like Anna and Simeon who waited in the temple.

- You can carve out times of silence and solitude to mute all the other voices and distractions and listen for God's voice. You can do that in prayer or by reading Scripture prayerfully.
- Sometimes people need a friend, a spiritual friend, to help us see where God is at work in our lives. "What do you see God doing?" And to pray with us. Or we can join a group where others can gather around us and pray and look and listen as well.
- There is an old Ignatian practice where at the very end of the day just before you go to bed when you are settling down, where you pray backwards through your day. You ask God to give you the eyes to see and the ears to hear. "Where was God close to me today? Where was I far from Him? Lord, show me where You are working in my life."

Soon I believe our spiritual muscles, our little *antennae*, will begin to grow and we will begin to see and discern and know when God shows up, often subtly in our lives. Jesus promises you. This is His promise, just as He promised Simeon, "I am with you now even to the end of the

age.” Will you recognize Him? He is faithful. He desires to make Himself known to you, to bind up broken hearts, to set those of you who are captive free, to declare the year of His favor over you. Friends, let us watch, let us wait. With eyes of faith, let us ask God that we might recognize Him and welcome Him. In the spirit of Anna and Simeon, will you pray with me.

Lord God, we thank You for these old saints whose hearts were set on You. They yearned to see Your salvation, and how blest we are that we know the story. We look for You every day to come again into our lives and finally at the end of this era in all Your glory to bring Your Kingdom in its full. Keep our eyes open, our spirits ready, and our hearts receptive. We pray in the strong Name of Jesus. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.