

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
December 21 & 22, 2013
Rich Phenow
REJOICE: Joy in Seeing
Luke 2:25-40**

Let me introduce myself. My name is Rich Phenow. I'm a pastor here on staff. Some of you don't know me and some of you may not want to know me and others of you don't recognize me this morning because I'm wearing glasses for the first time. I found out I have a small astigmatism and I went out and got some glasses. People have had a lot of fun with that although it's been at my expense. Some people have said I look like a rabbi. Another wise guy said I look like Santa Claus. I said, "Is that because of my glasses or my build?" Another guy said I look like Harry Potter. That guy obviously needs glasses. But anyway, I did appreciate somebody saying I look rather professorial and intelligent. I think if a pair of glasses can do that for me, it's a good investment. I found out from the eye doc that I needed progressive glasses, which I thought *that* fit rather well, and I'm enjoying trying to figure out how to use these crazy things as I walk into doors and stumble down stairs.

This is the time of year that is filled with such joy and such wonder. It's filled with holy and glorious moments, but the problem is that so often we miss them, don't we? We get caught up in trying to create these moments ourselves and we get harried and we get busy and we get stressed because we want to manufacture perfect joy and perfect peace. In the midst of this frenzied season, we only get small glimpses and sights and sounds that remind us what this moment is all about.

Yesterday morning I brought a family member to the airport and on the way home, I was listening to Christmas music. One of my favorite Christmas hymns came on, *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*. I want to tell you, I belted it out as loud as I could.

Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the new born King,
peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!"

It was just wonderful. It put me right where I needed to be. Thank God, there wasn't anyone else in the car. I thought of my buddy, Steve, as I sang that song. It was just a moment and it passed quickly. You know, we watch old movies. We watch *White Christmas* and *Holiday Inn* and *Miracle on Thirty-Whatever Street*. We do it because we want them to create something for us. The sights and the sounds really proclaim the one and only Savior. They proclaim when Heaven came to earth, *Emmanuel*, God with us, but we're not attentive. Our eyes are focused on the baking and the shopping and the wrapping, or they are focused on the people who are driving like crazy in a hurry all around us, going nowhere fast. A guy just bawled me out the other day because I wasn't driving fast enough. We miss hearing and seeing and experiencing God's

ultimate act of love because our lives are cluttered. Our minds are preoccupied. Many of us are trying to create that perfect moment so that somehow we can experience the beauty and the glory that God has revealed to us in the birth of the Christ Child.

Don't get me wrong, I love Christmas. It's wonderful, but for many of us it's a time of great hurt. It's a time of great loneliness and abandonment. I'll always remember the Christmas of 1993. I was to preach on Sunday, the day after Christmas, and the title of my sermon was *I Was Dreaming of a White Christmas but It's Turned Out Blue*. Right before Thanksgiving that year, Jody's brother Brad, a 44-year-old man, died of blockage in his arteries. And two weeks later, little Andrew Dake, whom I had baptized here in a service, died of SIDS [Sudden Infant Death Syndrome] and I had to go to the airport to tell Sylvia, on the tarmac, that her son had died in daycare that day. That was the year that a precious little boy named Ian Buie, six years old, died of a brain tumor. It was a discouraging time for me. It was a dark time for me. It was a blue time for me. I was disappointed with God that Christmas.

But let me tell you that joy is not the absence of suffering. It is found in the sheer presence of God. That's where we get joy, in the presence of God. It's not about creating a perfect Christmas. It's not about a perfect world because we are not perfect people and if we were perfect, we wouldn't need *Emmanuel*, but He came to a broken world filled with broken people, people filled with pain, who were waiting.

Now, today we are going to look at two little known characters, Simeon and Anna, who are common, ordinary, humble people, who meet Jesus about six weeks after He is born. They are faithful, devout people who experience extraordinary joy in seeing Jesus for the first time. Both Simeon and Anna are very old. They are nearing the end of their lives, and they are living their call for one, single purpose, to encounter the Christ Child. They are living in a world of patient hope where suffering has become a way of life, especially for Anna. Join with me as we work through our text for this morning. It is in Luke's Gospel, chapter 2. It's on page 1,526 of your pew Bibles or follow with me on the screen. Keep your Bibles open. I'm going to work through this passage, starting in verse 22 when Jesus is presented in the temple.

22 When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord **23** (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), **24** and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons."

Joseph and Mary came to Jerusalem for simply two reasons: for Mary to receive the Rite of Purification, required at least 30 days after the birth of a first-born male child, and then they came for Jesus to be consecrated, to be dedicated to the Lord. They didn't necessarily have to go to the temple in Jerusalem, but they were close by as they were coming from Bethlehem. They would spend time in the Temple and then head home to Galilee. Joseph and Mary are living in humble obedience because they love God with all their heart, soul, and strength and because they followed the Torah, they followed the Law. The Law taught that you are to bring a lamb for the firstborn to be sacrificed to dedicate this child. Mary and Joseph had no lamb because they couldn't afford one. The law made provision for those who were poor. They could bring instead two doves or two young pigeons. When Mary and Joseph are in the temple courts, they get approached by this guy they have never met or seen before. Reading now in verses 25 through 28:

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. **26** It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. **27** Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, **28** Simeon took him in his arms and praised God

Simeon grabs this baby out of the arms of Mary. She has never met this guy before. Can you imagine, as a mother, a guy you have never met before grabbing your child from your arms? Simeon is righteous, he is devout, and he has been waiting for this day for the hope of Israel. The Holy Spirit has come upon him and he is moved by the Spirit. He has been watching and praying for this moment all of his life. This is the moment he has lived for, so he takes the child from Mary and lifts the baby up. In verses 29 through 32, he says this:

29 "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. **30** For my eyes have seen your salvation, **31** which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: **32** a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."

Simeon is overcome with joy. He has been waiting day after day for this moment and in this crowd, he picks out Jesus. He recognizes Him with his eyes and says, "God, this is what I've been waiting for my whole life and now that I've seen Him," he says, "I can die. I'm ready to go." He proclaims that Jesus is the light, not just for Israel, but the light of revelation to the Gentiles, to all people, to all nations, for all time. It as if Simeon was saying, "I believe God is doing something wonderful in this world, and I want to see it first-hand. I want to hold it. There is something tremendous going on and I want to be a part of it." He is so full of joy he says, "I'm ready to cash in my chips. I'm ready to die."

Simeon has waited patiently all his life. He has watched and waited. Each of us is waiting for something, but the question isn't so much, what are you waiting for but *how* are you waiting? What kind of person are you becoming in the waiting? A good friend of mine who is a doctor had to retake his medical exams to be certified. He waited for weeks and weeks for the results. The guy was a wreck. He just found out that he passed, but he was waiting. We are all waiting for something. Who are we becoming while we wait? Are we waiting devoutly in patient faithfulness or are we waiting with resentment and bitterness? Are we waiting for a new job? Are we waiting for a meaningful relationship? Are we waiting for cancer results? Are we waiting for a medical procedure? Are we waiting for the healing of broken relationships in our families with our child or spouse or with our siblings? Are we waiting for the discouragement and the anxiety to go away? How are we waiting and ultimately, are we waiting for the Lord?

Then Simeon turns and speaks, not to Joseph, which would have been the culturally appropriate thing to do, but he directs himself toward Mary. After delivering this message about the promise of Israel, about the salvation of Gentiles, in verse 33 the child's father and mother marvel about what he said about them.

34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, **35** so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

Then Simeon gives back the baby and walks away. One minute Mary and Joseph are busting with joy and disbelief, and the next minute, they are filled with alarm and shock. Simeon tells them that the glory of Jesus will only come through sorrow and suffering, that He will be misunderstood and opposed, that there will be a sword and death and great pain for Mary, "A sword will pierce your heart." Simeon goes from the child that he has been waiting all his life to see, the hope of the world, to the day that Jesus will go to the cross to redeem us once and for all and have His side pierced by a sword.

No sooner does Simeon walk away than Anna, a prophetess, comes to the scene. She recognizes this baby as Jesus as well. She is a widow and has been living in the temple praying and fasting. She has been waiting there over 84 years to see Jesus, begging for her livelihood. You would think that after 84 years of grieving that she would be bitter and filled with hopelessness, but here she is waiting for this very moment. Follow with me beginning in verse 36.

36 There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, **37** and then had been a widow for eighty-four years. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. **38** Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

We see that Anna is a waiter and a hoper. As soon as she sees and identifies Jesus, she is filled with praise and begins to tell everyone in the temple courts, "This is the hope of Israel. This is what we have been waiting for. He's arrived!" I can only imagine the incredible joy she felt after 84 years of waiting and watching, but her joy was born out of pain and it was found in the presence of Jesus. Anna, like Simeon, knew immediately who Jesus was because she recognized Him with her eyes *and* with her heart. Now these were two people who were in the right place at the right time. They each had the right posture of hope in waiting. Each was present in the moment, each was living in the moment, and each was filled with overwhelming joy once the moment happened as they saw the Bethlehem babe, Heaven coming to earth, with their own eyes.

The year was 2009, and it was in this room on Christmas Eve at a family afternoon service. It was late in the afternoon and Jean came with her 55-year-old son, Jay. Jay had a long history of battling drug and alcohol addiction, but he was here that day. He was in recovery and he was sober. His mother Jean is a faithful woman. She has been in our Intercessory Prayer Ministry and she has been on our Prayer and Healing team. She has prayed all her life for that afternoon. Jay was here that day, and something happened to Jay at that service. He was overcome by the Holy Spirit.

We ended that Christmas pageant right here with the children, the shepherds and the sheep, and the angels, and the Magi, and Mary and Joseph. We were all behind the manger, and I said, "Great! Take pictures. This is a Kodak moment. This is a Hallmark card. Get out your cameras. And then let's go home because that's the end of the story." I had rehearsed with the kids, and they all yelled, "NOOOOOO, Rich! We're the *beginning* of the story!" And so we disassembled the manger, created by Ross Robinson Designs. We took it apart, and the shepherds grabbed a piece and walked out into the world and the angels grabbed a piece. The

sanctuary was filled with children taking pieces of wood, going out into the world to tell the story. Then we ended the service by handing out a little piece of wood to everyone.

I truly felt overcome by the Spirit as I explained with great joy in the Benediction, “This little piece of wood reminds us that Our Savior came into the world and rested on a piece of wood, and then gave His life for us on another piece of wood, a cross. Now we can go and tell others the story of Jesus, who has redeemed us and redeemed the world.” So we passed out the pieces of wood and Jay got one of them. I told everybody, “Put the piece of wood in your pocket, put it in your purse or your billfold, put it on your dresser, and whenever you see it be reminded of Heaven coming to the earth for you and redeeming you and calling you by name and reminding you that you will never walk alone.”

After the service Jay left Jean and the family. He walked into the ushers’ closet and when he came out, he had a big smile on his face. Jean said, “Honey, Jay, what were you doing in the closet?” And he said, “Mom, I got a handful of these wood chips.” He said, “I’m going to go tell the world and I’m going pass them out to my friends.” Twenty-two days later Jay died, and they found a piece of wood in his pocket. All the other pieces had been given away. We celebrated Jay’s service here. We brought up a manger and broke it down and passed out pieces of the wood. We gave out wood chips to everyone in the crowd and reminded them that Heaven had come to earth for them and that they had been redeemed by the love of God. What an amazing story and amazing life! I’m so grateful to God that Jay received that day God’s redeeming love for him.

Let me challenge you. Pay attention. Slow down. Don’t miss the moment. We know the story. We’ve heard it hundreds of times, but keep waiting and watching with hopeful anticipation. Push out all the noise and all the distractions. Push out the desire for a perfect moment. Push it away because it happened 2,000 years ago. I pray that we will allow the Holy Spirit to access the deep places in our souls and in our hearts, that we will be open and be able to see Christ in a new way all around us. I pray that we will see Christ in the people we love and in the power of reconciliation all the people who show up to remind us that we are not alone.

This past week a group of people showed up at Brenda’s house. Brenda has lung cancer. A group of friends showed up and decorated all the trees and bushes outside of her picture window because Brenda spends countless hours in front of that window praying and reflecting. They put lights everywhere and now when she stares out the window, she enjoys the twinkling and the beauty of those lights. This small group of people who showed up in Brenda’s life were a reminder of Heaven coming to earth.

This past Tuesday evening our Special Needs Ministry, a phenomenal ministry, came around the church. I was there and saw the way the students in our Impact Ministry came around these special needs children as they acted out the nativity story. Watching the pageant played out in such a wonderful and beautiful way brought such warmth to me. It brought tears to my eyes. It was a tangible reminder, a moment when I could see God clearly and in a powerful way.

One last way that I love to be reminded of the holiness of this season is in a story that I read every year. It’s called *Trouble at the Inn*. I would ask you to humor me because it’s difficult to try to hold people’s attention when you are reading a story, so humor me a little. Close your eyes and just let this simple little story called *Trouble at the Inn* powerfully minister to your soul. Close

your eyes. You're a child now hearing this story. Concentrate and try to listen. *Trouble at the Inn* by Dina Donohue:

For years now whenever Christmas pageants are talked about in a certain little town in the Midwest, someone is sure to mention the name of Wallace Purling. Wally's performance in one annual production of the Nativity play has slipped into the realm of legend. But the old timers who were in the audience that night never tire of recalling exactly what happened.

Wally was nine that year and in the second grade, though he should have been in the fourth. Most people in town knew that he had difficulty in keeping up. He was big and clumsy, slow in movement and mind. Still, Wally was well liked by the other children in his class, all of whom were smaller than he, though the boys had trouble hiding their irritation if the uncoordinated Wally asked to play ball with them.

Most often they'd find a way to keep him off the field, but Wally would hang around anyway—not sulking, just hoping. He was always a helpful boy, a willing and smiling one, and the natural protector, paradoxically, of the underdog. Sometimes if the older boys chased the younger ones away, it would always be Wally who'd say, "Can't they stay? They're no bother."

Wally fancied the idea of being a shepherd with a flute in the Christmas pageant that year, but the play's director, Miss Lumbard, assigned him to a more important role. After all, she reasoned, the Innkeeper did not have too many lines, and Wally's size would make his refusal of lodging to Joseph more forceful.

And so it happened that the usual large, partisan audience gathered for the town's Yuletide extravaganza of the staffs and creches, of beards, crowns, halos and a whole stageful of squeaky voices. No one on stage or off was more caught up in the magic of the night than Wallace Purling. They said later that he stood in the wings and watched the performance with such fascination that from time to time Miss Lumbard had to make sure he didn't wander onstage before his cue.

Then the time came when Joseph appeared, slowly, tenderly guiding Mary to the door of the inn. Joseph knocked hard on the wooden door set into the painted backdrop. Wally the Innkeeper was there, waiting. "What do you want?" Wally said, swinging the door open with a brusque gesture.

"We seek lodging."

"Seek it elsewhere." Wally looked straight ahead but spoke vigorously. "The inn is filled."

"Sir, we have asked everywhere in vain. We have traveled far and are very weary."

"There is no room in this inn for you." Wally looked properly stern.

"Please, good innkeeper, this is my wife, Mary. She is heavy with child and needs a place to rest. Surely you must have some small corner for her. She is so tired."

Now, for the first time, the Innkeeper relaxed his stiff stance and looked down at Mary. With that, there was a long pause, long enough to make the audience a bit tense with embarrassment.

“No! Begone!” the prompter whispered from the wings.

“No!” Wally repeated automatically. “Begone!”

Joseph sadly placed his arm around Mary, and Mary laid her head upon his shoulder, and the two of them started to move away. The Innkeeper did not return inside his inn, however. Wally stood there in the doorway, watching the forlorn couple. His mouth was open, his brow creased with concern, his eyes filling unmistakably with tears.

Suddenly this Christmas pageant became different from all others.

“Don’t go, Joseph,” Wally called out. “Bring Mary back.” And Wallace Purling’s face grew into a bright smile. “You can have *my* room.”

Some people in town thought that the pageant had been ruined. Yet there were others—many others—who considered it the most Christmas of all Christmas pageants they had ever seen.

We’ll miss it. We’ll miss the moment unless we make room in our hearts and our lives to see Jesus this Christmas. Let’s pray together.

Gracious God, I pray that You would slow us down, that You will help us stop and look and listen. I pray that we, like Simeon and Anna, would be humble, ordinary people waiting patiently. Help us live with patient hope and remind us that real joy is not in the absence of suffering but is found in Your presence, in You, *Emmanuel*, who came to earth as Jesus. Help us recognize You as we hopefully wait. Help us see You in the moment and not miss You. Help us see You in small, ordinary ways and in people who love us at work in the power of reconciliation. Help us to see You, Jesus. In Your Name, I pray. 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.