

**Luke 2:22-40** <sup>22</sup> When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord <sup>23</sup> (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), <sup>24</sup> and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.” <sup>25</sup> Now 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. <sup>26</sup> It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. <sup>27</sup> Guided 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, <sup>28</sup> Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, <sup>29</sup> “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word, <sup>30</sup> for my eyes have seen your salvation, <sup>31</sup> which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, <sup>32</sup> a light for revelation to the gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” <sup>33</sup> And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. <sup>34</sup> Then 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 <sup>35</sup> so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul, too.” <sup>36</sup> There 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, <sup>37</sup> then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. <sup>38</sup> At 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. <sup>39</sup> When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. <sup>40</sup> The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favor of God was upon him.

Luke 2:22-40

12/31/2023 – Saginaw First United Methodist Church

“Someone We Can Know”

Rev. Amy Terhune

“Tom Ervin, Professor of Music at the University of Arizona was attending a conference for music teachers in New York. While at the conference he purchased a talking metronome. A metronome is a device for counting the beats in a song. One can set it to go faster or slower depending on the needs of the song. Before Tom and his son boarded their flight home, Tom hefted his carry-on bag onto the security-check conveyor belt.

“The security guard's eyes widened as he watched the monitor. He asked Tom what he had in the bag. Then the guard slowly pulled out of the bag this strange looking device, a six-by-three-inch black box covered with dials and switches. Other travelers, sensing trouble, vacated the area.

“It's a metronome,” Tom replied weakly, as his son cringed in embarrassment. “It's a talking metronome,” he insisted. “Look, I'll show you.” He took the box and flipped a switch, realizing that since it was brand new, he didn't actually have any idea how it worked. “One . . . two . . . three . . . four,” said the metronome in perfect time. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

“As they gathered their belongings and headed for their assigned gate, Tom's son whispered, “Aren't you glad it didn't go 'four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . . '?” [4 ¶s from tanger@lvbaptist.org (Timothy Anger); as used in “Two Promises For A New Year” by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

I'm sure he was probably very glad. Today, we're done with countdowns—at least, for a while. Advent, though an important season in its own right, is often viewed and experienced (for better or worse) as a countdown to Christmas. And I'm sure that tonight, many of us will spend some time counting down to ring in 2024. Many centuries ago, Joseph and Mary were counting down days to important times in their lives as well. After eight days, Jesus could be circumcised and named—a ritual most likely carried out in the home where they were staying, or perhaps the local synagogue there in Bethlehem. The big deal, according to the law of Moses, came thirty days after giving birth. That's when Mary and Joseph traveled the five miles from Bethlehem to Jerusalem to participate in two ancient rituals. One was that of purification for Mary. A woman was considered “ritually unclean” for 30 days if she gave birth to a son, 60 days if she bore a daughter, and so she couldn't enter the temple during that time. The second ritual was the redemption of the first born. Leviticus 12 states that everything which opens the womb belongs to God—first-born animals and children—but a young couple could offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving to “redeem” or “buy back” their first-born child from God. According to Leviticus 12:6-8, a couple should offer a lamb as thanksgiving, but those who fell below the ancient poverty line could offer a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons instead. That's what Mary and Joseph offered, which tells you quite a bit about their circumstances.

No doubt, they entered the temple on an ordinary day, along with thousands of others who regularly flocked to the center of the Jewish faith. Mary, holding the infant Jesus, would have waited in some kind of line in order to bathe and purify herself in some pool in a temple antechamber as tradition dictated. She and Joseph would have waited in another line with their month-old infant in order to change Roman coinage into shekels. Then they'd have waited in another line to purchase the birds they hoped to offer. And finally, they'd have waited in another line before the priest to offer the birds and dedicate their son. Don't miss the symbolism happening here. There amidst the crowds and the bustle of temple business, Mary holds in her arms one that needs no redeeming—the lamb of God who redeems the world. And nobody recognizes him...well, almost nobody.

Simeon and Anna both recognized him. In fact, they'd been waiting for them. Perhaps it was as Mary and Joseph waited in one of those countless lines, or perhaps it was after all was done and they made their preparations for travel—we don't know—an elderly gentleman filled with the Holy Spirit makes his approach. The text tells us that Simeon was both righteous and devout, and the Spirit has assured him that he would not see death before seeing the Lord's Messiah. So day in and day out, he waited, immersed in quiet study and prayer, his heart always searching for Israel's comfort and hope.

I wonder what he thought he was looking for. An inspired prophet? A great leader? A military genius? What did he expect? And what did he think as the spirit drew him towards a peasant couple with an infant in arms. I love the way Tom Long puts it when he writes of Simeon: “A man, a woman, two birds, and a baby. Can this be the heralded and hoped-for coming of God?” [from “They Also Serve Who Wait” by Thomas G. Long, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

But God never does move quite as we expect. Simeon had discovered that long ago. He was open to the promptings within. He was open to God's leading. And still to this day, he teaches us the true value and power of Emmanuel. He took that infant in his wrinkled, trembling hands, and gazed through tears down into that tiny face. “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for I have seen your salvation.” But what did he see? Think about that!

Long before Jesus preached a single word, or healed a single person, or multiplied loaves and fishes or walked on water or calmed the storm, Simeon experienced Jesus' mission. In that moment, he recognized that salvation was not an event on a timeline. Salvation was flesh and blood. Salvation was this tiny being in his arms. Salvation, meaning God's saving grace; like a salve put on a wound (same root word) salvation heals what is broken and restores relationship—salvation...is not something you get. It's someone you know. Simeon met salvation in a temple hallway, in the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

And in that moment, he who has been waiting with humble service and deep devotion for decades for the consolation of Israel is moved to articulate Jesus' mission—a light of revelation to the world, not just his own people, and an embodiment of God's glory for Israel. But in that moment, Simeon also recognized how deeply this would challenge everything the leadership of his people cherished. They wanted a God who defeats enemies, not one who loves them. They want a God with the power to rule lands and governments, not hearts and souls. They want a God who charges into battle, not one who charges us to endure in hardship and persecution. They want a God of victorious glory, but they can't see how a cross or an empty tomb play into that narrative. From afar, Simeon saw the opposition, the upheaval, the suffering. He seemed to know that Mary would have endure great pain in seeing her son live out the mission of redemption and salvation.

Simeon challenges us this new year to put aside what we expect and embrace the God we can see, touch, and know in Christ Jesus. He challenges us to be open to the Spirit, to wait for God not as one sits in a dark theater before a movie, but to wait actively by nurturing faith through devout worship and service to others.

As Simeon spoke quietly to the young couple, an octogenarian named Anna began to speak to everyone else. At least, that's how the text tells it. At 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. She is the very first evangelist—the very first who couldn't keep good news to herself.

What she said is not recorded. We only know that "...Anna spoke words of hope to everyone present because the long-awaited Messiah had finally arrived. Anna knew that God's promises are not to be kept; they are to be shared..." While Simeon challenges us to be open to new and unexpected leading of the Spirit in a new year, Anna challenges us to never let go of the timeless hope of God, but to cling to it and to share it in a cynical and hope-deprived world.

I have a colleague who shared a story not too long ago, and he told me I could share with you as long as I don't use names. It seems he held an elderly lady in his congregation who was alone, and she developed cancer. Church member took turns driving her to chemotherapy, and my colleague would usually pick her up and bring her home again. He chose to be the one to pick her up, because they never knew for sure when she'd be done. Sometimes, he had to wait, and so they'd get a chance to visit while they were finishing up. After a few weeks, my colleague encountered a guy in the chair next to his church member. We'll call him Don, and Don was spiritually hungry, but had no church connection. So my colleague began to minister to him, too, because that's what you do when you're a pastor. It turns out, Don's health was a lot worse off than his church member. He had throat cancer. He continued to go for treatment, even though it made him deathly ill, because he was afraid to die. In time, Don lost his voice altogether, but he would sit in the chair and listen to my colleague read scripture and pray, and when my friend asked if he'd like to accept Jesus into his heart, he did. They prayed together, and it was clear that Don had found something he needed – that he and my friend had forged a connection.

One day, my colleague went in as usual to pick up his church member and Don wasn't there. The nurse informed him sadly that Don had passed on that weekend. Even though it wasn't really allowed, the nurse did share Don's last name so that my friend could look up the funeral details. It was a busy week, and my friend admits that he thought about not going, but in between some other errands, he managed to quickly stop into the funeral home for visitation a few days later and introduce himself to Don's son. It turns out that Don's son was a devout Christian and had been praying for his father to come into faith for years. He admitted that his father had seemed more at peace lately, but because Don couldn't speak, the son didn't know anything about the relationship that had formed during chemo. My friend shared with Don's son about some of their conversations before he lost his voice, and about his decision to accept Christ, and how he'd grown less afraid of dying as he understood that Jesus would be with him all the way through it. These are the kinds of stories you just can't make up – they don't happen that often, but when they do, it's just an extraordinary moment that you just have to pause and appreciate. The son broke down and wept for an answer to prayer he'd never expected, and my friend admits that he got pretty choked up, too.

Sometimes, all it takes to give a little hope, a little peace in this world is the willingness to give up a few moments. And sometimes answers come in the most unexpected ways. The values we lift up when the nights are long and the days are short—Christmas values of hope, peace, joy, love, and light—they only retain value as they are shared.

So Anna and Simeon waited, wondered, hoped, believed. “They did not wait because "there was nothing else to do," but because they had hope, because they were looking for God to move. Therefore their waiting was not a vacuum, devoid of activity. They worked and worshiped, performed acts of justice and prayer. While they waited, they defied the darkness by serving God, because it was for the light of God that they waited. And so must we. Like Simeon and Anna, we must be open to new and unexpected leadings of the Spirit in a new year, even as we cling to the timeless hope of God. Simeon and Ann did what they could, and they waited. [from “They Also Serve Who Wait” by Thomas G. Long, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).] And though their waiting was a time of blessing, what came of their waiting wasn't something they got. It was someone. And not just any someone. God made flesh. Thanks be to God. Amen.