



Sunday, Dec. 27, 2020
Sermon Series: Christmas

Jesus is Presented in the Temple
Pastor Shelley Cunningham

Luke 2:21-40 NRSV

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 turtle-doves 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 for seven years after her marriage, ³⁷then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped 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.

³⁹When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.



There was a special baby born last week.

He was born in Pensacola, not Bethlehem. His father wasn't a carpenter, but a tattoo artist. But this baby's arrival was still heralded with joy as text messages announced the good news.

Atlas Walker was conceived at the end of March, right after his parents Katy and Aaron went into lockdown. His mom said he's a coronial; a member of the micro-generation that will forever be tied to this weird time. It remains to be seen whether 2020 will produce a baby boom or a baby bust. But pandemic pregnancy - like pandemic parenting and pandemic everything else - has been a whole new adventure.

Mom Katy said if she had to pick a word to describe it, it would be insular. Usually having a baby is a shared experience. Friends and family and even strangers weigh in with advice and gifts and well-wishes. But not this year. Her husband couldn't attend any of her prenatal visits. There were no birthing classes, no shopping trips for nursery supplies, no baby shower or gender-reveal party. Because she rarely left the house, plenty of acquaintances never realized she was pregnant. "I feel like I've been living a secret life," she said.

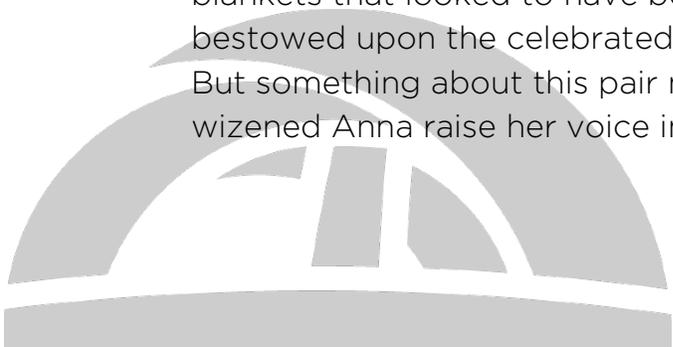
Someday, she'll explain to Atlas why his mom and dad were the only two people who held him or fed him or rocked him to sleep. Someday, she'll tell how he met his grandparents and great-grandparents over FaceTime. Someday, she'll explain why everyone in his baby photos was wearing a mask. But for now, she's writing all these things in her journal so she won't forget them; a 21st century version of pondering them in her heart. For her, good news has finally arrived, weird year and all.

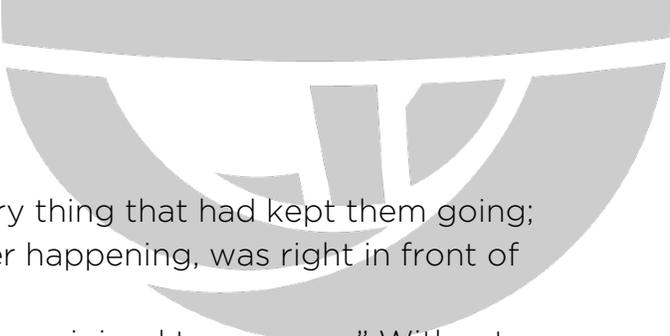
Simeon and Anna have spent a lifetime - a lifetime - in the temple waiting for good news to arrive. They have lived faithful lives; marked their hours by prayer and holy rituals. They've followed the religious rules and helped others do the same. But still, year after year after year has passed by without so much as a whisper that the long-awaited Messiah was near. So if you are looking for a sign that God comes quickly to people in need, this isn't it.

But if you're looking for reassurance that sooner or later God does keep God's promises, you are in luck.

That's the word Simeon shares when he lays eyes on the quiet couple hurrying in to make their sacrifices at the temple. They clearly didn't have much; his hands held not a lamb or a goat but two small bird. Her hands clutched a bundle of blankets that looked to have been hastily collected, not painstakingly crafted and bestowed upon the celebrated arrival of a first-born son.

But something about this pair made old Simeon stop in his tracks. They made wizened Anna raise her voice in praise. Somehow, after all this time, it was true. He





was here. And for these two faithful souls the very thing that had kept them going; the very thing that maybe they had given up ever happening, was right in front of them. Hope had been born.

Professor Fred Craddock writes that “hope is always joined to memory.” Without the vision of something to hold on to – whether a past experience, or a picture of a different future – our imaginations too often get stuck in the present. And while each and every moment is a gift from God, we know that hope is what gives us the ability to transcend the struggles we face and carry us forward.

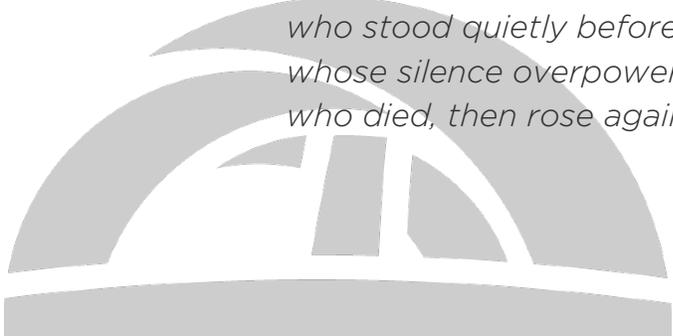
In faith, hope is joined to memory when we stitch together -- carefully, thoughtfully -- the stories and promises of scripture. When we see, sometimes in reflection, where God has been present. You know what they say – hindsight is 20/20. And I trust that when 2020 is in our rear view mirror we will be able to spot the glimmers and glimpses of countless ways God has been present. Sometime this week, I pray that you will pour a cup of tea, and pull out your journal or your calendar or your camera roll, and take the time to reflect on where God has shown up for you.

Though we may not behold the Christ Child like Anna; though we may not cradle Jesus in our arms like Simeon; we have seen the Lord. We just don’t always know it in the moment.

But there is something we can do to help us stay aware and alert for Christ: We can confess our deep and abiding trust in the God who keeps promises. Perhaps this Advent Creed shared by British author Dave Hopwood can be part of your daily practice:

*We believe in God the Father, creator of heaven and earth,
The one who is full of patience,
who is not afraid of silence,
who does not need to fill each moment with activity and noise.
The one who is beyond bluster and flurry,
and who does not jostle for attention.*

*We believe in God the Son, Saviour of creation,
who slipped into Bethlehem one night, mostly unnoticed,
who lived thirty years without headlines or hurry,
who frequently took time alone with his patient Father,
who waited for the right time to become the suffering servant,
who stood quietly before the noise of his accusers,
whose silence overpowered their words,
who died, then rose again on a quiet Sunday morning.*





*We believe in God the Holy Spirit,
who strengthens, empowers, renews and refreshes,
sometimes arriving with obvious power,
sometimes with the quiet breath of a whisper.*

*We believe in one God
who patiently waits for us,
and who longs for us to do the same.*

Friends, the season of Advent may be past. We may be anxious to flip that calendar page to 2021 and put this weird year behind us. But if we have learned anything from Simeon and Anna, it is that our journey of faith is not just for a season. It is for a lifetime. Some days we will sing. Some days we will weep. Some days we will wonder. Some days we will rage. Some days we will be guided by a star and some days we will sit in darkness.

But the words of the angels are words for us: do not be afraid.

The song of Simeon is a song for us: do not give up.

The promise of scripture is a promise for us: do not lose hope.

God is faithful. Christ is born. Amen.

