12-31-17 Rev. Amy Haines

Luke 2:22-40 Going Home Again “Coming Home” Advent Series

Five weeks ago we began the journey of Advent, and our “Coming Home” series. Have those five weeks gone fast for you or dragged on for you?

For me, they have gone fast. December was filled with concerts and birthdays and shopping and family gatherings and special worship services. It was a joy to see so many of your family members at worship last weekend. This past week we were able to take a few days off and spend time with our extended family, including going home to the town where Ken was born and raised.

But now the travel is over. The presents will soon be put away. And once the 12 days of Christmas finish on January 6th, the decorations will be boxed up for another year. After one more day of rest and football, my family will return to some semblance of a normal schedule

in the new year.

Are you ready for a new year to begin?

Tomorrow marks the beginning of the year 2018. A new year of hope, a new year of possibilities. Yet also a new year to continue to live by faith, a new year to continue to live by love, a new year to continue to trust in God’s presence and God’s promises.

The promises we have heard proclaimed in Scripture over these past five weeks are timeless.

Throughout Advent and now into the Christmas season, we have heard God’s constant invitation to come home, home to God’s presence, home to God’s grace, home to God’s gift of salvation. God offered this invitation to the Israelites both before and after the exile; God offered this invitation to the Gentiles as the early church expanded the good news of Jesus beyond Judah; God offers this invitation to all, then and now and into the future, through the gift of Emmanuel, God with us, God’s own Son born into the messiness of our world.

Today we hear once more God’s invitation to come home, not to a specific location, but home to a relationship with God, through faith in Jesus as Emmanuel, God with us, our Savior and our Lord.

Today’s scripture is anticlimactic after the good news of Jesus’ birth proclaimed by the heavenly host. Today’s worship may feel anticlimactic after the wonder of candlelight on Christmas Eve.

Yet life moves on, and we are still called to be faithful. That is true for us gathered here to worship on this last day of the year, and that was true for Joseph and Mary following the birth of Jesus.

When the shepherds left, Joseph and Mary had to settle into a new routine in Bethlehem,

at least for a little while. Finding a temporary place among distant relatives, they had to learn how to care for their newborn son. Do you any of you remember what life is like with a newborn baby creating a new normal that is anything but routine?

While in Bethlehem, Joseph and Mary also had to figure out how to stay faithful to the Jewish rituals that the Law dictated after the birth of their firstborn son.

The closest we have today to these rituals is our sacrament of baptism. I can remember the choices Ken and I had to make as we wanted all three of our children claimed by God through the sacrament of baptism, yet chose to have all three of our December born babies baptized in April due to the unpredictability of weather, the distance family had to travel, and the coordination of schedules with the district superintendents who officiated at the baptisms.

Joseph and Mary did not have the luxury of flexibility when they sought to fulfill the Jewish rituals for their son Jesus.

Eight days after birth, Jesus was circumcised and officially given his name.

Forty days after birth, the holy family had to travel to the temple in Jerusalem for Mary’s purification and the dedication of their firstborn son. While technically the dedication was to occur thirty-three days after birth, for practical purposes these two rituals were often combined

at the time of purification. Unlike circumcision, which could be done in the home, the rituals of purification and dedication both had to occur at the Temple in Jerusalem, which was only a short journey from Bethlehem.

The ritual of purification allowed Mary to reenter society and the worshipping community as she was pronounced clean by the Temple priests. The dedication ritual gave Jesus the status and role as head of the family for the next generation and gave thanks to God for the blessing of his birth. Both of these rituals were performed after the customary sacrifice, which for Joseph and Mary was an offering of two doves or two pigeons, the common sacrifice of a poor family.

To most observers at the Temple on that day, Joseph, Mary and the infant Jesus were no different than any other ordinary faithful poor Jewish family coming to fulfill the law of Moses.

I am certain Joseph and Mary expected that trip to the temple to be ordinary like every other ritual observance. Yet, once again, Mary and Joseph were reminded that their family is now anything but ordinary and that their family life will be anything but normal with God’s Son as their child.

Once again, Jesus was recognized and worshipped as God’s long-awaited Messiah. Where first shepherds came to worship the child, now two elderly Jews recognized God’s salvation in their midst.The visit of the magi was still to come.

The two elderly Jews at the center of today’s Scripture were both extremely faithful Jews

who spent their time in prayer and pious living.

Simeon was an elderly man who eagerly prepared for and prayed for the coming of God’s Messiah, an occurrence promised to him before his death. Often Simeon would be guided by the Holy Spirit as he lived a devout and just-filled life patterned after the ways of God.

Anna had been a praying widow since her husband had died seven years after their marriage,

and she was now eighty-four years old, a very old woman according to that day’s standards.

Anna spent her widowed life worshipping at the temple in prayer and fasting.

Both Simeon and Anna lived their lives waiting, preparing, and anticipating the arrival of God’s Messiah, looking forward to the day when God would be in their midst.

Unlike many of that time who were looking for a military-style conquering-hero messiah to save Israel from Rome and Herod and poverty, these two devout Jewish elderly saints were open to receiving and recognizing God’s salvation in whatever form God chose to send himself in. I often wonder what they were really looking for. Were they looking for a couple of power and position? Were they surprised when Jesus showed up with poor peasant parents?

What would I have been looking for? If I had been in Bethlehem on that holy night, or in the temple on this day, or residing in Galilee 33 years later, would I have recognized Jesus as the Messiah? Or would I, too, have been looking for a conquering hero or a political activist rather than a humble carpenter rabbi, born to a peasant family in a borrowed room?

Thankfully, both Simeon and Anna were looking in the ordinary temple routine for the salvation of humanity, seeking to see the Christ among us.

Simeon and Anna had both been prepared by the Holy Spirit to recognize the infant Christ.

They had both been on a constant vigil for years anticipating the coming of God to our world.

So their witness to Jesus on the morning of the rituals was no accident. Through continual prayer, fasting and following God’s ways they had both grown closer to God and God’s word.

On the morning of Jesus’ dedication Simeon and Anna were both prepared and open to be led by the Holy Spirit to see their vision and vigil affirmed.

When they saw Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus Simeon and Anna did not see any miracles, signs or wonders. They did not see a big billboard from God with an arrow pointing the way to the Son of God. They did not hear an audible from God or even a whisper that this baby was different.

Led by the Holy Spirit, Simeon and Ann just knew. They recognized the Christ child in the face of an ordinary tiny baby. They saw God in the midst of an ordinary poor couple faithfully fulfilling the Law of Moses.

When they looked upon Mary’s child both Simeon and Anna knew then that it was time to praise. It was time to rejoice. Simeon could now face death at peace that he had seen the fulfillment of God’s promises. Anna could now cease her fasting for the joy of Israel was in her presence. Simeon and Anna knew in that moment, in that day, that they were in the presence of God incarnate, and they both responded with loud praise.

The Gospel of Luke records the words of wonder spoken by Simeon:

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
    according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
    and for glory to your people Israel.” (LK 2:29-32)

God was now in their midst. “The Word had become flesh and had made his home among us.” (from JN 1.14a) The long-awaited Messiah was now living, breathing flesh and blood in Israel. The prophecies had been fulfilled. God’s salvation was now at hand for both Jew and Gentile,

a light of love for all people.

Simeon and Anna worshipped, and witnessed, and gave thanks for the fulfillment of God’s promises. They had no need to see God’s promise come to fruition in Jesus’ ministry and death and resurrection. They knew it would come to pass.

They worshipped, and trusted, and believed, simply thankful to see with their own eyes the one who would bring about God’s redemption in our world, the one who would offer salvation to all people- old and young, rich and poor, male and female, those on the margins as well as those in power.

Simeon and Anna remind us today that Jesus’ birth was only the beginning of the story. The baby in the manger would grow in strength and wisdom and favor with God until the time his ministry would begin. And his ministry, his death and his resurrection—they all proclaim once again God’s saving grace offered to all people in all generations in all nations.

This is the good news we gather once again to proclaim in our worship today—Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us, for every moment of every day.

And through faith in Jesus, God once again invites us home, home to God’s forgiving love, hope, peace and joy.

Are you ready in the new year to go home again, home to God’s love and grace?

Are you ready in the new year to go home again, home to an abiding relationship with Jesus?

Are you ready in the new year to go home again, home to a life of faith and faithfulness,

living as Christ’s followers at home, at work, at school, at play?

My prayer is that we will all seek to be ready to renew our faith as the calendar declares a new year in the morning.

If you have not yet made a home with God, are you ready to come home to God in the new year for the first time, to commit your heart and life and future to Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us?

My prayer is that a new year will bring many a new commitment of faith from all who do not yet have an abiding relationship with Jesus.

Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. Jesus is good news for all people in all nations in all generations. Jesus is our Savior, the one who has forgiven us of our sins, and our Lord,

the one who will lead us into new ways of living by God’s grace, hope and love.

As we move into a new year, may we grow in wisdom and grace, in faith and hope,

in love and favor with God.

May it be so. Let us pray.

Like the people who found hope in a manger,
Christmas Spirit, Holy Spirit, rest on us!Like Wise Men traveling to see a new star,
Christmas Spirit, Holy Spirit, reveal to us!Like Scrooge yelling from his bedroom window,
Christmas Spirit, Holy Spirit, guide us!Great, good news-carrying Spirit
Rest on us as you did on Simeon.Illuminating, light-bringing Spirit
Reveal to us as you did to Anna!Holy, Holy, Holy Spirit
Guide us as you guided the wise long ago, (Amen).

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May we all find our home with God through faith in Jesus.

Amen.