12-27-20 Glory Revealed Rev. Amy Haines

Lk 2:22-40 Christmas 1

When have you had to wait a long time for something?

Some people have to wait years to finally receive a well-deserved promotion. Others are impatient waiting in line at Kings Island or even Kroger. How many first-time parents struggle through the ups and downs of the nine months waiting on the arrival of their firstborn son or daughter? How many in our world today have struggled through the ups and downs of these past nine months and counting since the world went into lockdown? If you’re like my family, you are still waiting for packages to arrive that were supposed to be here prior to Christmas day. And speaking of Christmas morning, how many children believe minutes feel like hours when waiting to unwrap presents.

Imagine spending your entire life waiting. Waiting for the coming of God. Waiting to see the Lord’s Messiah. Waiting for God’s glory to be revealed. Would you be filled with anticipation or impatience? Would you wait in reluctance or in hopefulness?

We know through the prophets that the people of God waited generations for the coming of the Messiah. We know through the Scriptures that many of God’s faithful followers died before seeing the fulfillment of God’s promises. Today, we hear the story of two ordinary Jews, Simeon and Anna, who waited their entire lives for the glory of God to be revealed. And that glory was revealed through the infant Jesus.

When I think of Simeon and Anna, I picture grandparents who have waited and prayed for years to hold a grandchild or great-grandchild. Think of how many men and women are still waiting in this year of COVID to hold newborns born in different states or even different countries. Then imagine the joy and delight that will be on their faces when they finally get to hold those children for the first time.

Simeon and Anna were two ordinary yet faithful Jews who spent many hours in the Temple in Jerusalem.

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 saints were open to receiving and recognizing God’s salvation in whatever form God chose to reveal Godself. They recognized the Christ child in the face of an ordinary tiny baby. Like the shepherds, they looked at the face of this little child and wonder of wonders, saw the glory of God revealed.

Jesus was brought to the Temple that day by Joseph and Mary to fulfill the rights customary to their faith.

After the shepherds left on the night of Jesus’ birth, Joseph and Mary had to settle into a new routine in Bethlehem. Finding a temporary place to live among distant relatives, they learned how to care for their newborn son. 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 traveled 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 faithful Jewish family coming to fulfill the law of Moses. Yet to those moved by the Holy Spirit, they were not an ordinary family.

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.

I often wonder what these two elderly saints 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, Simeon and Anna had both been prepared by the Holy Spirit to recognize God in the flesh, Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. 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.

Simeon’s name means “to hear.” For many years Simeon had listened to the sounds of the Temple. To the cries of the people. To the words of the rituals. To the songs of praise as well as lament. To the prayers of praise and sorrow.

For years Simeon had also listened to the Holy Spirit. He listened to God’s Word. He listened for God’s ways. And on that day, in that moment, he heard promises fulfilled through the sounds of an infant.

When Simeon and Anna saw Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus they did not see any big 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.

When they looked upon the face of Jesus both Simeon and Anna knew that their prayers were answered, and now was the time to praise. Now was the 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 having seen the one who would redeem Israel.

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)

Anna is the only female in the Gospel of Luke to be named a prophet. Not only did she give thanks for Jesus, she spoke to others about the one who would redeem Israel.

God was now in their midst. As the Gospel of John proclaims:

“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. God’s good work was ongoing for all people. God’s glory continued to be revealed.

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, 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. God’s glory has been revealed to us through Jesus. God’s good news is still the gift of Jesus for each and every one of us.

How do we respond this day?

Are we open to hearing this as good news for us here today?

Are we open to seeing God among us still?

Are we open to sharing with others the good news we have seen and heard?

Are we open to praising God for God’s presence?

Christmas is just the beginning of Jesus’ story, and the beginning of the story of God’s love for each and every one of us.

As we move into a new year, may we listen to the Holy Spirit guiding us to live by faith. May we live with expectation and hope that God is still with us. Then may we join our voices with Simeon’s and Anna’s in singing and sharing and proclaiming the good news of God’s gift of salvation.

A child has been born—for us! God is with us, to redeem us and to redeem our world! Thanks be to God.