

Sermon  
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Simeon and Anna

### The Wait is Over, and So It Continues both Day and Night

Let's be in prayer: May the words spoken, and the words received, be only in your service great God of Love.

Waiting is rarely easy. Sometimes we wait for a death. Sometimes we wait for a birth. Sometimes we wait for medical test results, needing to hold the possibilities of life and death at the same time. Sometimes we wait for justice that we're not sure we'll ever see. Sometimes we wait for a good surprise that we are assured is coming.

In the church year, we have a whole season to practice waiting. The church is so convinced about the importance of waiting that it dedicates four weeks of the year to it. We call the season of waiting Advent, and we're gifted with time to anticipate and prepare to remember and celebrate the Savior's birth.

Our waiting for Christmas echoes back to the waiting of our spiritual ancestors. Simeon and Anna, along with the whole people of Israel, had waited not just four weeks of each year but over 800 years for news of liberation. For that long they had been a people in bondage—either literally in Babylon or under the rule of empires that conscribed their lives and livelihoods, such as under the Roman Empire. It had been nearly 800 years since the words attributed to the prophet Isaiah that a Messiah would liberate them from their bondage. That's over 30 generations by some calculations! It seems no wonder to me that the aging Simeon would say, "You can take me now, God! I've seen the fulfillment of your promise, and that is gift enough for this lifetime!" It seems no wonder that Anna, an aged prophet who'd devoted her life to worship of God in the Temple, would shout out for joy when she saw that the Promised One had finally arrived.

We're not told exactly how Simeon or Anna recognized that the baby being presented by Mary and Joseph in the Temple was, in fact, the Messiah. Simeon had heard from the Holy Spirit that the Messiah would be in the Temple, and to go and see, like the message the shepherds got to leave their fields and go to Bethlehem. The writer of Luke's Gospel doesn't tell us if Anna had received a similar foretelling. Were either of them told specifically who to look for, or did they, like Mary's kin Elizabeth and her baby John just know by Mary's countenance that the infant she was now carrying in her arms instead of her womb was the longed for child of God. Whatever was the case, the importance of the story seems to be that both Simeon and Anna knew that they were seeing the promise of their God fulfilled.

This is the message of our Christmas celebration. That after a long wait, the promise of our God is fulfilled. In an unexpected and upside-down way, as a baby in a cattle stall to migrant parents, but the way the promise is fulfilled tells us much about how God has and does intend to be incarnated in creation. It is a story of great joy, meant for all people. Glory to God in the highest! The long wait is over!

This is true, but it is not the end of the story for a God for whom paradox is the paradigm. For, just as Jesus lived and died and was resurrected to new life, and present to us even now through the same Holy Spirit who invited Simeon to the Temple, the wait is over and is yet.

Jesus spoke of a kingdom of God. An upside-down kingdom, that wasn't a political or military or even religious dynasty. It was a subversive kingdom. As we hear each year in the nativity story, the anointed One of God didn't arrive at the palace, but in the stable. In fact, his

coming was so unspectacular and his ministry so humble, that many were confused about who he really was. Maybe this is why so many still are.

During his ministry Jesus tells his followers that this so-called kingdom, or realm, of God was something altogether different than the power structures of the day. The kingdom of God, he says, is like a treasure buried in a field, like yeast that leavens bread, like the tiny mustard seed that grows into a bush large enough to harbor birds, like good seed sown into a field, and like a pearl of great price. The kingdom of God is a place where the last shall be first and the first shall be last, where one must be willing to enter like a small child. The kingdom of God is found where the sick are healed, the outcast are welcomed, the hungry are fed.

Jesus tells his disciples that this kingdom was both being fulfilled in their presence and is still to come. Its arrival is enigmatic, here and not-yet-here. It's arrival something to acknowledge and celebrate in the present moment, yet something to prepare and wait for. There is something about the season of Advent that permeates the whole of our Gospel, even as we see the promise of God made plain in Jesus.

This paradox confuses Paul and the other disciples after Jesus' resurrection. They thought Jesus was talking about a kingdom that would come in their lifetimes. That Jesus would return soon and make all things right. In fact, Paul seems so convinced of this timeline that he told people not to bother getting married or starting families. The new heaven and the new earth were just about to arrive.

It's been 2,100 years and we're still waiting.

Christians have different understandings about what we as Christians are awaiting and when to anticipate the coming realm. Some take the apocalyptic writings of the Bible—which are writings describing the oppressions of the time in symbolic language that would not be understood by the oppressors—and try to make a time table. Some play on people's fears about the coming kingdom being ushered in as an apocalypse and make a hefty profit by selling them provisions for their bunkers. But a more faithful way of thinking about the return of Jesus has to do with awaiting the fullness of the kingdom of God that Jesus spoke about in his ministry. Similar to Anna, we're not told when or if it will happen in our lifetimes. But Jesus has told us how to spot the kingdom. It is when the last shall be first, the hungry are fed, and creation is restored. We're even told that where Love is, there is God. We feel this realm in the waters of baptism. We taste this realm in the Holy Supper. We see this realm in every act of justice.

And yet we are promised that there is more to come. Where every tear is dried and everything that life will have no enemy, not even death.

Our ancestors Simeon and Anna waited for the Messiah, in the way that 800 years' worth of waiting prepared them. They understood that waiting for God is an active proposition. They went about their business of being faithful to God, neither having given up hope nor simply passing the time. Simeon was a man of God, with a faith strong enough to follow the Spirit's prompting to the Temple that day. Anna was a prophet and a widow, who spent her days and nights at the Temple, praying and fasting.

These two faithful elders teach us about the nature of waiting, and how we are called to wait for the fullness of God's kingdom. We're called to praise for God for the Promise fulfilled and to trust in God's working for the coming realm. We're called through grace to live in the now-ness of that realm even as the fullness of it is yet to come.

Ours has been a 2,000 year wait, and yet it isn't meant to be a passive wait. It is a wait that cooperates with what God is yet doing. It doesn't hold its breath, but takes deep gulps of the Spirit who is breathing the kingdom into us even now. It isn't a wait that sits on its hands, but rather one that asks God to put our hands to work to help build that coming kingdom.

It is a wait that is alert for signs of God's hope still arriving. Just as Simeon and Anna recognized Jesus because they were paying attention, we practice paying attention so that we,

too, can notice signs of the now-and-coming realm of God. Our spiritual practices of worship and scripture study and prayer are all related to being awake and aware to notice God's perpetual birthing in the world.

With the season of Advent over, we may feel that we have finished waiting. Jesus has been born, after all. We finally get to sing Christmas carols. The presents are unwrapped. The leftovers are finished. We get to move on to the New Year with new resolutions and whatever the day-to-day of 2019 will bring. Yes. And, still we wait.

Let's wait with the patience, example, and gratitude of Simeon and Anna. Let's practice paying attention to where Jesus is now at work. Let's keep our hearts and minds alert to notice where the realm of God is yet breaking in. For we, too, have seen the salvation of our people and of all creation, and we can go in peace, sustained by the Spirit to know that this is enough.

It has been, it will continue to be. For the realm before and within us, for the realm all creation will one day see, thanks be to God!