

Seeing All Things Holy
Luke 2:22-40
December 28, 2014
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
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Today is one of those in-between Sundays that tends to be very quiet. Unwrapping is done, ringing in the New Year is yet to be done; eating pounds of butter and sugar and white flour is done, launching into resolutions is yet to be done. We could have easily stayed at home in our pajamas past noon for one more day with that second or third pot of coffee, but the promise of community and worship beckoned, and we are here. Gathering together here on this in-between day (a little stuffed, a new to-do list waiting for us a few days from now) is a great place to linger a while. Find both solace and challenge here. It's a good day to hear a story.

The last time we saw Mary, she was praising God with her cousin, Elizabeth. The two women, both unexpectedly pregnant with unique and special babies, had said "yes" to God's unpredictable and unknowable plans. They had said "yes" to making themselves available as central characters in God's unfolding story. They formed a bond with each other and affirmed the goodness of God being made known through them.

Mary was terrified when Gabriel showed up with a Divine Plan to offer her, but the angel told her to *not* be afraid. Mary knew it was easy to stay afraid alone and harder to stay afraid in community. After she told God, "Here I am, all of me, take my life, let it be", she went to her cousin to hold onto that bravery a little bit longer and borrow courage when she needed it.

The two women spent about three months together, then each returned to their lives and gave birth to babies: John the baptizer and Jesus.

We find them this morning on an in-between day, not unlike this morning. It is a worship scene or ritual dedication and purification. Jesus has been born, the angels and shepherds are gone, it is 40 days later, but he's a long way from being a man who gathers disciples and heals the sick and brings words of God's shalom to all people. Today, he's a newborn; about at the age when you look into his eyes and give him a big, exaggerated smile, and he responds grandly with a big, newborn baby smile of his own. It's at this age that Mary and Joseph bring him to the temple to be dedicated to God.

Almost a year has passed since the day Gabriel came to visit Mary. She has remained committed to God's promises that entire time. She has held the words of the angel and the shepherds in her heart. I suspect she's gathering them up and holding them there because she will need those reminders throughout her life to remember what she said "yes" to all those months and years ago. When God does not feel close and saying "yes" feels more like a dream than a Divine contract, she has these markers to hold onto.

When she is up all night with a baby who has his days and nights mixed up and wants to say, “I must be crazy to believe that God has plans for me and for my son. I must have imagined all of this to be true.” When she is living out the reality of saying “yes” to God and it’s a lot more mundane and difficult than she expected it to believe. That’s when she can access these things she holds in her heart—the time shepherds just showed up after she had given birth and said, “Angels told us that God is doing something amazing through you. There’s this big bright light following above you. Don’t you see it? It’s a sign. It’s a promise.”

Today she and Joseph go to the temple to mark that her waiting time after giving birth is over, and now she can return to the fullness of community and worship. And they dedicate Jesus to God. There was also a practice of redeeming firstborn babies; a ritual that linked back to the Torah that was an act of protection. While Mary and Joseph make the sacrifice for Mary’s purification, they do not pay a redemption price for Jesus. Instead, they dedicate him to God’s service. Their act reminds us of another unexpected birth from a woman who said “yes” to God, Hannah. When Hannah’s son Samuel was to be born, she sang a song of praise to God...just like Mary...and she gave the boy to God saying, “now I give him to the Lord. For his whole life he will be given over to the Lord.”¹

The parents are doing their part to honor the ways of God. They bring the child to the temple to be dedicated, they bring Mary to the temple to be purified. Sometimes the process of living out our “yes” to God’s ways is ritual, daily, step-by-step. We honor God by simply showing up and giving ourselves to life, worship, community. Sometimes we feel connected and sometimes we don’t. Today they are committing themselves and their son through an act of worship but likely have every intention that it will be an ordinary day, just their family of three. Today they are surprised.

Simeon wasn’t planning on going into the temple as Mary and Joseph walked in. Maybe he was running errands or had already been by or was going over later. But something stirred in him, and he was drawn to the holy place. Because he was a life-long watcher of God’s movement, he knew this compulsion to go in was something beyond him. So he paid attention to the pulling on his body and walked inside. He scanned the room. Had he forgotten something? What was that nagging within him? He saw people praying, priests accepting sacrifices. Then he saw a young couple whispering to each other. They had that tired-but-proud look of new parents. Then he saw the baby and felt that nagging in his gut again. So he went to them, like he was being pulled quickly by a rope, and he scooped that baby up out of his parents’ arms. And that feeling in his gut shot through every part of his body. This was it. This was the one. This was everything he had watched and waited for his entire life. God has not gone silent but has been plotting and planning and whispering.

The baby whom shepherds abandoned their fields to find, now six weeks old, was already developing a reputation for attracting bizarre, unexpected episodes. The elderly Simeon stared down into the baby’s eyes and felt the contentment and certainty he had hoped for all of his days.

¹ 1 Samuel 1:28

He waited year after year after year after year for God's promises to be true. Friends had laughed at his fervency, given up on his stubbornly held belief in God, called him an old fool. But he kept watching and waiting because he remembered that time when the Spirit moved, God's presence was as close as breath. It was like the story of Moses being hid in the cleft of the rock as the great I Am came strolling past. It rarely happened in that way again, but Simeon did not give up on how real it was. And when God's Spirit was made known to him, he knew that God would reveal the New Thing to come.

Simeon has waited his entire life for whatever new thing God will do through and for God's people. He's committed himself to waiting and watching, and finally, as his days are nearing an end, he sees the thing he has been waiting to see.

Did he think it would be an infant? A warrior? Did he expect an introduction or just a moment when he "knew" what he was seeing was holy? He kept watching, looking, and then he saw this baby.

He held the infant and started to sway, the way you automatically do with a newborn, and prayed-whispered-sang, the way you automatically do with a newborn. But his words were rich and complex and another of those holy markers for mama Mary. The baby Jesus grabbed onto one of his fingers, the way those sweet babies do, and Simeon cried out:

I can die now with the peace of God wrapped tightly around my being.
I have seen the plans of God come true.
This baby in my arms is the very light of God, for all people.
Thanks be to God.

Maybe he twirled around a little bit, smiling and laughing and lost in that baby's face. Perhaps he forgot the tired-but-proud parents were standing close by, taking in this scene of an old, old man with tears in his eyes staring at their baby like he had been waiting for this day to come.

Mary cleared her throat or Joseph stepped in a bit closer. Something finally caught his attention, and Simeon looked up at the parents, and he blessed them. Oh, Mary and Joseph, get ready for this. You will need this blessing, so hear my words and hold onto them. This child is more than special. This child will change the world, but it won't be easy. No, it won't be easy, you will feel like your very soul has been pierced with a sword. God's grace and peace be with you, dear ones. This child is a gift not just to you but to the world.

And as if that weren't enough, Simeon walks away and the elderly prophet Anna appears. Anna has spent most of her life at the temple watching for God, looking for signs of holy. She's learned a way of seeing things that we often overlook because we're too distracted, too cynical, too busy. She sees the signs, the markers, the glimpses. And today she has watched from her usual spot; the place she has spent night and day for decades.

She saw the couple come in with their baby and their turtledoves. She could tell right away that this was their 40 day visit. She went through her usual prayers, usual steps through the women's court of the temple. Her eyes returned to them as they moved through their own prayers and own rituals. She stopped moving and praying and just watched. Soon she saw Simeon walk in with a determined look on his face. She stood still as he made a bee-line for the young family. And as he picked up the baby, she understood. She started walking over, slowly, amazed. Listening and watching.

When he was done, she knew. And her prayer changed from that moment on from what God might do to what God is doing. This family, this baby, thank you.

Because Simeon and Anna are watching, they SEE Jesus...they see who he really is, who he is going to become. They are awake and alert in a way that even on an in-between day in the temple, an ordinary day of going about prayers and routine and the details of daily life, they are in a state of anticipation that God could show up. Something new could happen. Even after spending decades of life waiting for some new thing, they are so tuned to God's spirit that they know the new thing will happen now.

They watch, they see, and they praise God for all of what seeing this baby means, even though that means predicting obstacles and death.

We have to learn to see like Simeon and Anna. Sometimes when we describe what we see, the list is ugly. The details in our lives that are not as we wished or would have chosen for ourselves. The rocky marriage, the rockier career. The empty house, the sick child. The stack of bills, the lack of options. If it isn't our personal lives that overwhelm us, the world will surely do it. Systems and nations that are broken. Civic leaders and religious leaders we put great hope in turn out to be fragile and human, just like us, and that is sure to disappoint. Great evil abounds and seems to go unchecked, and that is enough to send us all back to bed where we hide from it all.

But the world Jesus was born into was at least as broken and corrupt as this one, and Joseph and Mary and Simeon and Anna knew it. In the face of overwhelming evidence to believe in the stuck-ness of humanity, they praised God for the ways God will make it all right. They did not believe the world would stay as it is. They believed that God would finish the story beyond what we have seen and known. And they watched vigilantly for signs that God was and is very much at work in the midst of what we *know* to be imperfect.

To this point Karoline Lewis writes, "We give praise to affirm our belief that the world can be different, has to be different, and that that difference is known in bringing about the kingdom of God here and now.

We desperately need Anna and Simeon this week. We need them to help us utter the praise of God that simultaneously responds to God's presence and resists the presence of evil. We need them to model the reaction to the convergence of waiting and fulfillment.

We need them to give us the courage to trust in our God who is indeed present and powerful when the world in which we live suggests otherwise."²

Mary and Joseph finished their rituals in the temple. They gathered up their things, themselves, and the amazing words spoken over their family, and they went back home. They did what they knew to do today. They went home, gave themselves to each other and to God, remembered the signs and markers of God's promise, they prayed and gave thanks, and they watched for God to surprise them again.

What do we do on this in-between Sunday when the town is sleepy, and we are slow, and the news continues to be bad, and all we want is to find comfort in each other's presence in the faint hope that God might surprise us? We show up. We watch. We pray. We give thanks. We see God at work in small and unexpected ways. We hold onto the signs that appear, big and small, to guide our way and affirm our waiting. And if we keep at it, then one day we will feel that tug like Simeon, we will respond and look, and God will send an undeniable sign of God's presence and peace.

Until then, we pray:

O God,

We thank you. We thank you for Christmas. For the promise of light in the darkness and goodness that triumphs evil. We thank you for the hope of a baby born into a world that needs hope...and joy...and peace...and love. We thank you for drawing us together in this place. We thank you for whispering and conspiring and creating new ways to reach us. We thank you for writing a story that is bigger than us and drawing our stories into yours. We ask that you keep reaching and whispering and drawing us toward you. May we watch, may we not be distracted, may we not give up. May we see the holy in the mundane, may we trust that you are ever-present and ready to surprise. Amen.

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3469>