

First Sunday After Christmas
12/31/23023
Southeastern Iowa Synod-wide Worship
Bishop Amy Current
Luke 2:22-40

Happy Christmas!

Soon the tree will come down.

Soon the blue bathrobe, the crowns and the wings and manger will be talked away back in the closet for another year.

But for now, for now, in this first week of Christmas, we relish the moments hearing the story of Jesus birth anew told with joy and wonder in the music and the gifts, in the feasts and in worship.

I am all in favor of a good old Christmas program with all the carols, all the costumes and all the wonder. Some of my favorites, though have not included only the littles, but also the elders, where the shepherds with their crooks and the angels with their halos range from age two to 82 and together share the good news, "glory to God in the highest and peace to all God's people on earth."

This is one of the beautiful ways that Luke tells the Christmas story too, through the elders, beginning with the patient and profound hospitality of Zechariah and Elizabeth as they welcome and greet Mary, the mother of Jesus as she awaits his birth.

And now with Simeon and Anna, humble witnesses who recognize the long-awaited Messiah, who will save the whole world from our sins in the baby that is carried by his parents to be presented to God at the temple so far. Then in Luke's gospel, we've had the telling of the story by the shepherds, and now by Simeon and Anna. Simeon and Anna, much like the shepherds are not religious elite, they're not religious leaders in the sense that they are not trained. They have no official duties in the temple.

We are told that Simeon is a faithful gent, a regular in the community who's getting on in years. He spends his days, we are told, praying, and waiting to see the promised Messiah before he draws his last breath.

Anna is an elder as well, a widow, a woman from one of the lost tribes of Israel. So Anna's an outsider in so many ways. She's dedicated herself to prayer, to fasting, and to worship in the temple since the day her husband died. And in the story, Luke names Anna as a prophet.

As I read again this story of faithful Simeon and the prophet Anna, I find myself profoundly grateful for their witness to Jesus, for their deep faith, for their diligence in hope. And I frankly am cheering on Luke's witnesses in celebrating and centering the elders in Jesus' story.

So often in our congregations, we center the stories of Jesus on children. I believe we as Lutheran Christians take seriously our baptismal promises to teach the faith, to provide for the scripture in the hands of those who are baptized, to bring them along to worship, to bring them and invite them and welcome them to the Lord's table and to walk with the baptized. Yet why is it that we focus only on the children? So often, what joy it is when all the baptized from age zero, a babe in arms to 105 all share in the good news of Jesus.

Truth be told, I often hear grief and yearning in our congregations about the changes in regular church attendance, which most often is expressed in grief about change. Loss culture shifts, changing demographics in our communities, and it comes in this question, Bishop, where are the young families? Where are the children?

I hear this longing for the energy, for the joy and for the generations. Even the noise that the youngest among us often bring, but friends, children will not save the church. Only Jesus saves.

And in the midst of our grief, which is real, and our longing, which I deeply understand, we often lose sight of the promise of God. And the mission we share for the promise of God is that God promises to save the world from our sins, from ourselves, from death, and promises us life and hope, and to create something new in our longing.

We often miss those beloved baptized, faithful prophets that have been here all along, watching and waiting and praying, and faithfully attending to worship, to fellowship, to service. For these are the Simeon and the Annas in our very midst.

You know the ones...

- The first one that arrives at church every time there's worship, throws on the lights, checks the heat, and then goes and greets each one who enters with the love of Jesus. Now, they might not use those very words, but you know it and feel it in the depths of your heart when you're met at the doorway.

- The one who knits, the one who knits the prayer shawls in their assisted living apartment. And as they're knitting the shawls that will be shared with those in need, they're talking to God about the community prayer lists as they knit each row.
- The one who shows up for Bible study every time a Bible study is offered. If every week that's great, all year long, you betcha, to learn about God's grace in scripture again and again.
- Or it's the one who builds the free pantry. You know the little boxes that we see in front of some church buildings, and they don't only build the free food pantry, but they keep it stocked as they're paying attention to the fact that there are people that are going hungry right in our own neighborhood, in our own communities.
- The one who reaches out their hand to hold onto another's to meet them in their grief or pain or longing. Not saying a word, but just being present.
- You know the ones who amazingly call every single person by name with tender love and then greets every guest that walks in the door and learns their story and never forgets it and shares the warmth of the community.
- Or the one who tends the flowers. You know the ones, the ones that weeded in the garden or the ones that make sure that the Easter lilies and the poinsettias are up and ready. And then the Sunday after they deliver those flowers to those who now live in long-term care.
- Or the ones like Simeon, the ones who wait for the promised Savior to meet them as they prepare to shut their weary eyes, eager for God's promise of eternal life and salvation.

You know these folks, beloved ones, for we are the church together, we all are witnesses to Jesus. We all are the baptized children of God, loved, gifted with faith, and likely burdened along life's way, broken at times, sinners every day. Yet by God's grace, we are met, we are held, we repent, and we are forgiven, and we then are freed to share the love of Jesus each and every one of us, no matter what our age is.

Simeon and Anna met Jesus. They met Jesus with awe and reverence and wonder and hope. Hope for a messiah who would carry God's promise of judgment and redemption for the whole world. And they knew they had a sense. They'd seen some things along the way. They were

familiar with God's story of scripture. They knew that the way ahead would not be easy for in Jesus. God enters the world, the messy, broken, weary world. And in Jesus, God encounters hatred and greed and evil and sin and torture and death. Death on the cross, and God indeed, God indeed judges the world. God judges us sinners and in doing so through Jesus loves us from death to life.

For God's love is the promise of life. In the face of death. For God's love is the promise of forgiveness for each and every sinner. For God's love is light dawning on a weary world which may not reveal what we remember, may not reveal what we long to return to, but what we can be assured of is God will meet us. God will meet us in our yearning, God will meet us in our pain. God will meet us in our sin and make all things new. We still proclaim the promise.

- Christ was born.
- Christ lived among us.
- Christ has died.
- Christ has risen,
- and Christ will come again.

In the meantime, we pray. We tell the story, we sing, we worship, we share our gifts. We feast at God's table. We celebrate the body of Christ unleashed on earth through the power of the Spirit, and we go in peace sharing the good news for Jesus. The Savior is with us. Amen.