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## Do You See What They See?

Luke 2:22-40

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 27, 2020 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

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Can you see it? A slightly hunched over man saunters slowly into the temple. His back is weary from the precariousness and struggle of a long life in first-century Palestine. Yet, his senses are on high alert because the Spirit has guided him to the temple today. And there Simeon waits and watches. Perhaps this is not the first time the Spirit has led him to the temple in expectation of something wonderful. Perhaps this was a common experience for him. But maybe not. Maybe it had been a long time since he had felt the tingle of anticipation about what God might do in his life. His eyes dance back and forth landing lightly on people throughout the room. What is he to see? Who should he notice on this day? What would be the gift for his faithful following of the Spirit's prompting this time? Watch him as he notices a young couple pass through the gates and enter the temple. His eyes light up! In that moment, he is a great grandfather meeting his great grandchild for the first time. In that moment, he is a child recognizing the package under the tree that bears the shape of the most treasured and desired gift. He is at the temple for this reason, for this encounter. So he extends his arms as he nears the couple, ready to receive the gift of the Spirit in the form of an infant child. He couldn't have known that this was the day the Lord's promise to him would be fulfilled. He couldn't have expected that he would see the Lord's salvation on this day. But it was the day. And with gift in hand, Simeon erupts in joy filled, prayerful praise of God. "Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights! Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host! Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars!" (Psalm 148:1-3). "Lord, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word for my eyes have seen your salvation."

Off to the side, a fixture of temple life gazes upon this holy moment and recognizes God's gift. Her eyes are no doubt failing with age, yet they are keen to perceive deeper realities because nights and days of prayer and fasting have honed her sight. Anna sees what others in the room do not. The temple is her home. Speaking on the Lord's behalf is her calling. Watch widowed Anna, frail as she is from fasting—the fasting perhaps borne both of piety and of poverty. Watch her as she rises from her humbled position. Slowed by age yet with a particular pep in her step, she makes her way to the young child in Simeon's arms. As she draws closer, the words swell within her. She is a prophet ready to proclaim a word from the Lord. She stands ever more upright, inhales the breath of the Spirit, and praises God and preaches to all the good news of the Lord's redemption made real in the child. "Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens! Let them praise the name of the LORD, for he commanded and they were created. He established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed. Praise the LORD from the earth... Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth! Young men and women alike, old and young together! ... Praise the Lord!" (148:4-7a, 11-12, 14b)

That day at the temple turned out to be quite the day. It was likely a day just like any other that ended up being a day like none other for Simeon and Anna. Some days are like that. Prayers recited and rituals enacted—the quotidian stuff of temple life happening all around when something special occurs. Seemingly minor encounters or ordinary practices occurring at the right

time and the right place mark mundane moments with the mystery of God. Often in the life of faith, the mundane is where we encounter the miraculous. It was that kind of day at the temple for Simeon and Anna. These faithful servants of the Lord persisted for their lifetimes in righteous devotion to God. They had shown up day after day, year after year, decade after decade. Devout in practice. Persistent in faithfulness. Consistent in prayer. Anna and Simeon had been watching and waiting for the coming of the Messiah. They must have been like children eagerly waiting for Christmas morning to see if that special gift would be under the tree. But multiply that anticipation and the longing a thousand times because the gift for which they waited was the redemption of God's people and light for all humankind. Perhaps they didn't know that would be the day, but their faithful habits of prayer and piety led them once again to the place where they just might receive God's grace and have an encounter with the Holy One. Yet that was the day! What joy! What blessing! What celebration! What praise and proclamation and peace! Can't you see it! On that day, they saw God's grace enfleshed. Do you see what they see?

What we don't see as easily in this story from Luke's Gospel are the years piled on years of Anna's and Simeon's watching, waiting, longing, desiring, needing, struggling, and journeying. We don't see the faithful lives of Anna and Simeon over the long-haul. Their lives with God—much like anyone's life with God over time—were made up of days stacked on days of ordinary devotion, faithful practice, and persistent prayer. We don't know if Anna and Simeon had little sightings of God's redemption and the consolation they desired along the way. We don't know if the waiting on God's promises had grown burdensome for them. We can't see if they experienced the dark night of the soul in their watching. We can't be sure if their years of pious devotion were marked at times or at length by dry stretches, wilderness wanderings, seeming silences from God. We are only told of their righteousness in waiting to see God's salvation. We only hear of their pious devotion in the delay. And in this we are given a glimpse of the persistence and long-suffering that surely is needed for any who journey with God over the course of a lifetime.

If the experience of modern-day saints is any indication, it's likely that both Simeon and Anna experienced the challenge of the long wait on God's promise to be fulfilled. Abundant are accounts of saints—the holy ones among us—who've journeyed with Jesus through doubt and struggle over years. Saints like St. John of the Cross and St. Thérèse of Lisieux lived devout lives, marked by the fruit of the Spirit and practices of faithfulness, yet nevertheless they sometimes went for long stretches without the sight of God's promises fulfilled for them. By now most people have heard of Mother Teresa of Calcutta's struggle for faith that persisted with her as she served Jesus among some of the world's most destitute and poor. For all of her devotion, for all of her sacrifice, for all of her serving Christ in every person she encountered, she nevertheless spent years in doubt, longing to experience God's presence and to feel the touch of the Lord.

Maybe you're saying today, "Preacher, why are you talking about waiting and longing and struggling and doubt? Don't you know it's the first Sunday after Christmas? Advent is over! Christmas is all about promises fulfilled, about the joy revealed, about the festive celebration of God coming to be with us. 'On the third day of Christmas my true love gave to me, three French hens,' not a sermon about prolonged waiting on the promises of God." Yet I have a suspicion that on this third day of Christmas, on this first Sunday after Christmas in the year 2020, there is more than one person who needs a word of encouragement that comes from the wisdom of elders, saints like Simeon and Anna. I suspect that there is more than one person struggling to see God's promises fulfilled or to experience the consolation and peace that is offered in the Christ child. For

so many around the world today, this year's Christmas was deprived of much of the typical joy and celebration because traditions 50 plus years in the making were canceled; the table was without food; a chair was unexpectedly empty. These challenges and so many more have muted if not eliminated the typical joys of the Christmas season for people everywhere. And while it is nevertheless true that in Christ God's promises have been fulfilled and God has decidedly determined to be with us forever, seeing this reality and holding it in our hands may be harder this year for you than it typically is.

If this is true for you today, there is good news. You are not alone. Sainly sinners and sinful saints long before you have walked the same road. And these elders in faith have offered guidance for the journey. Today our wise elders—Anna and Simeon—offer us examples of how to approach the journey of faith when the waiting is long and the fulfillment is delayed. And once we have finally seen what God invites us to see, they also demonstrate for us how then to respond. So let's attend to the wisdom of our elders this morning. Luke tells us that Simeon was a devout and just or righteous man and that Anna worshiped continuously, praying and fasting night and day. Simeon and Anna enacted their life with God through works of piety and works of mercy. Their daily lives were formed by practices of faith. These practices became the habits that shaped their lives and prepared them to recognize Jesus when they encountered him. Their devout acts served as conduits of the Spirit's activity. John Wesley, the 18<sup>th</sup> century Episcopal priest and de facto founder of methodism, called these sorts of ordinary practices of prayer and faithfulness, of piety and mercy, means of grace. Means of grace are those things God regularly uses as avenues for encounter with people. Means of grace are not ways of earning God's grace, but they are ways of actively waiting on God's free gift. Wesley spoke of things like reading scripture, fasting and praying, dining at the Lord's table, visiting the sick and imprisoned, feeding the hungry, and seeking justice as ways of actively waiting on God. So praying and fasting like Anna, or going to worship and doing deeds of justice and righteousness like Simeon serve to put us in the places where God regularly chooses to show up and be actively present with us. When we give ourselves to works of piety and mercy, we open ourselves to experience God's grace anew. And making habits of these practices is precisely how our eyes are honed to see when God uses the mundane and ordinary as moments of encounter with the Lord. Simeon's and Anna's practices of faith over time prepared them to see when God's Messiah showed up not as a royal king but as an infant child of peasant parents. Simeon and Anna show us that eventually faithful devotion makes room for glimpses of God's salvation, redemption, and consolation even in unexpected circumstances. Perhaps it will take years of faithful devotion for you to see what they see. But rest assured, God's faithfulness surpasses our own, and God's promises for us are steadfast and sure. So even if its momentary and not exactly what you expect, you will see what they see—Jesus, God's salvation enfleshed, for you.

Perhaps like Anna and Simeon, by the abundant and unearned grace of God, you have seen and can see the salvation of God right before you. If that is true for you today, Simeon and Anna demonstrate what comes next. When you see God's promises fulfilled, when you have experienced monumental or mundane moments where you've encountered God, when you've touched or been touched by God's promised deliverance, it is your place to praise God. And it is your place to proclaim the message to all around. When your expectations are fulfilled, your hopes realized, and joy has come, then praise and proclamation should erupt forth. Praise and proclamation are the vocation of all who've experienced the promises of God fulfilled. Praise and proclamation are the Spirit-evoked calling of any who have seen Jesus and recognized God's salvation in him. Whether

you believe yourself to be a preacher or not, praising God and testifying to your encounter with Jesus is the holy work of all disciples. That means it's your Spirit-enabled work for the sake of those longing for comfort, redemption, and salvation. In this work, in your praise and proclamation, you join your voice with the voices of the elders and saints before you, and you become encouragement for those who cannot yet see what you see.

Do you see what Anna and Simeon see? Look closely. The Lord's promise fulfilled may be as close as your next prayer or the touch of a child or a meal for the hungry or a march for justice. Ah! There it is! Praise Be! Amen.