
Are We There Yet?

Luke 2:22-40

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel
on December 28, 2014 by the Rev. Dr. Carol Gregg

Are we there yet? I wonder how many parents have heard this question as they traveled over the hill and through the vail to grandmother's house. With gas prices lower than they have been in years and the Christmas holiday falling close to the weekend, I'll bet there have been many road trips which started last Wednesday and will conclude today. From the backseat, tired passengers may whine the familiar question, "Are we there yet?"

Road trips were part of my childhood. My two brothers and I shared the backseat of the family car when we traveled from Michigan to our grandparents' home in Iowa or on a family vacation. Years after those trips, when my brothers and I were securely in adulthood, my father confessed his secret. Comic books. He claimed the 25cent comic books were a wise investment because they kept the three of us quietly reading and rereading stories as my parents drove. Today, families consider a DVD player a wise investment for road trips. Even accounting for years of inflation, I think my father had a very modest investment.

As we hear the story of Simeon and Anna this morning, I cannot help but hear the familiar question of arrival time. Are we there yet? Have we finally arrived?

Simeon was a faithful Jew who looked forward to the consolation of Israel. He longed to see the Messiah. In some ways, he may not have been particularly unique. The faithful of his day looked for God's action in the world. The words of Isaiah were familiar to them: "Comfort, O comfort my people... prepare the way of the Lord." (Isa 40:1,3) They longed for the day when they would go out in joy and be led back in peace. (Isa 55:12) Despite the fact the Isaiah's prophecy was roughly 600 years earlier, comfort had not yet come. Since the time of the exile, Israel had been invaded and conquered a number of times. Simeon and Anna lived under the Roman occupation, which began approximately 60 years before Jesus was born. The day when a Jewish monarch faithfully ruled Israel was in the far distant past, a glorious memory, but that day and its return remained an ever-present hope. One day, the Anointed One would come to restore the people and the nation. Not all was well in world in which Simeon lived so, of course, he longed for the consolation of Israel. He, as a presumably elderly man visiting the temple, represents the long-standing hopes of the people of Israel.

While in many ways Simeon was like his contemporaries, he was also unique. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he saw the Messiah. Guided by that same Spirit, Simeon found himself in the Temple the same day Mary and Joseph came to fulfill the requirements of the law. In walks the Holy Family, whom Simeon seems to immediately recognize. Taking Jesus in his arms he declares "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace... for my eyes have seen your salvation" (Luke 2:29-30). The long-awaited Messiah is here. He has arrived. We have arrived. The journey of waiting is over. Praise God. Maybe even a "Yes!"

We can appreciate Simeon's joy. In our own way, during the season of Advent we have waited again for the celebration of the birth of Jesus. The Christian church intentionally sets aside the four weeks of Advent for waiting and preparation. On Wednesday and Thursday last week we celebrated our Lord's birth with worship, family gatherings, special meals, the exchange of gifts, service to others. Once more we can declare we have made it; we have arrived. Jesus is born. Christ is come. Yes!

Yes, but...

If we have arrived, why are we here? Can't we like Simeon depart in peace? I am not suggesting depart in peace to death as was the case for Simeon, but simply depart in joy and praise for having seen "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to [God's] people Israel" (Luke 2:32) Christmas has come. We have celebrated. That for which we have longed has arrived. The birth of Christ, salvation. Three times this passage points to promise and fulfillment.

- Simeon looked for consolation (vs 25) and saw salvation (vs 30).
- The Spirit revealed he would see the Messiah (vs 26) and it happened according to the divine word (vs 29).
- He was promised life until he saw the Messiah (vs 26) and now he is ready to depart in peace. (vs 29)¹

So why can't we just departed in peace knowing the promise is fulfilled? I wonder if it because there is something that comes after the "yes".

I expect that you have used the sentence construction, "yes, but", as I frequently have. It comes with the circumstance of combining seemingly opposing ideas, with the result that the second half of the sentence tends to negate the first. For instance, in giving feedback to someone we might sandwich the bad news between two compliments. One author gives these examples: "Yes! What a wonderful idea. But we don't have time right now." "Yes! That's a great jacket. But do you really want to wear it to the office?"² Everything that follows the conjunction dominates what preceded it. The criticism is clear.

It reminds me a bit of Southern blessings. You know, the "Bless her heart; she has no sense of style". "God love him, he just can't seem to win a game." I'll go on record here saying that I am always grateful when people pray for me and am dependent on those prayers, and yet will not feel slighted if you withhold the southern blessings!

How would our conversations change if instead of saying "yes, but.." we said "yes, and..." "Yes, its good idea and I look forward to talking about it." Author Karen Hough compares this to improvisational comedy. One actor declares "I am a fish" and instead of arguing that the other actors don't want a skit about fish, and the next quickly follows with "Yes, and I'm the aquarium keeper."³ Very quickly a story develops in which each part builds on the next; the story is fresh and entertaining as it unfolds before the audience. Can we say "yes, and there is more to come"?

Simeon was honored to see, hold and bless the baby Jesus. His delight was confirmed by the prophet Anna who spoke about Jesus to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

¹ *The Gospel of Luke* by Joel Green, p. 143

² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/karen-hough/yes-but-the-evil-twin-to-_b_5669640.html

³ *ibid*

(Luke 2:38). Anna is a holy woman, fasting and praying in the temple night and day. Her actions seem to indicate that, like Simeon, like much of Israel, she was longing for something. One commentator writes, “these two aged saints are Israel in miniature and Israel at its best: devout, obedient, constant in prayer, led by the Holy Spirit, at home in the temple, longing and hoping for the fulfillment of God’s promises.”⁴ Upon seeing Jesus, she confirms what Simeon had declared. The long wait was over and the Messiah had finally arrived.

History has shown, however, that the kingdom did not come as expected. All was not well in Simeon’s and Anna’s day. Likewise, all was not well as Luke wrote about Anna and Simeon.

Scholars don’t know an exact date of when gospel of Luke was written, but generally claim that it was in the last third of the first century. As Luke writes of the birth of the Savior, tensions in Judea with the Roman Empire had intensified. Taxation by the empire, with its associated extortion was every present. Emperor Caligula had been tyrannical; some of his successors also problematic. The Zealots saw revolt as the best solution and advocated a violent response. They hoped to gain control of their own state once again. Small clashes between Jews and Romans escalated into full scale revolt in the years 66-70. There was death and destruction. Additional conflicts followed. For Luke and his readers, the story of the baby in the manger is told when all is not well in their world. What were the readers and hearers of Luke’s gospel to think? “Yes, Jesus was born, the Messiah has arrived, but the world is still a mess and we long for something more.” In half a century or more the world had not improved, in fact in some respects it may have deteriorated. Does that negate the arrival of the Messiah? “Yes, he came. *But* never mind, we are still in a bad way.” Or, could they say, “Yes, Jesus is here, *and* there is more to come.”

Luke original audience in the first century knew tensions, injustice and violence in their world. As Luke’s current audience, we know the same. Inside the church, we hear the gospel’s powerful words, we worship in the glory of this sanctuary, we are inspired by beautiful music, and all the while we knew that not all is well with our world. Lurking beyond these walls is pain and protest, suffering and hardship. Residing deep in our hearts is fear, shame, anger and grief. We may be tempted to say with resignation, “Yes, we celebrated Christmas, but now it’s back to life as usual.” Resist that temptation.

Sometimes it is hard to celebrate the Good News which is Christmas and to stay in the celebration. We are often worried and troubled about many things. We are accustomed to the guilt which comes with the reminders of all that is wrong. Craig Barnes, the President of Princeton Seminary, was prompted to reflect on this by seeing service dogs resting at their owners’ feet during worship. He writes that we often feel scolded with a “bad dog” message; a message that we have made a mess of our world and our lives.⁵ We do need prophetic challenges, and we also need grace, mercy and hope.

Today, in the midst of the Christmas season, between the shepherds’ visit and the wise men’s arrival, our job is to rejoice. Let’s stay with the celebration that is Christmas and savor God’s gift of Jesus. My guess is that each of us needs the rest, pleasure and gratitude that comes from staying in this moment, for it allows us to be filled with peace.

⁴ *Interpretation Commentary: Luke* by Fred Craddock, p. 40

⁵ “Good dog, bad dog”, by M. Craig Barnes, *Christian Century*, Nov 6, 2014

We rejoice, not because we are Pollyannas or mindlessly optimistic. No, it is because we, like Simeon, Anna, and Luke, know that all is not well that we rejoice in the gift of a Savior.

Redeeming love is here.

Thank God we have arrived. The old covenant is past. The new covenant has begun.

Thank God that the baby Jesus came to fulfill a holy mission.

Thank God that the ongoing, loving work of redemption is real.

I am grateful that God's redeeming love is at work in my life, for God knows, there is work to be done. Perhaps you are grateful too, not just that God is changing me, but also that God is redeeming you as well.

We need a Savior. And the Savior has come.

Are we there yet? Yes! And there is so much more that God is redeeming even now.

Good Christian friends, rejoice!