

“What Did Simeon and Anna See?”

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Luke 2:22-40

²²When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³(as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), ²⁴and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. ²⁷Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, ²⁹“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” ³³And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” ³⁶There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. ³⁹When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

In some senses, this was an ordinary family. In today's Gospel lesson, Luke tells us about Joseph and Mary going to the temple for ritual purification, and to present their son to God. Luke helps us out by quoting from the law in Exodus, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord." They were just following the ritual of their faith. We all have rituals, whether we call them that or not. A few minutes ago, we did what we call "Passing of the Peace." That's a ritual. We say the same words to each other, week after week, giving each other signs of the peace that is ours through Christ. We gathered here on Christmas Eve, singing "Silent Night" while holding lit candles. That's a ritual. When we gather at the table of our Lord, we say the same words, quoting from Holy Scripture words that have been repeated over the centuries. Another ritual, and we have many in the church. We have family rituals, as well. Many of us gather in certain places for the holidays, eating the same foods, and sharing traditions – such as the family in this church who told me they act out the nativity scene every year. In my family, we gather for our Christmas celebration at my mother's house with my brothers turning on football, but with the volume turned down, because they know Mom doesn't want football to be the center of our family gathering. Thus, the event is punctuated by seemingly random shouts of joy or cries of anguish as someone's preferred team does well or not. On the first day of school, many take photos of their children. Some friends have a nightly walk. All of these are rituals.

Joseph and Mary participated in rituals like this, as an ordinary family. They were faithful to their traditions. They were there in the temple that day because it was a ritual of their faith. Mary, having given birth, had to undergo a ritual purification, and Jesus, as a firstborn male, was to be designated as holy to the Lord. It was all done according to the law of Moses, so it was nothing out of the ordinary. Countless mothers and babies made this journey to the temple in Jerusalem. Mary and Joseph were no different.

Luke also lets us know that they were poor. He makes sure that we know what sacrifice Mary and Joseph offered. The usual sacrifice in such circumstances was a dove or other bird and a lamb. However, if you were poor, two birds were allowed, instead. Luke tells us that they offered the sacrifice stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

Joseph and Mary were, on the surface, simply a poor couple, with an ordinary child. They were pious, yes, but so were the many others who also brought their child in for the rituals. Luke calls what they were doing "customary," after all.

Meanwhile, two devout people were in the temple that day. Simeon had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would see the Messiah before he died. How often must he have come to the temple in search of the Christ child? How often must he have looked at a baby and lowered his eyes with disappointment? This day, though, the Holy Spirit led him to the temple, and I wonder if he ran there, knowing what he was to see, but scarcely believing it was possible. And Anna was there, an old prophet. She was always there, never leaving the temple, but worshiping with fasting and prayer day and night. She had to have seen even more babies come and go than Simeon did, since she was always there. Somehow, though, neither he nor she gave up hope of what God would do.

Somehow, Simeon and Anna saw who this child was, despite the ordinariness of it all, despite the poverty of Mary and Joseph, despite their aging eyes. They saw that *this* day, the ritual was carried out for the true Son of God. Their eyes saw the one who would be “a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” Simeon took the child in his arms and praised God. Imagine his joy! Imagine how, as the hymn puts it, “the hopes and fears of all the years are met” in the Christ child in Simeon’s arms. Rev. Nancy Townley writes, “Simeon was awestruck by the presence of the child, and he knew that this was not the end but the beginning of something that would completely transform the world.” He breaks forth in what we now know as the Song of Simeon or *Nunc Dimittis*. The Message paraphrase has it as “God, you can now release your servant; release me in peace as you promised. With my own eyes I’ve seen your salvation; it’s now out in the open for everyone to see: A God-revealing light to the non-Jewish nations, and of glory for your people Israel.” Simeon’s life was fulfilled; he had seen the salvation of God, light for everyone. Anna, likewise, saw this child for who He was. Her eyes beheld the one who had been promised, and she praised God loudly and shared the news about the Christ child to all who were expecting him.

What was it they saw in looking at this child? How did their eyes see what was hard for others to see? Simeon had the guiding of the Holy Spirit and Anna spent all of her time in worshipping God. Their eyes were well-trained to see what God had in store. They were attuned to the things of God, from much experience with God. They were looking through the eyes of faith.

What do we see? What eyes are we looking through? The world was in great longing for the salvation of God to come in the Messiah, but not everyone could recognize the Christ child. It took the eyes of faith to see the truth. Our eyes can see Christ in those around us, if we look with the eyes of faith. An image of people of many faiths and ethnicities is shared on social media with the caption, "You either see God in all, or don't see God at all." The world around us looks different seen through the eyes of faith. We see situations differently. We see the hope of the future differently. We see each other differently. As Simeon says that Jesus will be a light for everyone, we all see by that light, remembering the words of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, "For though my faith is not yours and your faith is not mine, if we are each free to light our own flame, together we can banish some of the darkness of the world."

Dr. John Rottman of Calvin Seminary says the story of the aged Simeon greeting the young Christ child, shared at the end of the year as it commonly is, reminds him of the sketch we often see of the year ending as an old man and the year beginning as a newborn baby. The joys and trials of the world's people over a given year certainly add up, and if they were all encapsulated in one person, that person would indeed look quite fatigued and run-down. It's quite a contrast from the fresh-faced newborn baby of the new year. Dr. Rottman sees Simeon and the baby Jesus in a similar way. Simeon represents the end of an era, and the infant Christ represents the beginning of a new era in God's long story of redemption. It can be seen through the eyes of faith.

Likewise, we *are* approaching the end of the year, which also happens to be the end of the decade. What will there be for us in the next year, the next decade? It is a time of possibility. It is a time of wide-eyed wonder. Or, it can be a time of great fear and uncertainty. Which it is depends, in part, on what eyes we see through. Will we enter this new year seeing with the eyes of faith? Will we live in great anticipation, like Simeon and Anna? We commonly say that "seeing is believing," but the eyes of faith teach us that "believing is seeing." So, go out into this yet uncharted future, seeing with the eyes of faith, that which you believe. Amen