

Christmas 1, Year A
Sermon 12.27.20

Luke 2:22-40

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”),²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

Now 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. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.²⁷ Guided 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, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.³⁴ Then 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 so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

There 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,³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At 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.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him. (406)

No Sunday comes faster than the Sunday after Christmas.

As for this year, that time is about as short as it can be, only one year when it’s faster, when Christmas is on a Saturday.

In another sense, though, the timespan is long, as long this year as it ever is. In this, Year B, the story on the Sunday after Christmas is already forty days after Jesus’ birth. This was the time of purification for Mary, a Jewish rite for women after childbirth, a rite to take place forty days after the birth of a boy, eighty days after the birth of a girl.

It's best if you don't think about that too much—that gender difference and what it might imply. It's best not to think about it, except maybe to rejoice that such voices as Luke's would join the chorus of witnesses to God's good will.

Some things were about to change.

This gospel, Luke, is one we most often hear from in Year C, but during this (Year B), which is Mark's year to speak, others of the four gospels will chime in. Mark's gospel is brief and spare, and doesn't have any so-called nativity narratives. So, during this season of the nativity, this season of Christmas, which is twelve days long, we rely on the other three gospel voices—this week Luke, next week John, and following that, on the 12th day, January 6th, Matthew.

As for this gospel, Luke, one of its particular tendencies is its concern for women. Women show up a lot in the life and ministry of Jesus, according to Luke—Luke who is thought to be the only Gentile writer of the whole Bible. For this, it's possible our writer's concern for those previously falling outside the favor of the Law were of concern to him—because he himself was such a one.

We see this in Luke's recognizing Mary, Jesus' mother, as central to this whole story, she according to Luke the first of many sorts of Christian. She was the first disciple in that she was the first to say “yes” to Christ. She was the first Christian witness in her recognizing what her baby would become and what he would signify for all the world. She was the first Christian preacher, at the annunciation of Gabriel to the maiden Mary her recalling and now interpreting ancient scripture for the living of her day. (This is what a preacher is: someone who recalls and interprets anew ancient scripture for the living of a new day.) Luke made it so Mary plays the prominent role she does, and indeed should.

We see this also in Luke's seeing in an old widow, Anna, the very person to grant such pride of place, indeed considering her a prophet, no less. It's doubtful others would have seen her as such. It's doubtful anyone in her life would have called her a prophet, or would have called anything, maybe only rarely her name: Anna.

It's actually a good question, why she is included in the narrative at all.

This is always a good question when it comes to studying any text, especially ancient texts. These which are both important and efficient, these which presumably leave a lot out (as any text

does, must) it's always a good question, why the inclusion of this and not the (presumably) many other things that might have been included?

As for Anna, consider, she otherwise played no part in the story. She neither moved the narrative forward, nor showed up later and in some way that proved to be significant to Jesus' story. All she was, was a witness, one by some mysterious power of revelation and insight. Like the shepherds were at the stable, Anna was in the Temple: an early, and unlikely, witness—Anna and Simeon, both actually.

You know, I don't think I've ever preached on this occurrence in the Temple. Though twenty years now a preacher, and six times a preacher during Year B, I've always decided the Sunday after Christmas was the perfect time for a carol sing or Godly Play, the sort of Sunday you don't have to prepare much for. I am *spent* by the time Boxing Day arrives; I imagine we all are. But during COVID times we can't do much of a carol sing and I still haven't figured out how to do Godly Play under these conditions. So, here we are, with these faithful oldsters who are, though, sort of new to me—and all I can really tell you about them is that they seem to have waited for a really long time.

The thing is, this is one of the most frequent stories to be set to music, the so-called *Nunc Dimittis*, Latin for "Now Dismiss Us." It's been, for centuries now, set to music for one of the most frequently performed rites, a daily rite. In the church's keeping of the hours, the last rite of any given day would be this: evensong or vespers or compline. Since the 4th century, this passage has been sung as the way to close out the day: "Lord, you may now dismiss your servant in peace, according to your word."

I actually sang it with some frequency myself, when I was in divinity school and in the choir for Harvard's Memorial Church. We'd participate in a compline service once a quarter or so, and there we'd sing the *Nunc Dimittis*. A lifelong church-goer, I'd actually never heard this, or even heard of this. So, embarrassed by the fact, I never asked anyone about it, just sang the music in front of me and kept my head down, except to keep watch of the conductor.

The hardest things to learn are the things you think you should already know.

It strikes me now as a welcome sentiment: that we can safely rest, that we can indeed rest assured that, while we let go our watch, the Lord will yet keep. Coming off the season of Advent,

whose central theme is (one of them anyway) staying awake and keeping watch, it might be a truly welcome thing, the idea that we can also now rest.

I hope you all had a merry Christmas.

I did, in a way.

The hard thing was waking up to the next day.

What usually helps me recover from the grand climax of Christmas is the idea that now I can get back to my life, and I mostly like my life.

This year, though, there's still not much of my life to get back to, which I imagine is largely true for each of you. There's still so much that's missing.

For that, we wait until spring, or (so say some) until fall.

That feels like a really long time, and I hope all that made up our lives is still with us to bless us. It's a long time for such suspension.

So, let's just keep on keeping on. In the spirit of Simeon and Anna, let's keep with it, and keep with each other. I really hope the church will sustain you as it has lately me. I really hope the church will sustain us. There's a lot here to do so, a depth from our tradition that I've found actually surprising, I'm embarrassed to have to admit. After the 12th day of Christmas comes Epiphany—six weeks, light, wisdom, understanding. Then Lent—gravity, penitence. Then Easter—astonishment. Then Pentecost—the blessing of the ordinary. Season by season, Sunday to Sunday, hour by hour.

Thanks be to God.