

Looking for Hope - Anna & Simeon: Yearning
Luke 2:21-40
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Rev. Susan Bresser

It's over ... it's done. Christmas is over. Actually, according to the calendar of Church seasons, Xmas is just beginning. Welcome to day 4 (day 5) of the season. But probably for many of us, it's over. Christmas is done. Did you get what you wanted? Did you get what you needed? Are you full? Or are you empty? What were you expecting?

Today we wrap up the sermon series called *Looking for Hope*. Today we come across two characters that make their appearance in the final chapter of the Christmas drama ... Simeon and Anna. Joseph, Mary and the baby are at the temple for the traditional purification ritual for Mary and for the baby's circumcision ... it is here that we encounter Simeon and Anna. They don't appear in any nativity scenes or in many Christmas cards, but they both have very significant roles in the Christmas story. Both are yearning for God to act. Both are yearning for God to show up. Both are waiting to be filled.

When Jesus was born, things weren't going very well for the nation of Israel. They hadn't heard from God in a long time. Under the rule of the Roman government, Israel had lost their political independence and their power ... and they lived in fear of the very crafty and oftentimes very cruel King Herod. Many were yearning – longing, aching, hungering – for God to free them. Many were yearning for God to send someone, something, to bring about change, to bring comfort and healing. The people were yearning – yearning for more.

It seems to me that this feeling – this yearning for more – is fairly universal. We all struggle with loneliness, emptiness, insecurity, even desperation. And for some, this season of joy makes it that much harder. When is God going to show up?

What are we waiting for? An angel? A miracle? A God that has a fairy wand like a fairy godmother? Poof! You're perfect! Are we waiting for the heavens to open and for big hands attached to big arms to come out of skies and say "I'm here and I will smite your enemies and I will make your children perfect." That seems like a pretty bad Monty Python movie, if you ask me. It seems pretty silly ... and yet that is often our question: when and how is God going to show up? When will God's light overcome the darkness? When will my emptiness be filled? When will my yearning, searching, aching soul be settled?

I believe the message of Christmas is fairly simple and straightforward. I believe the challenge is trusting the message and trusting our role in the story.

What we're waiting for has already happened. The miracle has already taken place ... 2000 some odd years ago. A baby was born. A baby who cried, who needed a diaper change, who spit up his milk, who goobered all over his dad's shirt and pulled his mom's hair.

The birth of a baby is pretty ordinary. Even though it's pretty amazing, it's also very common. How many babies are born every day in this world? Lots. (According to the World Vital Records, there are 15,000 babies born every hour.) How many babies are born not in the comfort of some sterile, clean maternity ward? Probably lots. Having a baby isn't pretty. It's not glamorous. It's not easy. It's messy, it's loud, it's hard work, but it's pretty ordinary.

Ordinary ... that's the beauty of God's presence. God comes to us in very plain and ordinary ways. You want an angel? Here at this moment, I am your angel, your voice of God, speaking directly to you, but I'm suspicious that some of you want me to have wings on my back and a halo around my head. Me as an angel might not be good enough for you, because you're expecting more.

But the message of Christmas remains the same: God comes to us in very plain and ordinary ways. God comes through the plain and ordinary. God was born to a plain and simple young woman, in a stable, with the smell of animals, sweat, blood and fear surrounding the birth of that baby ... that baby named Jesus. God chose the common and the natural, the humble and the ordinary, to express love to us.

Our problem is trusting this message ... because we want more. We don't want God to come to us in ordinary ways ... because that would mean God could use us. We want God to come to us through extraordinary ways. I think we continue to miss God because we're not focusing on what God does give us: the pain and the joys of daily living, the blood and sweat of birth, the worry and the strength of our friends and family, the community of saints and sinners. We continue to miss God because we want more.

I like the story of Simeon and Anna. I like how they round out the Christmas story. Simeon is an old man, yearning to see the Messiah, yearning to see the change God has in store for God's people. He didn't see any miracles, he didn't see any signs, he didn't see any wonders. He simply saw the baby Jesus and said, "God, take me now ... because with my own eyes I have seen your salvation." No miracles. No signs. No wonders. Just a baby ... and Simeon believed and that was enough.

And Anna ... an old woman ... a faithful, old woman ... for her, there were no miracles, no signs, no wonders. She saw the child and celebrated. Her yearning, searching, aching soul was filled with joy because she, too, saw the child and believed.

Both Simeon and Anna saw the plan and purpose of God in the ordinary. When our yearning hearts are looking for, waiting for, and anticipating the presence and intervention of God in the common, ordinary events of our daily lives, God shows up! When we expect something more, we often miss out.

So, where have you seen God at work today? Where have you seen God at work this past week? Turn to your neighbor and share with them.

I believe the message of Christmas is fairly simple and straightforward. God has shown up and we are called to believe and trust that Jesus is all we will ever need.

I would like to end with a contemporary parable. Hear these words:

Many years ago, there was a very wealthy man who shared a passion for art collecting with his son. They had priceless works by Van Gogh and Cezanne and Gauguin adorning the walls of their family estate. As winter approached, their tiny country entered into war, and the young man left to serve his country. After only a few short weeks, his father received a telegram. His son had died.

Distraught and lonely, the old man faced the upcoming Christmas holidays with anguish and sadness. The joy of the season had vanished with the death of his son.

On Christmas morning, a knock on the door woke the lonely old man. As he walked to the door, the masterpieces on the walls only reminded him that his son was not coming home. As he opened the door, he was greeted by a soldier with a large package in his hands, who said, "I was a friend of your son. I was the one he was rescuing when he died. If I can come in for a few moments, I'd like to show you something."

The soldier mentioned that he was an artist and then gave the old man a package. The paper gave way to reveal a portrait of the man's son. Though the world would never consider it the work of a genius, the painting featured the young man's face in striking detail. Overcome with emotion, the man hung the portrait over the fireplace, pushing aside millions of dollars worth of art. The old man spent Christmas sitting in his chair; gazing at the gift he had been given.

The painting of his son soon became his most prized possession, casting a shadow on the pieces of art for which museums around the world clamored.

The following spring, the old man died. The art world waited with anticipation for the upcoming auction. According to the will of the old man, all of the paintings would be auctioned on Christmas day. The day soon arrived and collectors and curators from around the world gathered to bid on some of the world's most spectacular and priceless paintings.

The auction began with a painting that wasn't on anyone's museum list. It was the painting of the old man's son. The auctioneer asked for an opening bid, but the room was silent. "Who will open the bidding with \$100?" No one spoke. Finally, someone said, "Who cares about the painting? It's just a picture of his son. Let's move on to the good stuff."

The auctioneer responded, "No, we have to sell this one first. Now, who will take the son?" Finally, a neighbor of the old man offered \$10. "That's all I have. I knew the boy, so I'd like to have it." The auctioneer said, "Going once, going twice ... gone." The gavel fell.

Cheers filled the room and someone shouted: "Now we can bid on the real treasures ... let's get on with it!" The auctioneer looked at the room filled with people and announced that the auction was over. Everyone was stunned. Someone spoke up and said, "What you do mean, it's over? We didn't come here for a painting of someone's son. There are millions of dollars worth of art here! What's going on?" The auctioneer replied, "It's very simple. According to the will of the Father, whoever takes the son ... gets it all."

The son, the child, the Messiah, has been offered. Can your yearning heart claim this gift? Can you accept this gift or are you expecting more?