

Sermon
Luke 2:22-40
First Sunday after Christmas
December 27, 2020
Providence Forge Presbyterian Church

Well, another Christmas has come and gone. The presents have all been opened and perhaps already forgotten. Some of us may have taken our decorations down, although I would guess most of us will leave them up until after the new year. We may have put on a pound or two from all those Christmas goodies, and we'll set goals for losing those, and probably have other goals as well. All of us are hoping for some changes in the new year, not only in our own lives but in the life of our nation and our world as the Covid vaccination becomes more widely available. I think we can all agree that we hope 2021 will look a lot different than 2020 did. At some point, we hope that most of us will be back to worshipping in person here in the sanctuary. We hope to get back to potluck suppers and service projects and Vacation Bible School. We hope to find a new pastor, or at least be well on the way. With Christmas behind us, we are looking ahead to a brighter and happier new year.

But not so fast. We're not quite finished with the story of the Christ child yet. Today's passage has Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus, but it also introduces two new characters who do not appear in any of our manger scenes, Simeon and Anna. These two people are the perfect ones to follow up on our Advent season, because Advent is all about waiting and watching, and Simeon and Anna have been waiting and watching their whole lives to see the Lord's Messiah. This passage tells us about events that happened on one day at the Temple in Jerusalem and which involved these five people I've mentioned:

Joseph, Mary, the baby Jesus, Simeon and Anna. Mary and Joseph bring the baby to the temple for the ceremony of purification after childbirth, as prescribed in Leviticus chapter 12. The occasion requires a sacrifice, a lamb if the couple can afford it; otherwise, two turtle doves or two young pigeons. Mary and Joseph bring the birds, not the lamb. This ceremony happens on the 33rd day after circumcision, which happens when a baby boy is 8 days old. So Jesus would have been 41 days, or about 6 weeks old. Now we know why Joseph and Mary and Jesus are there in the temple that day, but what about Simeon? We don't really know a whole lot about Simeon. We are told in verse 25 that he lives in Jerusalem and in verse 26 that he is guided by the Spirit to go to Temple on the very day that Mary and Joseph bring in the baby Jesus. We are also told that the Holy Spirit rested on Simeon and that it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. So we have this devout and righteous man, a man who is very attuned to the work of the Holy Spirit in his life, and as soon as he sees the baby, he takes him in his arms and praises God, saying: *Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; 30 for my eyes have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.* The event that Simeon has waited his whole life for has happened, and he is now ready to depart the world in peace. Mary and Joseph, we are told, are amazed at what Simeon has to say about their child, but there is more. His last words are for Mary alone: *"This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed 35 so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."* I often think of Simeon's words when I hear the song that Melody and Tom so beautifully sang for us today, "Mary, Did You Know?" We know from these words in Luke that Mary was given a clue about

what was ahead, but I'm sure she could not have imagined the extent of the sword that would pierce her soul. So even on this most joyful of days, the shadow of the cross is very much present. And with these words, Simeon departs the scene, paving the way for the fifth and final character in today's drama, Anna.

We have a few more details about Anna. First of all we are told that she is a prophet. Now I find it interesting that we have quite a few of the words of the man Simeon recorded, and they very much sound like prophetic words, but it is the woman Anna is called a prophet, while Simeon is not, and we have none of Anna's exact words recorded. So we know that Anna is a prophet, that her father's name is Phanuel, that she is from the tribe of Asher, and she is 84 years old. We also know that after only seven years of marriage she was widowed and at some point afterwards she had moved into the Temple and had never left, spending her days and nights worshiping there with fasting and prayer. She, too, happens to be at the temple on the day when Mary and Joseph come in, and she too seems to know immediately that this child is the one for whom all faithful Jews had been waiting, the one who would bring redemption; in other words, the Messiah. Anna begins to praise God and begins to speak to everyone who will listen about who the child is. Eventually, Mary and Joseph leave with their child and return to Nazereth, where we are told that the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

So we have here, in these five lives, a vignette of faithfulness and devotion; five people ranging in age from a tiny baby at the very beginning of his earthly life, through a young couple, poor but proclaimed blessed, to an old man and an old woman, speaking words of wisdom gained from lifetimes of loving and serving God. As we anticipate a new year, may they serve as models to us. May we live

our lives in accordance with God's law, as Mary and Joseph did, seeking to understand and follow God's word through poverty and wealth, happiness and sorrow, whatever the next year may hold for us. May we, like Simeon and Anna, find ways to voice our praise to God, recognizing God's faithfulness in our lives and proclaiming with great joy all that God has done for us and for the world. May we commit to offer words of peace, of healing, of grace. And like the tiny baby Jesus, may we strive to grow and become stronger in our faith, whatever our earthly age may be. May we strive to be filled with wisdom and to find favor with God. May this be, for all of us, a year of faithful service to God.

When Mary and Joseph left the temple with their precious child, they knew two things. They knew that they had been blessed by God. And they knew that the road ahead would not be easy; that there would be difficult days ahead. Yet they were committed, with God's help, to follow the road that had been laid out for them by God. As we face the new year, we have a challenge before us as well. There is great division in our nation, even among those of us who call ourselves Christians. There is great distrust. Will we be agents of hope and peace? Will we strive to bring people together? The choice is ours. May God find us faithful. Amen.