

Augusta First Baptist Church

Luke 2:21-40

Christmas Survivors

December 31, 2006

NRS Luke 2:21 *"After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. 22 When 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"), 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." 25 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. 26 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, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, 29 "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." 33 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 35 so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed-- and a sword will pierce your own soul too." 36 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. 38 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. 39 When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. 40 The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.*

Well, we survived it didn't we? We survived the bombardment of all things festive, the processions of special worship services, and the scramble to live up to everyone else's expectations. We have dwelt for these past thirty to forty-five days in a state of sensory overload. How do you feel? As for me, well to be honest I am a little bit tired, but it is a good kind of fatigue. Of course, I cannot help but notice our crowds are not what they were last week when the sanctuary was packed and the balcony full. Fatigue has set in on more than one of us.

This morning, let me pull up, at least figuratively, a recliner and reflect on it all. Did you have a favorite memory this year? I get particularly reflective *after* Christmas, especially when it comes time to take down all the decorations. That is what we did this past Friday. The boys and I hauled all the many storage boxes back down from the attic, and then along with Amy, we began the arduous task of packing all the decorations away. There is the Nativity set that Amy bought for me one Christmas with money we did not have during seminary days. Then there are the many photographs we have of the boys sitting on Santa Claus's lap. There are the half dozen or so antique glass ornaments that use to hang on my grandmother's little tree. Of course my favorite Christmas decoration is our tree. It is just an ordinary Christmas tree that will never grace the cover of the Augusta Magazine, but whose ornaments represent pictures of our family history and marriage.

Now it is time to pack away our Christmas decorations. But before we pack away all our Christmas memories, let's tell one more Christmas story. This story is about Anna and Simeon and it is one of my favorites when it comes to the Christmas stories in the Bible. It is tender and devoid of all the usual exploitations that other passages frequently suffer. You never see Simeon or Anna in a Christmas pageant re-enacting the nativity, but they have their place as much as the wise men and their camels.

Simeon and Anna, while two different people connected only by the fact that they were both at the temple when baby Jesus was presented, held similar outlooks. They held holy expectations for their futures – and remember the Bible says they were both *old*. What an amazing thing to consider that as their lives were coming to a natural conclusion they both share expectant outlooks. It is written of Simeon in verse 25: *this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel*. In other words, he and prophet Anna knew that God had something *more* for their lives; that this solitary life was not all there was.

God had a purpose but they had to wait. Of course, right away I twinge with remorse that I am such a miserable failure when it comes to waiting. I fidget in line at the grocery store, rush through traffic, get flustered waiting for a table, and even inhale my food instead of waiting to enjoy it. Waiting, however, is largely what we do in life. Think about it; most of our time is spent waiting.

Haven't we all waited and waited for something only to realize it is right there in front of us? Do you remember when you were a child and you waited for Christmas morning to come? You wait and you wait, so excited that you could not even sleep well and then in a twinkling it seems Christmas is here.

When both my boys were just infants, I remember thinking I just cannot wait until they are old enough to jump in a pile of leaves to throw the football, to teach them how to paint the sky and to tell them stories. Last Friday, we brought supper by for one of our neighbors. The day after Christmas they had a baby – their first. It seems like yesterday we were where they are: expectant and waiting. The years slip by. What we have waited for is already here.

That's Simeon– that's Anna, they have waited and waited. And now in comes this couple hailing from Nazareth to present their baby child. What they have waited for all these years is finally here. So what can we learn from Anna and Simeon about waiting?

Consecrate the Time

Now I know that sounds awfully pious and smug. Here is what I mean by this. Simeon and Anna were found in the Temple marking their time for God.

It was also true of Mary and Joseph who began their new life as a family by consecrating over to God their child. This story is full of ritual observances: Jesus' circumcision, his formal naming, and purification at the Temple which included giving an offering, a sacrifice.

On the one hand there is nothing out of the ordinary here. What Mary and Joseph were doing was fairly typical of faithful Hebrews. They were marking their lives for God. And may this be said of us.

By now most of us are already filling up our calendar for 2007. It is easy how appointments, obligations and so on can take over our lives in such a way that we feel as if we have nothing left for ourselves much less God. For some, religious ritual is simply limited to church attendance and weddings and funerals. How do you mark your life with the sacred awareness of God's presence?

I like the modern practice of the observant Jew. Chances are if you are ever the guest in Jewish home they will have a mezuzah posted on the right side of the doorpost. Inside a *Mezuzah* is a small scroll or parchment called the *shema* (Hebrew, for "hear") which is the passage from Deuteronomy 6:4-9, "*Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD is one...*" On the outside of the mezuzah is the Hebrew **יְדִיָּוָה**, meaning "the Almighty."

It is a literally reminder for those entering or leaving a Jewish home, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." As Leonard Sweet puts it, it is a way of "**modulating the mundane into the eternal.**"

Making a difference where we live means sacramentalizing the ordinary into the extraordinary; transforming the everyday into the eternal. What is it that you do that transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary; the mundane into the holy?

All our moments have holy potential. All business dealings, all domestic chores, all time has holy potential. I believe everywhere one spends time should have reminders of the holy – one's home, car, office. How are you consecrating and marking your time as you wait?

Around the fifth or so century the desert monks recited a prayer called *The Jesus prayer*: "Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me." It was and is a way to "pray without ceasing."

Simeon and Anna waited, practicing the rituals of their faith in the everyday.

Waiting is hoping...

Perhaps another way to say this is, hoping is waiting.

Simeon, an old man alongside elderly Anna was holding a promise that he would not live to see completely fulfilled. It would be thirty more years before Jesus would be in the public again and by that time Simeon and Anna would be long gone. More than likely, the same could be said of the shepherds, the Magi and perhaps even Joseph.

Waiting is hoping knowing that we cannot see the entire scope of God's purpose in the now. Simeon knows that even while waiting and hoping their will be times of emptying. Simeon doesn't say this at first. He begins by joining his voice with the angels and announces a great future ahead for infant Jesus.

What parent doesn't want to hear that good news? "Your son has a great future ahead of him at this university, at this law firm, or with this family."

Parent teacher conferences are as hard on the parents as they are on the children. Amy and I go to all of them and we drag our boys along. The boys are a little anxious: *what if their teacher tells them they have misbehaved or are doing their work poorly*. And, we parents, have pretty much the same kind of fears. There is nothing better than the conference that unfolds with the teacher singing high praises for your child and in essence passing on a blessing that your child has a great future. That is what we want to hear.

This is what Simeon does for Mary and Joseph. We would call this a blessing. But he does something else. He says that this great future has a cost, it will not come cheaply. With the light that Jesus will bring there will be shadows. Simeon proclaimed to Mary that in Jesus there is great hope, but hope with a cost. (*and a sword will pierce your own soul too.*" V. 35b)

And so it is with all of us who choose to say, "*Jesus is the reason for the season.*" Along with the lights and the joy and the exaltations come commitment, sacrifice, and cost.

There is a cost in our waiting and believing: when we wait for good news from the doctor; when we wait for family dissension to heal; when we wait to get the big break in our business. What we are waiting for can be costly, yet we cannot afford to take a cheaper route.

A few years ago I was reminded by a mother about a visit I made five years ago during the Christmas season. In the middle of the night I was called to come to the hospital – The Scottish Rite Hospital. Their toddler son was critically ill. I remember making the visit, I remember the sorrow. The night was so long stretching into the dawn. The child was not expected to survive. The mother came up to me a few Sundays ago

and said every Christmas she thinks about that lonely December night spent waiting and praying. She said she finally came to a place where she just had to let go and realize that all things were in God's hands now. Her boy may not walk out of the hospital. She said, "It was only then that the peace came." It wasn't the smug assurance that he would get better. It was that no matter what the future held, God would hold the future.

*Many things I have tried to grasp, and have lost. That which I have placed in God's hands I still have--
Martin Luther*

It is in the waiting that we discover the true gift, the real gift – peace. When we wait for God to break into our darkness and shed a little light, then comes the peace. Simeon exclaimed: "*Now let your servant depart in peace...*"

You know what peace is? It is not simply the cessation of conflict. Peace is the fulfilling of God's purpose.

KJV Luke 2:29 Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: 30 For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, 31 Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; 32 A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.

Simeon and Anna both waited, and their wait was not in vain. And neither will our wait be in vain.

There is some irony that Christmas falls along the same time as the winter solstice. That is, of course, the longest night of the year. Nature has provided for us a wonderful sermon illustration. In the dead of winter, light is sparse and the darkness stretches on. But in the midst of our waiting Light begins to dawn.