

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 Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), 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. 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. 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, 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.

I googled how long the walk is between Nazareth and Jerusalem. 30 hours. That is Google time which means there is no allowance for breaks of any kind. So then you have to back in to those 30 hours of walking or riding on a donkey with an infant. I remember traveling 6 hours with an infant in the car and questioning whether I would arrive with my sanity intact. 30 hours of walking with an infant one way to present him in the Temple forty days after his birth.

Of all the things Mary and Joseph get credit for, this is rarely on the list, because this is simply the reality of Jewish parenting in the first century. They were no different than anyone else. That is the point, isn't it? Growing up in Nazareth, Jesus blended in with others his age. But on this day in the Temple, something happens that reminds Joseph and Mary this will not always be the case. Jesus has come into the world with a purpose, a mission, that only he can fulfill.

The messengers of this reminder are surprising. They are not heavenly angels like Gabriel. They are two prophets in the Temple, both who have been blessed with long lives. Simeon and Anna. Like Elizabeth and Zechariah, these two only make an appearance in Luke's gospel. We can easily forget their story is told in this time after Jesus' birth.

There they are in the Jerusalem Temple the day Mary and Joseph climb the massive steps up into the courtyard to the place where their sacrifice will be received. All we are told about Simeon is that he is righteous and devout, the Holy

Spirit rests upon him and that he is looking for when God will comfort and restore Israel. Anna is called a prophet. What? we say. We don't remember a female prophet in Jerusalem showing up in Jesus' baby book. But there she is in Luke's gospel. We are told she belongs to the Temple. After her husband's death, she never remarried living as a widow for probably sixty years. Now at the age of 84, she never leaves the Temple, fasting and praying day after day.

When I read this story again this year, I couldn't help but to be drawn by the contrast, the stark difference, between Simeon and Anna who recognize Jesus as Israel's messiah as an infant and the many Jewish leaders who not only do not recognize who Jesus is but crucify him because of what he can take from them. Luke wants us to know Simeon and Anna are present at the Temple every day, but they hold no official position or power. They are constantly listening and watching for how God is at work in the world.

So I mentioned at the beginning that Nazareth is a 30 hour walk to Jerusalem, but Bethlehem is not. Bethlehem is only a couple of hours walk, more like a suburb of Jerusalem. In these 40 days since Jesus' birth, had news travelled from the shepherds who were visited by an angel, heard the heavenly chorus and saw the Christ child in his manger bed? Had their good news of great joy reached the Temple? Had their good news of great joy reached Simeon and Anna? The Son

of God born to a young couple from Nazareth, born in Bethlehem because of Augustus' census.

If news had reached those in authority, the chief priests and elders, they certainly would have dismissed this news as comical dreams from foolish and weary shepherds. If God was sending Israel a Savior, they would know about it and that Savior most certainly wouldn't be born to an unknown couple from Nazareth in a cattle shed. They were the experts of how God works in the world and that simply was absurd and insulting to think that God would appear to his people like that. Did anything good ever come out of Nazareth? I imagine they didn't even let the people finish their story of all the shepherds had told them.

But what about Simeon and Anna? All they had was time. All they had was time and an open and expectant heart and mind, looking for where and how God might show up next. I don't know, but I imagine if word had reached the two of them via shepherds in Bethlehem, they would have listened to what had happened, leaned into the mysterious and wondrous news, preparing themselves to meet this newborn King.

So when Mary and Joseph and Jesus arrive at the Temple, Simeon and Anna are ready. Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit led Simeon that day to the holy family, fulfilling the promise he had received that he would not die before he would see Israel's Messiah. Simeon had been waiting for this day not just for a month, but for

a very long time. When he takes Jesus in his arms, he says “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.” Simeon blessed them and then spoke directly to Mary saying, “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.”

It is easy to miss Simeon’s words here so early in the gospel of Luke. The falling and rising of many. We usually say the “rise and fall” of others in that you must achieve something before you can lose it. Simeon says the falling and rising. It makes me think of Jesus’ words in John 12:24, when he says, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” It is the pattern Jesus life takes: falling, suffering, dying so then on a new morning rising, living, producing good fruit. It is the life of every disciple, what we lay down so that our hands are empty to take up the life Jesus is offering, what we sacrifice so we can gain, what we suffer so that we and others might live.

This pandemic has tested that in all of us. The distance, the separation, we must maintain to preserve and care for life, ours and others. We have not been able

to see our family, our friends, those whom we love. We have not been able to go and do, as we would like. We all have a list longer than our arm of all the things we are looking forward to doing when this pandemic is under control. Every precaution we have taken, every restriction we have maintained, everything we have given up, we have done so out of love. We celebrated with far less this Christmas in hopes that we can celebrate with so much more next Christmas. In this falling, we trust there will be a rising to restored life.

Simeon knew that God was sending a Messiah, a Savior, not so his people could have more power, more strength, more control but so they could have more love, more love for God and more love for each other. Simeon knew that love means you consider the other as much as you do yourself. It is a shared life, a mutual life, a life bound to the life of another. Love often requires sacrifice, surrender, selfless acts for the good of the other. That is the dying to self to be raised in the newness of life held in love.

Simeon and Anna were not over the Temple, but they were in the Temple every day, seeking to grow in their relationship with God. Luke says Anna prayed and fasted all night and all day. She would wake to pray when others were sound asleep. always thinking about God's relationship with her and her people Israel. There was no relationship she cherished more. She held vigil in the Temple not because it was her job, but because it was her heart. She watched others in the

Temple who had the authority, the power, the positions who carried out all the right movements, said all the right words, but their heart was only focused on themselves. They were looking for a Messiah to increase their power, restore their sovereignty, and establish their authority. They wanted to rise, and rise and rise until they were over all. They were on the lookout for a mighty warrior who could do just that.

Simeon and Anna looked at this infant child in Mary's arms and they knew God had sent a Savior, not to redeem Israel's power, but to redeem Israel's heart and the hearts of all people. God had descended from the perfect peace and perfect love of heaven to become one of us, to show us how to love and how to live as God's people, and to save us by dying on a cross so that we might all with him rise to new life. That is the truth Simeon knew would pierce Mary's heart, and yet somehow he knew she would watch her fallen son rise again.

Simeon and Anna stood in the Temple that day, knowing that they had seen the face of God, Love incarnate, Emmanuel, the Messiah they had been prayer for had arrived. This was good news not only for Israel but for all people for all time. The darkness of our world has been pierced by the light of heaven. Love has come down from heaven so that we might know and live in the perfect love and perfect peace of God.