

Shaped By Who We Wait Upon

Menno Mennonite Church
December 29, 2024

Purpose: To proclaim God with us as the force upon whom we wait.

Message: We are shaped by and for Immanuel as we live the reality of God with us.

Scripture: Luke 2:21-38 (I will read); 14; Psalm 131

Synopsis: We are all waiting for something. For the deal to come through. For a piece of news. For the coming of the light (literal or figurative) and so much more. We often see waiting and anticipating as wasted time. Yet it is this work of watching out for that shapes us to see that which we are anticipating. Simeon and Anna were able to speak of that which they were seeing by the gifts of the Spirit, yes, but even more so in their anticipation of that which they in faith had known. As we know God with us in this season, are we given shape to our anticipation of what God is doing around us, even here?

Luke 2:21-38

21 When eight days had passed,
Jesus' parents circumcised him and gave him the name Jesus.

This was the name given to him by the angel before he was conceived.

22 When the time came for their ritual cleansing,
in accordance with the Law from Moses,
they brought Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.

(23 It's written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male will be dedicated to the Lord.")

24 They offered a sacrifice in keeping
with what's stated in the Law of the Lord,
A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.

25 A man named Simeon was in Jerusalem.
He was righteous and devout.
He eagerly anticipated the restoration of Israel,
and the Holy Spirit rested on him.

26 The Holy Spirit revealed to him
that he wouldn't die before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

27 Led by the Spirit, he went into the temple area.

Meanwhile, Jesus' parents brought the child to the temple
so that they could do what was customary under the Law.

28 Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God. He said,

29 "Now, master, let your servant go in peace according to your word,

30 because my eyes have seen your salvation.

31 You prepared this salvation in the presence of all peoples.

32 It's a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and a glory for your people Israel."

33 His father and mother were amazed by what was said about him.

34 Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother,

"This boy is assigned to be the cause of the falling and rising
of many in Israel and to be a sign that generates opposition

35 so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.

And a sword will pierce your innermost being too."

36 There was also a prophet,
Anna the daughter of Phanuel,
who belonged to the tribe of Asher.

She was very old.
After she married,
she lived with her husband for seven years.

37 She was now an 84-year-old widow.
She never left the temple area
but worshipped God with fasting and prayer night and day.

38 She approached at that very moment
and began to praise God and to speak
about Jesus to everyone who was looking forward
to the redemption of Jerusalem.

There are various arguments I like to maintain with Emily not so much to win a point or to be passionate about something that actually matter so much as to have an argument through which we can bounce off of each other from time to time. It is what you do when you live together and have inherited a genetic predisposition for conversation focused on difference. Among those topics includes the age-old question of great and utter import: which is better—the book or the movie. Emily takes the side of the purist: a book is a far-and-away better depiction of a story than a movie ever could be. The depth of character, plot, and story can only pale when put on the screen. I take the approach that a book and movie are two different media entirely. Being a well-schooled communication major I contend that the media is the message, and that you cannot expect a movie to capture any book with fidelity precisely because it had different capabilities given its media; not least of which is the lack of internal visualization which will never measure up to the pictures we had in mind. A book is a book, a film is a film, and it is simply unfair to compare the two undertakings. What's more, if a movie tries to be utterly faithful to the text it will grind to a plod making it fundamentally unwatchable. This deprives my long-suffering wife my solidarity in resenting movies for not measuring up (what she is really after); a great frustration to her. That too is the fun part.

Where Luke a movie, he would be in one of those that falls into telling the story with as many scenes and characters as possible, perhaps falling into this trap of telling the story word for word. Like a Cecil D DeMille picture with a cast of thousands and long lingering scenes of minute detail, that would be Luke. As I have mentioned before this is at odds with the other gospels in the extreme length he goes to in telling the story. At least Luke warns us by starting off his telling of the story with the fair warning of intending to provide “an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us.” (Luke 1:1) and he is coming to it in great detail.

But even with this level of detail, one has to wonder at why we have this story following Christmas of Simeon and Anna interrupting the course of the natural progression of abiding by the custom of the Law for Jesus. It is warm and cuddly, but not strictly necessary. After all, we've already had not one but two visits by no less stellar a figure than the archangel Gabriel himself. By the time Gabriel is finished talking to first Zechariah and then—even more significantly and expansively—to Mary herself, we as readers already have a pretty good clue that this Jesus who had been born was a divinely sent figure who was Christ and Savior and Lord. Just in case we skip Luke 1 (as is our want in telling the Christmas Story) the declaration of the herald angels

singing before the shepherd watching their flocks by night was also another solid endorsement. By now we hope that we have likely taken the hint.

But after all of that drama, to have several of the temple regulars marveling and declaring over the new-born baby seems a bit unnecessary to make the point. To lean into the film metaphor once more surely this one could have been left on the cutting room floor and the story would have been none the lesser for it; if anything perhaps a bit stronger than it otherwise would have been.

But Luke keeps it. Not only keeps it but lovingly preserves it, giving these bit-players lines and everything. And we have to ask why. The inclusion of something is just as much a meaningful decision as what is not said. If we believe as we declare that these decisions in the case of the Biblical writers are not those of mere editorial whimsy and story telling but bear the fingerprints of the guidance of the Holy Spirit upon them, then we must ponder in our hearts along with Mary what all this might mean. Like Mary and Joseph themselves, so we as readers did not anticipate the occurrence of such things at the Temple that day. They were doing what there was to be done just minding their own business and in comes this declaration. Imagine if we would have the same thing happen during the dedication of a child the declaration of all that God was about to do in them. “This one here is going to be president some day. Some will love them. Some will hate them. But you will hold them in your hearts and worry for them their whole lives.” There would indeed be questions.

So why keep the story? I think it is to set the scene for the type of salvation God was bringing to God’s people. Mary and Joseph were in the Temple to fulfill a religious ritual every bit as familiar to them and the others in the Temple that day as an infant baptism would be to many Christians today. What’s more, as such rituals went, Mary and Joseph’s version was less glitzy than some because the best they could offer up to God was the poor person’s offering of a couple pigeons. Nothing about this spoke to the power and majesty of the coming of God’s messiah. As is the running theme for the story not much here is ordinary if by ordinary we mean that the ones who are actually important are recognized as such through the trappings of their position and power. That surely isn’t Mary or Joseph, the manger in Bethlehem or even the shepherd who attended the birth. All of this was ordinary in the extreme, lacking any of the expectation of salvation that we might expect to attend him.

Simeon and Anna become the prototype for those who are brought by the Spirit into the orbit of the kingdom of God. Whatever they thought they would see, what they actually saw when the Holy Spirit gave them a quickening of the heart was far, far quieter than all that. They saw a baby. They saw a poor family. They saw a mother and father who—despite what we as readers of Luke know in terms of everything that had been revealed to them about the special nature of this child—were quite simply blown away by the testimony of Simeon and Anna as to what was to come. They were shaped by the Spirit into that which would hold them in its thrall, fulfilling the promise of salvation but in the way that the Spirit directs. In many ways Anna and Simeon bracket the whole arc of Luke's account of what Jesus is doing. Notice what is said of Anna here: she was one who was waiting for the redemption of Israel (the CEB translation I read renders it Jerusalem). Fast forward 22 chapters or so to the disciples grieving on the road to Emmaus. What is their lament: that they thought that Jesus was to be the redeemer of Israel, a hope now disappointed. It takes the work of the Spirit, either in the vision of the prophets or in the redirection of the disciples' hope and vision clouded by expectation to allow them to realize the truth of the Christ that is before them, not the Christ that they are expecting.

What we expect shapes us. Who we expect moves us. Like meeting a long-distant correspondent for the first time in person, there can be quite a negotiation between expectation and reality. What we think about them, expect from them, hope for with them is all carried and bundled up together. Many times translating our expectations through the lens of our lived experience takes a lot of adjustment. As a single person I had the opportunity to meet several people through the lens of online dating. A few we had had months-long email conversations leading into the meeting. But the meeting face-to-face the reality of the individual was a revelation and often a challenge. In truth none of those opportunities survived the transition between the written conversation into the lived reality for a whole lot of reasons, not least of which was trying to reconcile the image and notion of the relationship with the reality that it now had. The experience of waiting had built an expectation, far or not, realistic or not, and that had to be brought back to earth sooner or later.

The same is true with our expectations of the divine. We are living precisely what we just celebrated: that God is with us; that the Spirit dwells within us and through us and moves us further and further toward the kingdom every day, even those days where it may not feel like that is the case. Our accompaniment of God with us is two fold—that which we know already and

that which we know will be revealed in the not yet. We know that we live in and with Immanuel and are changed by and through God's power. We expect the big things of God and many times we are given the still small voice, prompting us ever toward that which God is doing (our noticing is itself a gifting of the Spirit in the first place). Like Simeon and Anna were tuned by the Spirit to see beyond their expectations and see the truth of God's way and God's salvation, we too are invited ever to look beyond just the easy answers that would make that which we label as "good" as blessing and "bad" as curse to come to understand that in the good and the bad both, God still dwells and moves, even when our expectations can keep us from knowing that movement.

We must be shaped by the presence of God with us and the reality of Christmas not just when it is in season and popular, but the year round. The promptings toward charity and love are not robes to be taken off and stored neatly away: they are the lives and the world in which we now live come what may. We are given God's gift of presence for all our lives and all of our living. This is what we celebrate. This is the expectational reality in which we live and move.

For we have seen a great sight. Our vision can never be the same. Immanuel is the one that shapes us then and now, and in that we can rejoice. God is with us if we are given to seeing it. May we like Simeon and Anna live lives of hopeful expectation of all that God is doing and be given the sight to see God's movement, calling it out where we may. Amen.