

**What Child Is This?
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Luke 22: 22-40**

**Reverend Amy Pagliarella
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, IL**

When we last saw Jesus, he was a newborn in a manger, delivered under extraordinary circumstances and welcomed into the world by humble shepherds and a heavenly host of angels. Eight days later, Jesus appears more like any other baby born to Jewish parents in the vicinity of Jerusalem 2000 years ago. Like other boys, he goes to the temple for his circumcision. Like other parents, Mary and Joseph return to the temple a few weeks later for Mary's purification and to celebrate with a sacrifice. And like any other poor family, they offer two turtledoves rather than the lamb that a wealthier family would have sacrificed, and present their firstborn son to the Lord.

There is no heavenly host of angels. No shepherds. No cattle are lowing. No drummer boys are drumming. No one is proclaiming the good news – for now. There is just a young couple and their infant, doing what good Jewish parents have always done.

And then these parents encounter Simeon and Anna, a righteous man and an elderly prophet, and they – and we – are once again reminded that this is no ordinary baby.

Throughout Advent and Christmas, we heard from the prophets, from Mary's relatives Elizabeth and Zechariah and from Mary herself that an extraordinary child would be born. Mary told us that the Lord has brought

down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:51-53)

Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, described Jesus as a mighty savior who would save the people from their enemies and “from the hand of all who hate us” so that the Jewish people could serve God without fear for the rest of their lives. (Luke 1:71-75)

And then the child was born, and angels and shepherds alike proclaimed that this child was, in fact, the Messiah. So Simeon and Anna do not really appear to have any new “good news” for us – they seem to be confirming what we already know.

And then Simeon reveals **two new things** about this extraordinary child. And each of these revelations teach us that we have much to learn from Simeon and Anna.

Simeon stands there, an elderly man holding a tiny baby, and he rejoices. He has seen his Savior and he can die fulfilled. Then Simeon calls Jesus “...a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:31-32). For the first time, we realize that Jesus has come for all people – Gentiles as well as Jews. So the first thing we have to learn from Simeon is to rejoice. We rejoice; first, because God sent Jesus for **all** people, not just for a select few. Jesus is a light for revelation to the Gentiles, which means that he is able to *reveal* God to people who did not previously know God. This is good news, indeed!

At the same time, Simeon's prophecies have not really come to pass. Simeon rejoices as he holds a tiny baby, but the Messiah is still just an infant. Nothing has changed. Mary, Elizabeth, and Zechariah all rejoiced, but they, like Simeon, went back to the daily grind. Simeon and Anna will not live to see Jesus as a thirty-something adult man who proclaims the Kingdom of God. Jesus and his family will return home to Nazareth and probably never encounter Simeon again. Nothing will change in Simeon's lifetime. So why such rejoicing?

Simeon and Anna teach us that the hope that comes from Jesus Christ is enough reason to rejoice. The world is different because Jesus was born 2000 years ago and the world is different because Jesus was "born" last week on Christmas Day. That doesn't mean that the world is the way that God wants it to be, but it does mean that we have a hope that we didn't have without Jesus.

So in many ways, the world is different every year on December 25th. Like Anna and Simeon, we spend the season of Advent waiting. We try to be patient. To anticipate. To pray and to ponder. My son Nolan just turned two, and this is the first year that he started to understand Christmas. So when we put out our Nativity sets after Thanksgiving, we didn't put the baby Jesus in the manger. We waited. All month long, Nolan played with his Fisher Price Nativity set. We talked about Mary and Joseph. We repeatedly placed the angel on top of the stable so that the tinny version of "Away in a Manger" would be activated. But no baby Jesus. Until Christmas morning. Then, there he was, asleep on the hay, and we delighted in watching Nolan point and

call out, “Jees!” Other families celebrate Christmas Day as Jesus’ birthday, complete with cake and singing. We light the white “Christ candle” on the Advent Wreath to signify that Jesus is here. Every year, Jesus comes again and we are made new.

Perhaps this is why we set such store by New Year’s resolutions rather than commitments made in June or September. We have the chance to start fresh...to re-commit ourselves and to re-think the way that we live our lives.

Simeon and Anna probably didn’t have our need to make annual resolutions. They lived their entire lives in devout service at the temple and to God. Anna, a widow, lived in the temple where she could pray and fast regularly. Simeon, a righteous man, was guided to the temple by the Holy Spirit. They didn’t have the pressures that we encounter daily. And yet, we still have much to learn from them about living. I say this because they are elderly people who have been waiting their entire lives for the promised Messiah. In all likelihood, they were tempted many times to give up.

The second important point in Simeon’s message is that despite his joy and hope, there is a dark side to his words. Simeon adds a warning: "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" (Luke 2:34-36). And this is the first indication we have that things will not always be rosy for the holy family.

Yes, there is rejoicing and excitement in a newborn Savior. But Simeon and Anna also foreshadow what is to come. Jesus will not be the Messiah that

the religious leaders anticipated. Jesus will not be a sign of hope for **all** people but for some, will be a sign that must be opposed. Simeon also says that a sword will pierce Mary's soul – a horrible thing for vulnerable and weary new parents to hear. Simeon alludes to the sword that will literally pierce Jesus' side after he dies, as well as the pain that Jesus' mother will endure as she watches her child die. We aren't usually reminded of the cross during the Christmas season, but Simeon makes it clear that it is always present with Jesus.

As we leave another Christmas and enter into a new year, we take all these images with us. We are left to decide for ourselves what to make of them, and here is where we can also learn from Simeon and Anna. They know that the Messiah will suffer, and they don't sugarcoat this message or hide it from his parents.

The Christmas story is such a powerful one that we are sometimes reluctant to leave the manger and encounter a more "grown up" Jesus. In the supremely silly comedy *Tallegda Nights*, when Will Farrell says grace at the dinner table, he prays to the "little baby Jesus." His wife mocks him, but Farrell says he likes the little baby Jesus the best. The movie gets even sillier, as Farrell offers multiple images of Jesus as an infant. He prays to, "Dear newborn 8 pound 6 ounce baby Jesus..." and later says, "I wanna thank little baby Jesus, who's sitting in his crib watching the baby Einstein videos learning about shapes and colors." Okay – this is a pretty extreme example,

but it illustrates the fact that it is much easier to appreciate the infant Jesus than to confront the more challenging adult Jesus.

And when we do encounter the adult Jesus, we encounter another temptation – the desire to water down Jesus to make him easier to relate to. In another humorous example straight from pop culture, a satirical film called *Dogma* featured George Carlin as a local priest rolling out a statue of Jesus giving us the “thumbs up” as an alternative to the “wholly depressing” crucifix. The priest calls this image “Buddy Christ,” because, he says, “Christ didn’t come down from heaven to give us the willies!”

I can’t argue with that! However, that doesn’t mean that Christ came only to give us the “thumbs up,” or to validate whatever it is we choose to do in Jesus’ name. Simeon tells us that this child has come to be a light of revelation, but also to be a sign that will be opposed. From the beginning of the story, we learn that that many will see Jesus as a threat and that ultimately he will suffer for this. We learn from Simeon and Anna that Jesus can and will challenge what we believe to be true or how we think we should live. Simeon rejoices, even while he knows this. Anna continues to share the good news with anyone who will listen, and she praises God continually. We learn from them not to remain at the manger, cooing over an infant who is tender and mild.

Instead, Simeon and Anna become a model to help us leave the manger and move into the new year. They offer us patience. The ability to worship and follow God our entire lives, even if it takes a lifetime before God’s

promises are realized. They show us how to live joyfully. And finally, they teach us that a devout belief in God does not spare us from suffering, but instead allows us to be with God in the midst of pain.

Lauren Winner from Duke Divinity School says this story reminds us that, “we are called into a life in which God, in response to our suffering, breaks into the world, and that in-breaking is accompanied by God’s own suffering” (*The Christian Century*, December 16, 2008, 21). That’s a powerful statement. It reminds us that God isn’t with us **despite** our suffering but that God is with us **because** of and in the midst of tough times. **AND**, it reminds us that God has broken into the world again this year, and that our world will never be the same. Amen.